

American Freedom Story:
A Journey from *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* to *The Secret Life of Bees*

By
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Abstract

This dissertation identifies an American freedom story in a set of novels from 1885 to 2002 beginning with the foundation text *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Five American writers—Willa Cather, Zora Neale Hurston, Maxine Hong Kingston, Bharati Mukherjee, and Sue Monk Kidd-- use similar elements and approaches to consider the freedom quest. This story frame leads a misfit hero to leave family and hometown to form a community and experience personal freedom without cultural, religious, gender, racial, or ethnic limitations. The community, as well as the experience of freedom, exists only fleetingly. As the notion of freedom itself changes in America from the Civil War to the present, the hero and the quest in these novels must change as well. The use of the freedom story genre facilitates viewing these works and their diverse authors across historical time, critical approaches, and social contexts.

Dedication

I dedicate this work to my parents, Marion Herbert Lofflin and Ruth Opal Lofflin who provided me with all the manna necessary for my life's journey: the ability to love, the capacity for joy, and the power of spirit. They nurtured me with the means to know wonder and to see miracles—the fuel for all quests.

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I give a special thanks to Dr. David Miller who helped me find the path to continue this journey and to walk bravely into the future.

I thank my family and friends for their love and support. For my parents who taught me the courage and determination to begin and complete this work, this is a promise kept. As I worked on this project I kept the guidance of my father, Marion Lofflin, to “reach for the stars,” in my thoughts. In keeping with the hopes of my mother, Ruth Lofflin, who in her final years encouraged me on this project and whose spirit carries me through each day, I joyously completed the labor.

My gratitude is immense for the support of my brother John Lofflin, the first writer I admired and still my model for teaching, writing, and living. Thank you for reading, talking, and guiding me in this work.

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It strikes me that all of the people I have thanked, and those I keep in my heart only, have blessed my life with so much more than can be said here. On my own journey, I have been provided with the most exceptional people, the most beautiful experiences, and the most powerful understanding of the true meaning of this quest.

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Chapter 1

The American Freedom Story: An Introduction

I believe in Liberty for all men: the space to stretch their arms and their souls, the right to breathe and the right to vote, the freedom to choose their friends, enjoy the sunshine, and ride on the railroads, uncursed by color; thinking, dreaming, working as they will in a kingdom of beauty and love (DuBois 4).

The definition of freedom above is a portion of W.E.B. DuBois “Credo” at the beginning of *Darkwater: Voices from the Veil*. This particular image of freedom, a combination of experiencing ordinary acts of daily life without restrictions, living in community with others, and traveling free from racial limitation, draws an optimistic and wide ranging portrait of social and personal freedom. One voice among many, DuBois contributed a practical statement to the pervasive American conversation about the meaning of freedom.

Individual Americans define freedom subjectively. Freedom represents a powerful notion in American life and literature, and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, the foundation text for this study, has continuously been recognized as the quintessential representation of freedom in American literature. It has become an essential piece of our American conversation about the meaning and elusiveness of freedom along with political and cultural explorations of the concept. This study has at its core a search for the qualities and value given freedom by a culturally diverse set of six novelists writing across a century. Each succeeding novel weaves its story with threads of this initial freedom story, changing to suit the hero or the quest.

The three early novels, Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885), Willa Cather's *The Song of the Lark* (1915), and Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), have garnered abundant critical interest over a substantial amount of time; this critical interest and conversation has changed dramatically since the novels' initial publications. The three later novels have had less critical history: Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* (1976), Bharati Mukherjee's *Leave It To Me* (1997), and Sue Monk Kidd's *The Secret Life of Bees* (2002). These novels, early and late, share important story elements and characterization. Each takes part in the American conversation about the nature and value of freedom. The critical reception has changed dramatically for the early works as freedom movements in the United States have shaped ideas about race, gender, and freedom. The expansion of the canon to include minority and women writers and the emergence of literary schools focusing on those writer's works have been factors in the changing literary assessment of the novels in this study.

As the foundation text for the study, Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, creates a template for a uniquely American story. This novel's place in American literature, spanning over a century as the essential text of American freedom, has, in the last several decades, been criticized for its treatment of racial content. *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* has traditionally been described in similar terms to Malcolm Bradbury's estimation in *The Modern American Novel*. First, its position as the foundation of American literature is asserted, noting that "according to Ernest Hemingway," it is "the book with which American fiction started." Bradbury defines it as "a fundamental myth of self-creating American freedom, a vernacular vision of

spontaneous open morality won on a river raft despite the enslaving pressures of life beyond” (Bradbury 6). This praise of the novel corresponds to a variety of literary responses throughout the century; schools and communities, however, have been struggling with this novel of the “myth of self-creating American freedom” since the years of the Civil Rights Movement. Concerns about the novel’s treatment of race, particularly in dialect, language, and characterization of black characters, has made it unwelcome in the present day multicultural high school classroom. The depiction of Jim has been especially controversial.

The elements of the story in this novel appear with consistency and interesting variation in the other five texts. All share a common core of theme and purpose: each text comments extensively on American notions of freedom--its nature, its elusiveness, and its value. In this study I will use the term *freedom story* to describe these works. I use this term as well to suggest a difference between the works in this study and the traditional slave narrative such as *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* or a story such as *A Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mary Rowlandson*. This is not to suggest that correspondences are not possible among these stories associated with escapes and freedom; American literature encompasses a variety of texts about finding and losing freedom. The books in this study, however, share a focus on the story of an individual--in these works always a misfit character--who leaves his or her home community to journey toward a fulfillment of a quest. This personal freedom becomes possible through a community formed with a fellow freedom traveler; the community and the freedom prove transient, dissolve, and leave the hero diminished in each story.

Adventures of Huckleberry Finn's story of freedom forms a template for this American freedom story. In an examination of the elements repeated in the novels, the freedom story operates as a story-telling pattern that also encompasses matters of characterization, experimental use of language, repeated motifs, and a variance in tone. These collections of eclectic elements operate on a different level from a simple narrative technique or pattern. In my viewpoint, it operates similarly to the concept of trope analyzed in Margaret Anne Doody's *The True Story of the Novel* (1996). Moody's use of the term *trope* describes more than a figure of speech: "the discussion will concentrate not on history but on what I prefer to think of as the 'deep rhetoric' of the Novel rather than its 'form'." Moody further delineates her use of the term in analyzing the novel:

I concentrate on what I call 'Tropes of Fiction' in the Novel—as Tropes of the Novel itself. These tropes, I maintain, rather than anything describable in terms of spatial shape, characterize and thus define the Novel (insofar as it may be definable). These tropes are figures not of phrasing but of narrative. They are not techniques (like manipulating point of view). Nor are they modes of narrative (such as epistolary narration). The 'Tropes of Fiction' are to be understood as something more like narrative symbols that move us through a novel's story. They supply its 'meaning'—or rather the sense that it is meaningful" (Moody 304-5).

In the template of the freedom story examined here, two elements work "as symbols that move us through a novel's story" as Moody defines tropes: the stages of the journey and

the initial representation of the hero act as a means of moving through the story to illuminate questions surrounding the idea of freedom. These “narrative symbols” illuminate questions raised about the experience of freedom and a variety of forms of enslavement experienced by the heroes. The stages allow the working out of the dichotomy each story explores about the relationship of freedom to a need for isolation or community. The stages of the journey allow also for the evolving psychological, spiritual, or ethical drama the character moves through in the novel.

Moody compares the concept of trope to the use of concrete symbols or metaphor: “The tropes of the Novel are far less like ‘figures’ (visual shape again) than they are representations of experience; they operate on the experiential level, and not on the level of the picturesque” (Moody 305). In these stories, many figures come to represent freedom, such as the physical place to which the hero travels in search of freedom. Escapes to a primitive region are essential to the first three novels’ stories; Huck Finn’s Mississippi river, Thea’s Panther Canyon, and Janie’s “Muck”—the Everglades—each serves as a sanctuary for a short time of community and freedom. Also, concrete things serve as symbols related to the goal of each journey: Twain’s raft, Cather’s rock caves, and Hurston’s “ships on the horizon” give substance to the abstract notion of freedom. These landscapes and objects operate on the level of trope as Moody defines the term.

Each journey moves through several failed attempts to reach the goal and attain the fulfillment of the quest. The stages represent that “experiential level” and work similarly to Moody’s definition of tropes: “. . . let us say that the tropes of a novel act like moments in a liturgy, or more precisely like ritual acts or observances Such ritual acts and observances focus meaning, allow meaning to flow through” (Moody 305). As

the hero attempts and fails on their quests, the questions about freedom unfold as the character discovers what constitutes freedom, learns how others limit or promote that freedom, and experiences how human nature responds to both enslavement and escape.

Moody suggests that the study of tropes aids the reader in accessing novels from very different cultures and times:

We have a means of picking up the mythology the Novel so playfully (and so historically) offers us in examining its tropes. At the very least, picking up the tropes, the customs of fiction, offers us a means of escaping strict one-way historical lines. We can place novels of the third century, of the sixteenth century, of the twentieth century beside each other and keep nothing in separation (Moody 308).

The novels of this study span only one century, but a century filled with great cultural shifts, and, as evidenced by the changes in critical schools of thought, a century filled with major shifts in sentiment and viewpoint.

Moody advises an important caveat in the understanding of the trope that correlates with its use in the tracing of the freedom stories in this study. Moody points out that her use of the term trope assumes an unawareness of its usage: “We may expect the *character* to be blithely unconscious of deep significance much of the time, but, in the case of the tropes, the unconsciousness extends to the reader—and even to the author” (Moody 305). Whether or not Moody includes the critic in this group is unclear. Moody emphasizes this characteristic of the tropes of the novel: “They often act subliminally.

Authors pick up the tropes from other novelists and may use them quite ably without knowing that they do so” (Moody 305). In the case of the freedom story, establishing *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* as the antecedent freedom story, does not then assume that Cather, Hurston, and the contemporary novelists consciously set out to rewrite or comment on Twain’s novel. This novel creates the frame for a uniquely American freedom story. The hero, a misfit character, travels from home to seek a place—physical, emotional, and intellectual—where he or she can experience the freedom to reinvent or create his or her destiny. Three aspects of this story mark it as essentially American in each of the novels: the outsider status of the hero, the need for community rather than isolation and independence, and the belief that destiny may be self-created.

The freedom story that recurs within these novels suggests the existence of a genre as Amy J. Devitt defines the term in *Writing Genres* (2004). Similarities and differences in the stories imply a genre operating dynamically over time; its use by three very different artists over a length of time and with a variety of critical responses speaks to the interrelatedness of the texts. Both the writers and the readers respond in these works to the context of the time and culture. Expectations created by genre both for the writer and critics are apparent in the study of these texts.

The study of rhetorical genre theory in Devitt’s *Writing Genres* defines genre not as a static description of what a piece of discourse must exhibit to be considered a part of that genre. Instead genre responds to several factors, and Devitt relates, “Implicit in the dynamic nature of society and rhetorical situation, then, is the dynamic nature of genre” (Devitt 90). This viewpoint becomes focused on the text and its writer and reader:

Text, whether literary or rhetorical, is no longer seen as objective and static but rather as dynamic and created through the interaction of writer, reader, and context. Although literary theorists tend to emphasize the relationship of the reader and the text while compositionists tend to emphasize the relationship of the writer and the text, all acknowledge the interactive nature of textual meaning, the rhetorical triangulation of writer-reader-text, and the embeddedness of those relationships within context or culture (Devitt 165).

Although not specified in the analysis above, a specific reader exerts a larger interactive role than the all-inclusive audience for the text: the critic and the changing landscape of interest and approach to the three early works plays a principal role in this interaction.

Devitt points out other elements in the idea of genre: “. . . genre has come to be redefined as a dynamic concept created through the interaction of writers, readers, past texts, and contexts” (Devitt 166). In these works, the expectations for writers, the milieu in which the writer creates the work, and the response of critics to the work form an interplay that influences the reception of these freedom stories.

Devitt speaks of an interconnectedness of texts in terms related to the approach of this study: “Every text echoes previous texts in some ways; no text responds to a unique situation; every text is contextual. Similarly, every genre echoes previous genres in some way; no genre responds to a unique situation Antecedent texts and antecedent genres serve as powerful sources for and constraints on the development of new genres” (Devitt 92). *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* operates as an antecedent text for the writer, reader, and critic in American literature. This influence extends over time so that

more than a century later, a reviewer describes Debby DiMartino in *Leave It To Me* a type of Huckleberry Finn. The story of a young boy setting out to free himself and a runaway slave echoes in later stories of other outsiders and outcasts beginning improbable journeys. Huck and Jim and their story become icons of an American idea of possibility for fulfillment of the individual in some free place and moment.

In this rhetorical theory of genre, Devitt points out the belief that genre limits texts and writers, a notion stemming from expectations that a genre has a fixed set of characteristics. This raises the question of the extent to which writers are held to cultural and critical expectations; an example of a text being read differently over time is especially clear with *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Some early readers disliked Hurston's choice of topic, which seemed to violate expectations that an African American writer should write political and protest literature. Some readers saw it as simply a love story or a slice of life of "Negro" life. Others contended it echoed the minstrel genre and therefore presented a farcical view of African American people. Gender or economic class could not easily define the hero; Janie Crawford's depiction often appears androgynous and her social and economic class varies from middle to working class in the course of the story. Her place in the black or white community was skewed by her mixed race parentage. The story of a woman's freedom quest at the center of the novel becomes a new focus as a critical response after feminist and African American literary critics approached the text with different genre expectations.

Twain's description of the number and types of dialects in the preface to *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* might have served as an anticipation of critical misunderstanding of the use of dialect in the expected genre. Interestingly, Hurston's use of dialect, written fifty-

three years after Twain, proved distasteful to groups in her audience, most likely due to expectations for an African American author filtered through the contemporary use of exaggerated dialect in minstrel and comedy routines.

In describing that limiting role of genre expectations as they align with language expectations, Devitt points out a common reaction resulting from violating the expected genre. Speaking of the rules of standard language use as a language “etiquette,” she draws the connection to genre expectations: “Genres, too, are linguistic etiquette, exhibiting the ‘proper’ (that is, appropriate) behavior at the proper occasion” (Devitt 147). In this study, expectations from the historical and cultural time period exert influence on the writer and reader. Gender and ethnicity carry expectations as well for authors throughout this study. Devitt addresses this loyalty to the group in terms of genre: “Following generic etiquette ‘rules’ enables one to ‘fit in,’ to be marked as belonging to the group; not following generic etiquette marks one as not belonging in some way. To get along in society, one must learn or acquire the rules of generic etiquette” (Devitt 147). More often in this freedom story genre, this group of authors flaunts the expectations of gender, ethnicity, and genre. Each hero, moreover, flaunts society’s expectations.

The critical response to the three early novels has dramatically fluctuated over time. The value of the work, the preeminence of the writer, the nature of the thematic content of the novel, the choice of language—these features have been viewed in differing ways from the reception of the novel to the present day. Changes in American culture, especially the Civil Rights Movement and the Women’s Movement, have altered attitudes and schools of literary thought that have swayed opinions about the novels by

readers in different decades. This study will encompass a consideration of the freedom story template, tracing the dynamic nature of the template throughout the later novels and focusing on the changing critical response to these freedom stories. The freedom story template will be used to examine the continuing freedom conversation in the three contemporary novels.

The three recent freedom stories significantly correspond and diverge from the original template. Two authors, Maxine Hong Kingston, an Asian American, and Buharti Mukherjee, an immigrant from India by way of Canada, have a special perspective on this notion of American freedom. Sue Monk Kidd, the author of the most recent novel, creates a feminized *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* set in the Civil Rights Movement.

Throughout this study, both the elements of the story and the characterization of the hero play important roles. The freedom story exhibits important similarities in the initial narrative treatment of the hero. In each novel, the depiction of the hero highlights his or her differences from the community, family, and peer group.

Huck Finn does not fit well within the conventional St. Petersburg community, the social and religious criteria of the Widow Douglas, or even the boys in his gang who have acceptable relatives. He is an outsider in the church and the schoolhouse; his hesitant participation in these institutions draws his father's wrath. Finding kinship or community is shown to be his unfulfilled need in the first section of the novel, even before his staged "death" and escape.

In *The Song of the Lark*, Willa Cather presents clear differences between Thea Kronborg and her community of Moonstone, her siblings and parents, and her peers. Her family and friends emphasize her special qualities, raising her above the others as

especially gifted and unusually curious about the unknown outside world. The narrator emphasizes Thea's need to leave Moonstone in order to achieve her dream.

In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Zora Neale Hurston's Janie Crawford has a difficult time with personal identity from her earliest years. She is surprised to learn she is black; she lived with the white children her grandmother cared for but never realized her racial difference. She knows her one family member only by the name of Nanny, the same name the white children use for her because of her domestic role. Janie has never known her biological parents but knows a little about the story of her violent conception. She finds herself unable to fit easily within either racial group, and, because she feels restricted by her grandmother's expectations for her future life, she becomes estranged from her grandmother before Nanny's death.

Maxine Hong Kingston's first person narrator in *Woman Warrior* describes her lifelong effort to find a place within the American culture while balancing her relationships within a first generation Chinese emigrant family and tight-knit community. Her journey from childhood to adulthood is less about a physical journey than about an emotional and intellectual journey. Her mother has transmitted an oral inheritance by her art of *talk story*, teaching her daughter about the historical culture of China and of family. Brave Orchid teaches Maxine about life--about ethics and dishonor, compassion and cruelty--through her storytelling. Maxine learns that for her mother and within their culture more exists in the world than the ordinary and concrete. As well, Maxine faces struggles with an American lifestyle and the English language. Her journey must involve balancing these powerful and dissonant cultures and languages. She faces down the discomfort of new languages and a new culture by obstinate silence. Like all of the

heroes considered here, she must find a way to break with her family and community in order to begin her quest; she breaks with her mother before leaving for college and attempts to leave the “ghosts”—the intangible world vital to her emigrant culture—and live in an Americanized and logical world. To become a writer, as evidenced by her use of both the ordinary and extraordinary in *The Woman Warrior*, her journey must be to find a balance between the American and Chinese worlds.

Debby DiMartino in Bharati Mukherjee’s *Leave it to Me* feels socially isolated in her adoptive family and community. She sees herself as significantly different in personality and appearance from her sister and parents; she longs to find her biological mother and find the answer to her earliest memories, sending her on a cross-country journey.

Growing up in a traditional Italian-American family, she finds herself haunted by the sense of being different, even exotic, in comparison to her siblings and peers. Debby often recalls early memories before her adoption and move to America. These memories and the questions surrounding her adoption provide the impetus for her quest. She wishes to be free of her adoptive destiny and find her exotic, lost destiny.

Further estranging her from family and peers, her teenage years involve shoplifting and an affair with a graduate student that starts when she is thirteen. Her stages of the freedom story follow a similar pattern to Janie’s search for love through three marriages; Debby’s stages involve moving in and out of relationships, each of which provides some learning experience moving her further on her quest to understand her nature and identity. Like Janie she also finds herself named by several people and unsure of her real nature. Unable to participate in the American dream as she sees it played out for her family and peers, she heads cross-country in search of her mother’s last known home, San Francisco.

The Secret Life of Bees echoes Huck Finn's life and story. Sue Monk Kidd's young hero, Lily, begins her journey to escape her tyrannical and sadistic father, afraid for her life as Huck was of Pap. Lily has lived for a decade haunted by the memory of the day her mother died. Told by her father she was responsible for the accidental shooting of the mother, she replays the memory but fails to remember the moment the gun fires. She finds herself ostracized by her peers and pitied by the adults in her community because of this incident.

Her father continuously terrorizes and denigrates her to the point that she escapes his house and sets out, first, to help her closest friend and pseudo mother, Rosaleen, escape from jail, and second, to discover the path her mother's freedom journey followed ten years earlier. She has never felt comfortable in her home or community, so she desperately searches for an understanding of her identity and nature. This traveling pair, a young white girl escaping her father and society's estrangement and an older African-American woman escaping the wrath of racist violence during the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement, follow an uncertain path deeper into the South. Changing gender and historical time, this Huck and Jim pair follow a quest that leads them to a positive resolution with a group of African American mother-substitutes. Rosaleen finds safety and sanctuary in their home. Lily learns about her mother, finds love, and heals enough to confront her abusive father.

In addition to the similarities of the isolated nature of each novel's hero, there are other meaningful characteristics common to each story. Fathers are murderous, sadistic, and threatening or simply faceless and voiceless. For example, Huck Finn's Pap and Lily's T.Ray threaten murder and devise sadistic punishments. Thea's father only

appears once “onstage” in the novel and never in direct dialogue or interaction with his daughter. Janie’s father raped her mother and both have disappeared from her life. Debby’s adopted father seems harmless yet inconsequential to her life; her biological father, however, is revealed as a serial killer and a sadistic murderer. Maxine rarely speaks of her father, but the few references allude to his negative reactions to his daughters.

Another recurring factor in each of the novels is an embedded freedom story within the hero’s freedom story. In *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Jim’s flight from slavery parallels Huck’s story. Professor Wunsch’s story of immigration to America is told in *The Song of the Lark*. Nanny’s story of her perilous escape from slavery underpins the meaning of Janie’s journey in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Maxine’s story in *The Woman Warrior* begins with a story of an aunt who escaped the condemnation of her community and family in China by committing suicide after giving birth to a child conceived by rape. In Maxine’s vision to become a writer, the embedded freedom tale of Fa Mu Lan becomes central to the hero’s quest. In *Leave it to Me*, Debby DiMartino’s biological mother’s freedom journey as a hippie resulted in birth, abandonment, and adoption and necessitates Debby’s journey. As in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Rosaleen’s escape from a racially motivated imprisonment and subsequent journey is closely tied to Lily’s in *The Secret Life of Bees*.

The celebration of marriages, weddings, and births are not present in any of these novels. Numerous orphans, illegitimate births, and rapes are present; the one positive birth, Thea’s brother in *The Song of the Lark*, becomes a threat to Thea’s survival and is lamented by the doctor who comes to care for the newborn and finds Thea with

pneumonia. An elopement in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* leads to all-out war between the Shepherdsons and Grangerfords. The marriages between Janie and all three husbands lead to violence on different levels; her first husband threatens her with an ax, her second husband's death is linked to her words against him, and her third husband dies from a shotgun blast she fires in self defense. Curiously, the staples of family life and community are either absent or disastrous in these freedom stories.

In the last three novels, again no marriages occur and the relationships described are often destructive. In *The Woman Warrior* the No Name aunt commits suicide after a liaison outside of marriage, possibly coerced, that results in pregnancy. The birth scene, far from a celebratory moment, leads to the mother drowning herself and the child in the family well. Maxine's mother often tells horrifying stories about childbirth when she was a midwife in China. Maxine pledges to not marry and become a "slave". In *Leave It To Me*, Debby DiMartino's family story includes her biological parents' relationship within a counter culture harem in India, her mother's possible complicity in at least one murder committed by the father, and Debby's attempted murder by the biological father. Debby's sexual affairs are always prompted by twisted circumstances and result in increasingly violent events. Lily's family story in *The Secret Life of Bees* focuses on her father's cruelty, and a mother who escaped an abusive marriage, only to be return and be killed. Lily remains haunted throughout the novel by that one horrific memory of her mother's violent death. She seeks to know two unanswerable questions. Was her mother returning for her the day she died? Who was responsible for her death? The novel refrains from answering either question.

Each story has a structure with definite stages as the hero follows his or her quest. There are failed attempts or false escapes for each hero. For instance, Huck's trips to the shore, which always end in danger or chaos, spur him back to the raft and the continuation of the journey. Thea's trips to Chicago to study music drain her energy and fail to help her find her artistic vision. After realizing her desire to become a vocal artist while in Panther Canyon caves, she makes a false escape for a possible marriage that leads only to embarrassment and pushes her back to the original vision to study in Europe. Janie Crawford's marriages serve as the stages of her journey. The failure of each marriage forces Janie to reexamine her quest, develop her voice, and dare to search for true community in a relationship.

Maxine's attempts to escape include moving physically out of her family's community and emotionally and intellectually out of her mother's ghost infested world. After her journey to college and to a community without "ghosts," she must return to make peace with her mother and her mother's world before she may find a balance between two languages and two world views. Debby DiMartino leaves the traditional world of her adopted family in Schenectady to find the unconventional world of her biological parent. Successive affairs and encounters move her further on her quest. Lily's journey away from the torments of her father lead her to a series of stages of healing to resolve her emotional torments.

In each of these novels, the hero travels to a primitive region, establishes community, and realizes a time of freedom. This experience soon ends, followed by the separation of the hero from his or her community, and an end to the wilderness paradise. The hero continues on in isolation, a diminished character.

These six novels, then, form a complex conversation about freedom between authors, texts, and critics. The context of history and culture provide another voice in the mix. It is evident that the freedom story continues to be viable, and this strain of the American novel remains interested in issues of freedom, race, and gender more than one hundred years after the model freedom text.

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Chapter 2

Huck and Jim: Building Community

The value placed on freedom permeates American culture from politics to literature. Several writers, in the tradition of the fundamental freedom story *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, follow a similar range of stages to examine the value and meaning of freedom. Two important novels of the twentieth century, Willa Cather's *The Song of the Lark* and Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, continue the conversation about freedom that Twain's novel establishes.

The freedom narrative begins with a pointed effort by the writer to emphasize the separateness of the character within his or her culture. These outsider protagonists first attempt escapes that fail, eventually succeed in a true escape, later discover a short-lived community within a primitive sanctuary, but then experience an event or action that dissolves the community, sanctuary, and freedom. The character begins and ends in isolation; changed, he or she cannot return to former homes or lives.

Adventures of Huckleberry Finn begins by establishing Huck's uniqueness in St. Petersburg. From the beginning, a series of episodes describe Huck's separateness from the adults, the children, and the expectations each group has for him. Several key scenes establish that he is without family even though technically not an orphan.

One early scene illustrates Huck's separateness, not just from the sanctimonious adults in the town, but also from the boys his own age, including Tom Sawyer. As they prepare to form a "band of robbers" to be called "Tom Sawyer's gang," they decide to include a

clause in their blood oath that the boy's family would be killed if any gang member told the secrets of the group. Without family to be sacrificed, other than his drunkard father, Huck may be ostracized from this group as well. With humor Twain backs away from the pain of that isolation when Huck remarks: "I was most ready to cry; but all at once I thought of a way, and so offered them Miss Watson so they could kill her" (WMT 11). Huck is separated from his community by his perspective on the institutions of that world--education, religion, and family--and this isolation extends to his peers.

Daniel Traber in "Hegemony and the Politics of Twain's Protagonist/Narrator Division in *Huckleberry Finn*" points out that because of Huck's history in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, "Huck is already positioned outside the dominant culture due to his poverty and social pedigree . . ." (Traber 27). Traber goes on to point out that those inside the culture are obligated to help him because "His outsider status is slowly being dismantled by the logic of Christian benevolence. As it is the duty of virtuous people to help those who have wandered from the center, Widow Douglas is cleansing Huck of his marginality to make him more acceptable and incorporate him into society" (Traber 27). Traber adds that there is an economic factor involved: "The six thousand dollars he was rewarded In Tom Sawyer have made him a case worth saving, worth making respectable" (Traber 29). Social and economic status place Huck outside the mainstream community.

Another incident that distances Huck even from his blood relatives occurs in chapter five when his father is angry because Huck goes to school and has learned to read: "Your mother couldn't read, and she couldn't write, nuther, before she died. None of the family

couldn't before they died. I can't; and here you're a-swelling yourself up like this" (WMT 24).

At the beginning of the book, Huck gives us a summation of his discomfort with the ways of the civilized, in particular, the Widow Douglas, whose lifestyle doesn't suit him:

The widow Douglas she took me for her son, and allowed she would sivilize me; but it was rough living in the house all the time, considering how dismal regular and decent the widow was in all her ways; and so when I couldn't stand it no longer, I lit out. I got into my old rags, and my sugar hogshead again, and was free and satisfied. (WMT 1)

This is Huck's first false escape; he returns at Tom Sawyer's urging, and the process of separating the character from his culture continues. Huck elaborates all the discomforts and demands of life with the Widow. Even as he sweats in his new clothes, he must become a part of her routine: "the old thing commenced again. The widow rung a bell for supper, and you had to come to time." Beyond the discomforts of civilization, of clothes, routines and schedule, his voice and language express his uniqueness. He wonders why the widow must "grumble a little over the victuals," although he concedes that the food doesn't measure up for him because it is all cooked in separate pots (WMT 2).

Huck recounts a significant clash with religion stemming from the attempt by the widow to teach a story from the Bible, "Moses and the bulrushers," which doesn't hold his interest since Moses has been dead for a long time. This attempt by the widow is

followed by an attempt at bringing Huck to education, by the widow's sister, Miss Watson, who "took a set" at Huck to teach him spelling. All of Huck's other habits of smoking, slouching, stretching, and fidgeting cause the Widow to cry out: " why don't you try to behave?" (WMT 2-3). This leads to a parting of the ways between the widow and Huck when she describes the "bad place" and Huck declares that he "wished" to be there. This echo of a similar declaration later in the novel sets him at odds with not only the widow's household but also the St. Petersburg community. Huck explains; "All I wanted was to go somewheres, all I wanted was a change—I warn't particular." And later he admits he "felt so lonesome I most wished I was dead," and "I got so downhearted and scared, I did wish I had some company" (WMT 4). Huck's need for community to replace his isolation is established at the outset of the novel.

T.S. Eliot considered Huck's complete isolation significant: "Huck Finn is alone: there is no more solitary character in fiction." Eliot further elaborates: "The fact that he has a father only emphasizes his loneliness; and he views his father with a terrifying detachment. So we come to see Huck himself in the end as one of the permanent symbolic figures of fiction; not unworthy to take a place with Ulysses, Faust, Don Quixote, Don Juan, Hamlet and other great discoveries that man has made about himself" (Eliot 105). Eliot points to the scene when Huck pretends Jim had dreamt the terrible night in the fog:

What is obvious is the pathos and dignity of Jim, and this is moving enough; but what I find still more disturbing, and still more unusual in literature, is the pathos and dignity of the boy, when reminded so humbly and humiliatingly, that his position in the world is not that of other boys, entitled from time to time to a

practical joke; but that he must bear, and bear alone, the responsibility of a man (Eliot 107).

This passage also marks the recognition of the relationship they have developed in spite of the racial and social constraints of the rest of slavery. The scene pictures a struggle to form community between Huck and Jim in which each must throw off his past role. Equally, Jim must be able to speak up for himself to Huck, and Huck must be able to apologize to Jim.

Henry Nash Smith uses “outcast” to describe Huck’s later struggles with his conscience: “The satire of a decadent slaveholding society gains immensely in force when Mark Twain demonstrates that even the outcast Huck has been in part perverted by it. Huck’s conscience is simply the attitudes he has taken over from his environment” (Smith 122). From another perspective, Huck’s outsider status, that of a vulnerable and powerless member of his society who escapes the prejudice of his time, points to the lack of courage among the powerful and educated members of the society who were, unlike this ‘outcast’ boy, afraid to disrupt the status quo.

James Cox in “The Sad Initiation of Huck Finn,” also names Huck “in the deepest sense, an outcast.” Cox notes that Tom is also an orphan, but “he at least has relatives who recognize his credentials and have adopted him. Huck has only Pap, the drunkard, the outcast himself” (Cox 148). As painful as his isolation appears, his separateness from family and society will facilitate his escape from St. Petersburg.

Unlike the father, this society does embrace Huck, wanting to give him a home, education, basic necessities—and to change his habits, as well. Huck senses the Widow and Judge Thatcher care about him, even as they feel the need to ‘sivilize’ him. Pap

operates instead as a pariah, complaining about the world treating him unfairly. He bemoans his poverty, and complains about treatment by the Widow, the Judge, and even Huck. Somehow Huck escapes being Pap, who sees himself as a victim of this society. Instead, Huck finds himself happily on the edge of the St. Petersburg society where he does not mind being out of reach of all the rules and regulations, yet he willingly mingles with the genteel citizens on his own terms.

Another difference between Huck and his father is Huck's demonstration of courage to separate from the biases and values of the town. His father, a perfectly perverted spokesperson for the underlying racism that sustains slavery, rages about how much he hates former slaves walking on his sidewalk and voting:

There was a free nigger there, from Ohio; a mulatter, most as white as a white man. He had the whitest shirt on you ever see, too, and the shiniest hat; and there ain't a man in that town that's got as fine clothes as what he had. . . . And what do you think? they said he was a p'fessor in a college, and could talk all kinds of languages, and knowed everything. And that ain't the wust. They said he could *vote*, when he was at homeIt was 'lection day and I was just about to go vote, myself, if I warn't too drunk to git there; but when they told me there was a state in this country where they'd let that nigger voteI says I'll never vote agin (WMT 33-34).

Pap embraces the values and beliefs of this society although he is an outcast from it. Although his proclamations appear histrionic, they correspond with the community he

addresses in his rage. Pap continues by noting that this person walked on his sidewalk and he declares: “he wouldn’t a give me the road if I hadn’t shoved him out ‘a the way” (WMT 34). To emphasize that Pap’s opinions coincide with ordinary society, he addresses the crowd:

I says to the people, why ain’t this nigger put up at auction and sold? that’s what I want to know. And what do you reckon they said? Why they said he couldn’t be sold till he’d been in the State, and he hadn’t been there that long yetThey call that a guvment that can’t sell a free nigger till he’s been in the State six months. (WMT 34).

Pap is unable to put the more polite spin on racial issues that might come from slaveholders like the Widow Douglas or Miss Watson. More surprising then is Huck’s unique ability to form community with Jim during the journey within the confines of their river sanctuary. Huck must reject his father’s role as angry victim and act, instead, to cast out the accepted ideas of St. Petersburg.

Whether Huck is seen as the most “solitary” character in literature or as an “outcast” character, it is Twain’s thorough separation of the character from the acceptance of his culture that makes the leap to freedom possible. Huck’s separation from family, friends, and future possibilities clears all ties to home before the quest.

Huck makes several preliminary escapes from the Widow’s but each time returns to try to fit in again. Pap disturbs this pattern by imprisoning Huck in a log cabin in the woods. Pap’s alcoholic rages, his sense of being a victim of the town people, and his

concern about Huck's fortune combine to create a psychotic obsession and a nightmare world for Huck. When Pap first captures Huck, for a time it seems like an escape of sorts to the boy; he is happy to be able to dress, eat, and act without restrictions. Huck feels relief while momentarily out of the hold of civilization. This place mimics the primitive nature of a sanctuary, but Huck soon comes to realize he is a prisoner under his father's roof. Daniel Traber comments on his dilemma: "although living with Pap is difficult it is preferable to society's forms of control, until Huck's recurrent disdain for the threat of authority—especially as represented in his violent father—incites him to run away" (Traber 29). This is one of the recurrent patterns in the freedom story: a character momentarily follows a false escape path but returns to the original quest after an inner struggle.

Fearing for his life, he makes his true escape, leaving his last connection with family. Rather than return to the adults and children of his childhood who would certainly have sheltered him from Pap's terror, he chooses to stage his death and journey to an isolated existence.

Huck chooses a solitary escape, yet this first step will lead instead to an extraordinary time of community, sanctuary, and growth for the protagonist. Huck's only chance of finding freedom depends less on his escape and more on the chance teaming up for escape with Jim. Jackson's Island would have been a lonely refuge for Huck.

Huck and Jim need an urgent escape because of Jim's fear of being sold down river and Huck's fear of being killed by his father. Beyond the fear for his life, Huck felt alone in the world when imprisoned by his only relative. Pap's anger was tied to Huck's

fortune held by Judge Thatcher and the Widow Douglas' legal threat to gain custody of Huck.

Huck had taken elaborate measures to make his 'murder' obvious to all who might search for him. He painstakingly created the fiction that the cabin had been cleaned out by robbers who murdered him. When he discovers Jim on Jackson's Island he remains unaware Jim has been blamed for the killing.

Critical interest surrounds the meaning of the trip down river for the characters and the author. Sanford Pinsker in "*Huckleberry Finn* and the Problem of Freedom," defines Twain's purpose: "What Twain means to test out in Huck's idiosyncratic telling of how he and Jim made their way down the river is nothing less than what freedom in America means, and does not mean" (Pinsker 642). An exploration of the essence of freedom lies at the core of the freedom story.

James Cox sees a specific meaning in the rebirth of Huck's character. Discussing Huck's scheme to stage his own murder, Cox describes the importance of this event: "Having killed himself, Huck is 'dead' throughout the entire journey down the river. He is indeed the man without identity who is reborn at almost every river bend, not because he desires a new role, but because he must re-create himself to elude the forces which close in on him from every side" (Cox 146). Huck's supposed death allows him to create his own destiny, at least while he remains on the river.

The belief that a life may be recreated at will, characterizes an American attitude. Bennett Kravitz in "Reinventing the World and Reinventing the Self in Huck Finn" sees Huck as searching for a particular version of the American Dream: "After staging his own death, Huck arrives on the island convinced he will be able to abandon civilization

and refashion himself in a world of his own . . . Huck has latched on to one of the most prominent American Dreams . . . the dream of domination in the guise of creating a new world or settling a virgin land” (Kravitz 3). Beyond the domination of the “virgin land,” the freedom story allows the hero to dominate a personal destiny.

Pinsker examines the elusive quality of freedom in America in light of issues of racism leveled at the novel. His argument recognizes underlying racism in the treatment of Jim in the novel: critics “can never fully excuse or fully hide the deeper racism of the novel—the way Twain and Huck use Jim because they really don’t care enough about his desire for freedom to let that desire change their plans” (Pinsker 3-4). Critics have described Jim’s treatment as a demeaning depiction of an African American character, especially in early scenes in St. Petersburg and later scenes on the Phelps’ farm.

Daniel Traber discusses the unique position Huck and Jim share on the journey: “As they travel down the river a specific bond begins to form; they are now outlaws—Jim as a runaway and Huck for helping him escape. There is no more despicable crime a white person can commit in the slaveholding states—forms of punishment included fines, imprisonment, being sued for damages, or even hanged” (Traber 29). Huck moved in and out of civilized society to his free state while in St. Petersburg. Escaping with Jim changes Huck’s position: “This friendship will effectively cut off his connection to society because it makes him a more repulsive pariah than his poverty and dysfunctional family ever could” (Traber 29-30). Huck sometimes acknowledges his awareness of violating the rules of slaveholding society, yet these concerns are fleeting within the world of the raft.

Critical response often takes note of Huck and Jim's evolving relationship from the moment the escape begins. In Leo Marx's viewpoint in "Mr. Eliot, Mr. Trilling and Huckleberry Finn", the immediate connection between Jim and Huck is clear at the moment when Huck returns for the first time after visiting the shore: "The very words with which Clemens launches Huck and Jim upon their voyage indicate that theirs is not a boy's lark but a quest for Freedom. From the electrifying moment when Huck comes back to Jackson's Island and rouses Jim with the news that a search party is on the way, we are meant to believe that Huck is enlisted in the cause of freedom" (Marx 115). When Huck declares, 'They're after us!' Marx sees a narrative shift:

What particularly counts here is the *us*. No one is after Huck; no one but Jim knows he's alive. In that small word Clemens compresses the exhilarating power of Huck's instinctive humanity. His unpremeditated identification with Jim's flight from slavery is an unforgettable moment in American experience and it may be said at once that any culmination of the journey which detracts from the urgency and dignity with which it begins will necessarily be unsatisfactory (Marx 115).

Discovering at the end that Miss Watson had freed Jim in her will before the journey deflates the power of the original quest for freedom in this view.

In "Remarks on the Sad Initiation of Huckleberry Finn," Cox believes that "the argument of the whole novel" is "Huck's initiation into respectable society." He insists that "The tragic irony of the novel is Huck's inner awareness that membership in the cult

will involve the dissolution of his character and the denial of his values” (Cox 145). For Cox, the ending constitutes this initiation of Huck and his loss of character and values. For Cox, Huck exchanges the river community with Jim for the world of the Phelps and Tom Sawyer.

Cox makes several observations about Huck and Jim during the middle journey as well. For example, Cox asserts, “Huck and Jim are the only real human beings in the novel—they are human because they can still feel and because they possess a heightened sensitivity to the promises and terrors of life” (Cox 151-2). Further, “Only Huck and Jim possess wholeness of spirit among the horde of fragmentary personalities which parade through the novel. The society which hotly pursues Huck and Jim knows that they possess the real secrets—that is why it so desperately wants to ‘own them’” (Cox 151-2). In this estimation, outside forces pursue the pair in their travels. Yet, Huck’s demons often pursue him from within his own conscience. He struggles with the choices to follow or break the rules he grew up learning about slavery and race. Also, there are no actual pursuers; Pap is dead and Jim has been freed in Miss Watson’s will.

Cox sees Jim as fulfilling a major role in Huck’s life and in the novel: “Acting as Huck’s foster father, Jim brings to that role a warmth and gentleness which Huck had never known under the brutal masculinity of his real father” (Cox 152). Cox views the treatment of Jim as pivotal to the plot and the protagonist:

Indeed, Jim is the conscience of the novel, the spiritual yardstick by which all men are measured. As the two fugitives move down the river, Huck’s moral sense grows out of and revolves around the presence of Jim, and his ability to

measure up signifies his worth. Huck's whole sense of wrong, his feelings of guilt are products of his intimate association with Jim—his companionship with the runaway slave makes possible his moral growth (Cox 153).

Cox's evaluation of Jim's depiction directly opposes critical claims that Jim becomes a minstrel-like character in the novel. Interestingly, Cox goes further to declare that Jim is turned free "at the end of the novel at the very moment Huck is captured" (Cox 153). Cox elevates Jim's journey, his importance to the novel, and Twain's treatment of the character.

Bennett Kravitz, who focuses on the pattern of rebirth of Huck's character, sees Jim's role as crucial to that process. Describing Huck's emotional isolation at the beginning of his escape on Jackson's Island after he has overheard outlaws, Kravitz sees a "consolation" for Huck in Jim: "What will relieve his anxiety and solitude is his encounter with Jim. From this point on, the pair will embark upon a journey into 'virgin' territory together. Though they will never succeed in their quest—to refashion their selves in a new world—their solidarity and friendship will serve as a buffer against all the dangers society casts in their path" (Kravitz 2). Again, Jim sustains Huck during the journey, relieving him of his isolation. Significantly, however, the community and growth of both characters will not last. After the return to shore, the imprisonment of Jim, and the masquerading of Huck as Tom, the final episode finds Jim diminished by his imprisonment and Huck diminished by the loss of their community. Huck will choose to continue onto a solitary path; Jim's future becomes insignificant.

In the article, “Say it, Jim: The morality of connection in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*,” Laurel Bollinger compares the traditional “moments of radical autonomy—Thoreau at his pond, Ishmael offering his apostrophe to ‘landlessness,’ Huck ‘light[ing] out for the Territory ahead of the rest’ with what Bollinger notes is an “alternate strand in the tradition: moments of radical connection that call into question not just the value but even the possibility of autonomy” (Bollinger 32). Bollinger insists “a morality of connection functions throughout the text,” and, in fact, that the ending “emerges not from a shift in that ethic, but from its very consistency.” Also, she suggests, “we reconsider the book’s status as an icon of individualism, recognizing the deeper connectiveness underlying Huck’s character and, with him, the novel as a whole” (Bollinger 35).

Huck and Jim begin forming a community early in the novel shortly after the initial escapes and Huck’s chance meeting with Jim on Jackson’s Island. Several moments in the narrative illustrate the growth of their relationship. First, Huck points out his need for companionship: “I was ever so glad to see Jim. I warn’t lonesome now. I told him I warn’t afraid of him telling the people where I was” (WMT 53). Their connection seems to begin on an equal level in direct contrast to earlier interactions between the two characters.

Huck immediately questions his response to Jim: “People would call me a low-down abolitionist and despise me for keeping mum—but that don’t make no difference. I ain’t agoing to tell, and I ain’t agoing back there, anyways” (WMT 52-3). He knows the consequences of not reporting Jim’s escape, but he agrees to keep Jim’s secret in part because he doesn’t plan on returning to St. Petersburg. In this beginning of their

relationship, trust is reluctantly given and taken. Their relationship must grow to promote trust.

In the next chapter, Jim shelters Huck from seeing his father dead in the house floating by in the flood. Huck follows his direction not to look at the dead man, and later as they return he helps Jim hide under a blanket in the canoe so that he is not discovered. The chapter ends with Huck referring to their cave as a home: “We got home all safe” (WMT 62). Huck historically has lacked anyplace to call home.

Huck’s snakeskin practical joke almost kills Jim when a snake crawls into the bedding. Huck hides his actions from Jim: “Then I slid out quiet and throwed the snakes clear away amongst the bushes; for I warn’t going to let Jim find out it was all my fault, not if I could help it” (WMT 650). Huck wants to retain this connection.

Huck’s connection with Jim begins to emerge when Huck visits the shore and meets Judith Loftus. Huck hears the story told of his murder and the events that followed, including initial speculation by St. Petersburg that Pap is the murderer and later that Jim is the murderer. He is able to experience the town’s reaction through her eyes adding to his own certain knowledge of the ‘murder’. Upon hearing that her husband and another man are planning to surprise Jim on Jackson’s Island, Huck is visibly shaken. Once he is able to leave her house, he clearly takes on the responsibility for saving Jim by rushing to the Island, starting a decoy fire, and waking Jim to warn him about the men.

Once escaped from the slave hunters, they enjoy a sanctuary on the river. Two days out from Jackson Island, Huck describes a sort of minimalist paradise for them:

We caught fish, and talked, and we took a swim now and then to keep off sleepiness. It was kind of solemn, drifting down the big still river, laying on our backs looking up at the stars, and we didn't ever feel like talking loud, and it warn't often that we laughed, only a little kind of a low chuckle. We had mighty good weather, as a general thing, and nothing ever happened to us at all, that night, nor the next nor the next (WMT 78).

They exist in a simple and innocent limbo, temporarily safe from the people and institutions they dread. This pattern is repeated throughout the journey after each escape from the parade of evils on the shore.

Huck clearly includes himself in the plan to escape slavery described in the plan at the beginning of chapter fifteen: "We judged that three nights more would fetch us at Cairo, at the bottom of Illinois, where the Ohio river comes in, and that was what we was after. We would sell the raft and get on a steamboat and go way up the Ohio amongst the free States, and then be out of trouble" (WMT 99). Of course, Huck is not enslaved and so does not need to go North to avoid trouble. What if Twain had chosen to send the two up North through the Underground Railroad rather than letting the raft drift deeper South? Turning toward freedom might have afforded Huck and Jim countless adventures, but would not have simply kept them "out of trouble." An equal relationship between a white boy and a former slave would not have been possible in the free states either, although the connection would perhaps not have been as dangerous to Huck or Jim.

It is the separation caused by the night in the fog that obscures the point of escape at Cairo. Even though Huck suffers through a "dismal and lonesome" time in the fog

when they are separated, he is not able simply to show relief or concern for Jim; instead he regresses to earlier times and must try to fool him. The resolution of this scene, with Jim's assertion of his selfhood and Huck's "humbling himself" marks a moment when both free themselves of lifelong roles. First, when Jim tells Huck his treatment violated their friendship, Jim's full humanity is clear: "trash is what people is dat puts dirt on the head er dey fren's en makes em ashamed." He then turns his back and walks to the wigwam on the raft. The reaction changes Huck: "It made me feel so mean I could almost kissed his foot to get him to take it back." He vows to treat Jim honestly: "I didn't do him no more mean tricks, and I wouldn't done that one if I'd a knowed it would make him feel that way" (WMT 105).

Critics often focus on the inability to create a lasting community in the novel. The failure speaks to the historical situation surrounding race and slavery, as well as the abuses of Reconstruction. The historical context interacts with the writer and the reader of the text, even in details of the placement of the story as Jonathan Arac points out. The geographical location of one shore visit corresponds to a key moment and place in the Civil War: "The Grangerfords lived in Tennessee, a Confederate state; a mile away the Shepherdsons lived in Union Kentucky. So the democratic racial harmony of Huck and Jim's America-on-a-raft is overturned, and they are cast into the midst of bloody and terrible combat, exactly at the point where secession split the Mississippi" ("Putting the River on New Maps" 125).

This point in the freedom story caused a critic in the fifties to question the racial component of the relationship built between Huck and Jim, an issue common in the last few decades but not as prevalent at that earlier time. William Van O'Connor, writing in

1955, questions the equality of concern in the relationship. He points to the episode when the steamboat has destroyed the raft; Huck is swimming to shore while calling out for Jim without hearing an answer. O'Connor expresses shock that upon reaching land, Jim's welfare disappears from Huck's mind: "No thought about Jim enters Huck's head! It doesn't occur to him to search for the old Negro" ("Why *Huckleberry Finn* is Not the Great American Novel" 7). O'Connor further raises the issue of Huck's reaction later in the episode when he is led to Jim's hiding place: "There is not much indication that Huck is greatly relieved or moved . . . Huck says nothing about being glad himself" (O'Connor 7). The critic concedes it might be passed off as Huck's immaturity but insists, "it doesn't explain away Huck's absence of grief over Jim's 'death,' or his failure to search for him if alive, or his general indifference to Jim's fate" (O'Connor 7). Rather than attributing the ambivalence to race, this critic turns to the writing style, judging the situation separating Huck and Jim to be an "awkward and unconvincing" "device" for getting rid of Jim so that Huck can move into the Grangerford-Shepherdson world (O'Connor 7). O'Connor suggested that Jim would have more reasonably avoided detection by answering Huck's calls so that the yelling would end and insisted that Huck's character should have been involved in helping to hide Jim.

Certainly during the Grangerford episode, which represents another false escape and false family for Huck when the Grangerford's offer him a home, Jim disappears from the narrative (WMT 135). Huck turns from Jim to the Grangerfords quickly, "I like all that family, dead ones and all, and warn't going to let anything come between us" (WMT 141). This commitment and statement of loyalty could be compared to Huck's lack of concern for Jim as O'Connor pointed out. Yet, after the horrific feud massacre, he

regrets ever meeting them: “I wished I hadn’t ever come shore that night, to see such things. I ain’t never going to get shut of them—lots of times I dream about them” (WMT 153). Also, it is his reunion with Jim that saves him from complete disillusionment when he hears Jim calling from the recovered raft and Huck declares, “It was Jim’s voice, nothing ever sounded so good before” (WMT 154).

Huck further explains that he “never felt easy till the raft was two miles below there and out in the middle of the Mississippi. Then we hung up our signal lantern and judged that we was free and safe once more” (WMT 154). “We said there warn’t no home like a raft, after all. Other places do seem so cramped up and smothery, but a raft don’t. You feel mighty free and easy and comfortable on a raft” (WMT 155). Huck points out the contrast to the false home and family of the Grangerford’s, the violent chaos of the shore civilization, and glorifies the community of the raft, which, even though below Cairo in the slave country, serves the pair as a “home.” This community gives them serenity, sanctuary, and the real freedom they seek. Even as Huck extols the virtues of the raft, that southward movement guarantees the dissolution of this home and family.

A critic in 1960 takes the notion of searching for a home and family as the theme and purpose for Huck’s life. The idea professed by Eric Solomon in “*Huckleberry Finn Once More*” proposes a nonpolitical view. Solomon asserts that the novel has “a consistent theme, a theme that is emphasized throughout the novel and most heavily underlined at Phelps’ Farm: the novel is about a boy’s search to find his identity through a satisfying family life” (Solomon 173). This piece sees no community between Jim and Huck, and suggests the notion that once the Phelps family takes in Huck, he is able to be

a boy again and free himself from “his struggles in the man’s role of Jim’s protector” (Solomon 177). Without looking at race or the ironies so many critics have noted in the final episode, Solomon sees the slave holders in a positive light: “The genuine goodness of Uncle Silas and Aunt Sally provides a feeling of security. There is a comfortable frame for the light irony that satirizes Tom’s romantic notions” (Solomon 177). This startling viewpoint ignores both the tone taken with the depiction of these characters and the actual abuse needlessly heaped upon Jim. Particularly in light of the complex issues of race raised about *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, it is difficult to imagine the blindness to non-white perspectives in this article from an earlier, insulated time in America.

There is one other significant time when Huck will risk himself for someone else; when he decides to help Mary Jane Wilks against the King and Duke. Thinking about her after he has seen her for the last time in chapter 28, he declares a strong connection with her, thinking about her promise to pray for him: “She had the grit to pray for Judas if she took the notion—there warn’t no back-down to her, I judge. You may say what you want to, but in my opinion she had more sand in her than any girl I ever see; in my opinion she was just full of sand. It sounds like flattery, but it ain’t no flattery. And when it comes to beauty—and goodness too—she lays over them all. I hain’t ever seen her since; but I reckon I’ve thought of her a many and a many a million times . . .” (WMT 244). As a profession of human connection, this statement stands out as a clear attachment for Huck, one he claims after seeing her for the last time. No other instances of Huck feeling infatuation for a young woman appears in the book. In fact, no real celebrations of marriage or love appear in the book; the one love mentioned in the

Grangerford episode results in outright mayhem. Considering the use of the sentimental in this work, Gregg Canfield points out that Huck is touched with sympathy for Mary Ann when he sees her innocence being used by the King and Duke, and further notes the scene suggests “a dawning sexuality as part of Huck’s motive” and claims further that “according to sentimental convention . . .sexual feelings themselves are among the strongest spurs to the moral behavior of good men” (“Sentimental Liberalism and the Problem of Race in *Huckleberry Finn*” 108).

In the case of commitment to Jim, Huck has been struggling throughout the journey with the dilemma of loyalty to Jim set against the slavery codes he has learned. Huck almost renounces the community he has with Jim by writing a letter to end his flight. Before sending the letter, he recalls the moments of sanctuary on the river and is forced to make a decision. He chooses to “steal Jim out of slavery again; and if I could think up anything worse, I would do that, too; because as long as I was in, and in for good, I might as well go the whole hog” (WMT 271). This moment of decision before continuing on the journey occurs as an important stage in the freedom story.

Much of the critical attention about Huck and Jim centers on the sincerity (or lack of sincerity) between them throughout the journey. Susan Derwin notes the presence of manipulation on the part of both travelers. First, Derwin looks at the connection between Jim and Huck’s opinion of himself: “In the course of representing Jim to himself, Huck simultaneously constructs a flattering self-image” (“Impossible Commands: Reading *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*” 446). Huck’s life in St. Petersburg explains this connection in Derwin’s view: “In this respect Huck replicates the very process of narcissistic projection from which he had suffered before he fled from the shore society:

just as the widow calls Huck a poor last lamb and tells him the story of Moses in order to play the salvational roles of shepherd and Pharaoh's daughter, here Huck imposes an image of subjugation upon Jim and thereby experiences the concomitant pleasure of imaging himself to be a savior" (Derwin 446). Yet, Huck hated that role the Widow played and resisted his part in it consistently. Huck expresses more concern about his personal repercussions, moreover, after choosing to break the slavery code and continue to help free Jim from slavery.

Derwin lists Jim's manipulative actions. Jim's concealment of the dead man's face in the house he and Huck explore at the beginning of the journey is often seen as an act of kindness, sparing Huck from a nightmare view of his father. Since the concealment promotes Huck's continued fear of his father, Jim keeps Huck as a partner in their escape. Derwin reasons that Jim consciously chooses to deceive Huck because, "without the protections of his white guide, Jim's escape would have been even more perilous" (Derwin 447). Derwin ties Jim's action to Huck's narrative role: "Just as Jim retains Huck's father, so too does Huck, as narrator, retain our interest as readers by withholding from us the death of the father and the knowledge that the widow has freed Jim, knowledge that would undermine the justification for Jim's trip on the river" (Derwin 447-8). In the freedom stories in this study, the narrator often retells the hero's story without divulging critical events out of sequence.

The ending episode echoes earlier shore trips, but several important differences arise. Jim shares the entrapment with him this time rather than waiting outside the main scene for Huck to come back to the raft. Huck always creates a false identity when he visits the shore, but this time Aunt Sally gives him his identity by mistaking him for Tom Sawyer.

Developing other fabrications, Tom wraps a fictional story around the freeing of Jim even though the imprisonment of Jim is real and potentially disastrous. This last “adventure” will result in the breakdown of the relationship between Jim and Huck rather than another joyous reunion on the raft. Huck will choose to turn away from the community with Jim and choose a solitary venture. Both characters become diminished, truly imitations of the Huck and Jim of the river.

Jim’s depiction in the evasion episode garners the most extreme reactions about the presence of racism in the novel. Many critics have noticed his character reverts to the earliest and most minstrel-like depiction. Various critics speculate the racism of the situation and the characterization emanates from the times, the culture, or Twain himself.

One critic views Jim differently. Looking at Jim’s characterization as it grows in the novel, Forrest G. Robinson delineates the cunning Jim uses to stay safe on his journey and in the final episode. Robinson emphasizes that from the beginning, “Huck is the living proof that Jim is not a murderer. And Huck gives him eyes and ears, information, an alibi, and some small leverage when the inevitable disaster strikes” (“The Characterization of Jim in *Huckleberry Finn*” 367). When that disaster occurs at the Phelps Farm, Robinson describes the kinds of deceptive skills Jim has been honing throughout the journey that he will need to survive reenslavement: “Naturally enough, in entering this perilous but virtually obligatory game of cat and mouse, he exploits all the resources available to him. Not least among these is the deep cultural investment among white people in the conception of slaves as happy children— gullible, harmless, essentially good . . . There is safety, he knows, in their readiness to be deceived” (Robinson 370). This underlying trickster role for Jim has been reinforced throughout the

journey according to Robinson who suggests that Jim tried a more honest deportment with Huck: “Jim has tried being ‘visible’ and frank, opinionated, assertive, even argumentative with Huck, and the invariable result has been trouble. He has come to see that Huck, for all of his good nature, is quite unprepared to tolerate the full unfolding of the human being emergent from behind the mask of the happy, gullible, rather childlike slave” (Robinson 386-7). The masked version of Jim dominates the final episode and garners the most ire among present day readers and critics. In this view, Jim’s freedom story parallels Huck’s during this episode; both act differently and out of true character while at the Phelps Farm. On the river together, each exhibited greater dignity and acted more humanely towards each other than in the final episode.

As Jim must hide his emergent selfhood at the Phelps Farm, so Huck takes on a false identity and personality. Living among Tom Sawyer and his relatives, Huck hides his true quest and intentions. Often he protests the process Tom dreams up that tortures Jim while pretending to free him, but Huck is now ineffectual.

At the end of this final chapter, “Out of bondage,” Huck is freed from false imprisonment when he learns his father is dead just as Jim learns that he has already been freed from slavery. Significantly, the two epiphanies of freedom occur together. Their futures are now open to possibility. Huck could return to his hometown to claim his fortune, he could travel with Tom Sawyer to continue the adventures of boys, but instead decides to “light out for the Territory ahead of the rest” (WMT 362). Huck has changed and cannot return to the earlier hypocrisy and limitations of his hometown. He rejects the connection with Jim, however, and chooses a lone journey to another possible frontier. Critics vary widely on reactions to this ending.

T. S. Eliot contends that the ending matches important elements of the characterization in the novel and insists it could not end in the following scenarios: “For Huckleberry Finn, neither a tragic nor a happy ending would be suitable. No worldly success or social satisfaction, no domestic consummation would be worthy of him; a tragic end also would reduce him to the level of those whom we pity” (Eliot 111). Eliot distinguishes Huck from the “American Pioneer”:

Huck Finn must come from nowhere and be bound for nowhere. His is not the independence of the typical or symbolic American Pioneer, but the independence of the vagabond. His existence questions the values of America as much as the values of Europe; he is as much an affront to the ‘pioneer spirit’ as he is to ‘business enterprise’ He could not be exhibited in any amorous encounters or engagements, in any of the juvenile affections which are appropriate to Tom Sawyer. He belongs neither to the Sunday School nor to the Reformatory Hence, he can only disappear; and his disappearance can only be accomplished by bringing forward another performer to obscure the disappearance in a cloud of whimsicalities (Eliot 111).

Eliot then stands with those critics who would place meaning in the bizarre twists of the final episode. Eliot even goes so far as to claim that “the book has the right, the only possible concluding sentence” (Eliot 111).

For Leo Marx the ending violates the relationship developed throughout the novel, concluding that “the most serious motive in the novel, Jim’s yearning for freedom, is

made the object of nonsense. The conclusion, in short, is farce, but the rest of the novel is not” (Marx 117). Marx notes that the reader must shift from earlier developments in the characters to something different at the end: “During the final extravaganza we are forced to put aside many of the mature emotions evoked earlier by the vivid rendering of Jim’s fear of capture, the tenderness of Huck’s and Jim’s regard for each other, and Huck’s excruciating moments of wavering between honesty and respectability. None of these emotions are called forth by the anticlimactic final sequence” (Marx 117).

Particularly, Marx is dismayed by the change in Huck at the Phelps Farm as he appears to Marx to be influenced by Tom Sawyer: “Soon Huck has fallen almost completely under his sway once more, and we are asked to believe that the boy who felt pity for the rogues is now capable of making Jim’s capture the occasion for a game”, and noting that Huck has never enjoyed cruelty, but “To satisfy Tom’s hunger for adventure makes himself a party to sport which aggravates Jim’s misery” (Marx 118-9).

Marx is particularly dissatisfied with Twain’s treatment of the Phelps family and Miss Watson in the resolution that frees Jim. He notes the clear contrast between their social behaviors: “Like Miss Watson, the Phelps are almost perfect specimens of the dominant culture. They are kind to their friends and relatives; they have no taste for violence; they are people capable of devoting themselves to their spectacular dinners while they keep Jim locked in the little hut down by the ash hopper, with its lone window boarded up” (Marx 121). The irony of the sanctimonious slave owner with ‘no taste for violence’ in the house while torturing their human chattel out back has been a consistent Twain portrait from the beginning of the novel yet critics often find more discomfort in these scenes, perhaps the true measure of Twain’s intent in this section.

Most troubling to Marx is the use of these types of characters to “provide his happy ending” (Marx 121). In fact, as Marx sums it up: “The satisfactory outcome of Jim’s quest for freedom must be attributed to the benevolence of the very people whose inhumanity first made it necessary” (Marx 121-2). Huck has been caught up in this dilemma from the moment he enters the situation of Jim’s capture by the Phelps: he must fabricate an identity and seem to play “one of them” in order to free Jim, entrapped by others ethics just as he was in other shore fictions created by the Duke and King. Huck has struggled with his involvement in each of the shore fictions.

In a different viewpoint on the actions of Tom and Huck in the ending, Stacey Margolis proposes the ending as an attempt by Twain to envision collective responsibility for slavery, which culminates in Tom’s payment to Jim for cooperating with the imprisonment scheme. Margolis declares, in answer to many critics who find much cruelty in Tom’s part in the episode, “Critics have been too quick to blame Tom for Jim’s suffering, not acknowledging how the formal structure of the novel links Tom to much larger networks of action that include not only Huck but also Miss Watson and the widow Douglas, the Phelps and their neighbors, the slave catchers, and the King and the Duke” (*Huckleberry Finn: Or, Consequences* 337). Margolis dismisses Huck’s personal responsibility for slavery and Jim’s treatment as well, going so far as to say “The novel ultimately envisions a form of collective or corporate responsibility for systematic harm that has nothing to do with individual experience” (Margolis 338).

In another way of viewing Huck’s behavior at the end, David Burg asserts that the behavior is not a regression but faith in Tom’s position within the culture to save Jim: “And for all that Huck knows at the time his faith is justified. After all, he has enlisted as

an ally a resourceful friend who is a very exemplar of social responsibility. Thus Mark Twain's portrayal of Huck aptly accentuates his humanness and pragmatism" ("Another View of *Huckleberry Finn*" 305). Much critical effort is spent in excusing Tom, Huck, and Twain for the painful issues in this ending.

Jim's future after his freedom is not considered in the ending after receiving forty dollars from Tom for his cooperation in the scheme. Jim's future is omitted from the story. Questions about where he will venture or how he will reunite with his family are absent at the end. Tom's proposition for the three to go on an adventure doesn't materialize; neither Huck nor Jim responds. As a part of this freedom journey, the hero has changed and cannot return to St. Petersburg or the Widow Douglas. He rejects his fortune. The community dissolves and the 'paradise' disappears, leaving the character diminished. In this case, the hero resolves to set out again to find that lost freedom.

The design of this American freedom story will be carried forward in the five novels considered in this study. Each novel will begin by separating the misfit character from ties to home and family in order to be free to begin a journey. The hero will find a fellow traveler and establish a community in a primitive region. Often the protagonist will struggle with inner principles and desires in order to complete the quest. Three heroes will have an artistic pursuit at the heart of their quest; others will focus on finding identity and inventing a destiny. Each will search out and discover the value of freedom; most will lose the protection of community and freedom and continue on alone.

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Chapter 3

Thea Kronborg:

Willa Cather's American Freedom Story

In Willa Cather's *The Song of the Lark*, the journey becomes a woman's journey and an artist's journey. In similar ways to the freedom frame in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Cather creates a questing hero in Thea Kronborg. Thea grows up in the small Nebraska town of Moonstone with a desire to become a musical artist. It is clear from the beginning of the novel that she will need to leave the limitations of her hometown to achieve her dream. Early in her childhood it is understood she must break the ties with her family and community to achieve that goal.

Thea's desire to break from the traditional expectations for the daughter of this large family, for a young woman in Moonstone, and from the traditional roles of a woman of the time permeates the first section, "Friends of Childhood". Thea's need for freedom from the conventions of Moonstone are clear early in the story just as Huck's desire to leave behind the expectations of St. Petersburg, the Widow Douglas, Miss Watson, Pap, education and religion in general, uncomfortable clothing and regular table manners in particular, appears immediately in his story.

Although Huck's story echoes the traditional American myth of the hero escaping civilization and journeying to the freedom of the wilderness, the story also skews the tradition, first in the form of a poor, orphan boy as the hero and in Huck's

relationship with Jim, a runaway slave. The community they create transforms the mythic American story into a journey to reach a place where they are free to be connected with each other outside the racial, social, and cultural limitations imposed by ‘civilization’.

When Willa Cather writes *The Song of the Lark*, the mythic American freedom story is skewed even further with the female character as questing hero. A female protagonist in many ways will not ‘fit’ into this American myth.

In “Melodramas of Beset Manhood,” Nina Baym points out the difficulties inherent in feminizing this story. Baym argues that the canon of American literature is based on the “search for cultural essence” and that this search has “identified a sort of nonrealistic narrative, a romance, a story free to catch an essential, idealized American character” a character represented in a “myth of America” (Baym 131). She continues that this myth “narrates a confrontation of the American individual, the pure American self divorced from specific social circumstances, with the promise offered by the idea of America” (Baym 131).

This myth, similar to the freedom story seen in *Adventures of Huck Finn*, is according to Baym, “the deeply romantic one that in this new land, untrammelled by history and social accident, a person will be able to achieve complete self-definition (Baym 131-2).” Within this myth, the character is set against society because “society exerts an unmitigatedly destructive pressure on individuality” (Baym 132). The journey in *The Adventures of Huck Finn*, with all the dangers on the shore for the pair, fits well in this description of the myth.

Baym points out that the notion of a novel that allows the character to be free of society seems impossible except in the American setting “given the original reality of large tracts of wilderness,” leading to the idea that “the essential quality of America comes to reside in its unsettled wilderness and the opportunities that such a wilderness offers to the individual as the medium on which he may inscribe, unhindered, his own destiny and his own nature” (Baym 132). Huck’s Mississippi River and Thea’s Panther Canyon provide these “unsettled” venues for finding the freedom to create personal destiny and self-definition.

This myth would seem to be open to either gender, yet as Baym points out, within the myth, “the encroaching, constricting, destroying society is represented with particular urgency in the figure of one or more women” (Baym 133). Baym argues as well that women have used the mythic frame and cast the protagonist as a woman, and, in these stories, the “socializer and domesticator will be a man,” and the woman in the story will often be celibate. Baym mentions Thea of *The Song of the Lark* as an example of this type of questing hero.

Again the canon becomes an issue, for Baym argues that these women are “said to be untrue to the imperatives of . . . gender, which requires marriage, childbearing, domesticity,” and Baym adds that this ensures that their place in the canon is thus compromised because rather than “being read as a woman’s version of the myth, such novels are read as stories of the frustration of female nature. Stories of female frustration are not perceived as commenting on, or containing, the essence of our culture, and so we don’t find them in the canon” (Baym 135).

Baym sees a connection between the protagonist and the wilderness in this myth: “So the role of entrapper and impediment in the melodrama of beset manhood is reserved for women. Also, the role of the beckoning wilderness, the attractive landscape, is given a deeply feminine quality” which Baym further defines as landscape that is “compliant and supportive” (Baym 135). Cather’s treatment of Panther Canyon where Thea journeys creates a landscape that is ‘compliant and supportive’ of Thea yet the harsh and solid rockscape might be seen as an androgynous rather than a feminized setting.

In *The Song of the Lark* Cather has created a female hero who fulfills her journey to self-definition despite several obstacles that are expected in the freedom tale of this American myth. Her impediments to a successful journey will range from the stifling nature of small town Moonstone to the over-stimulating atmosphere of metropolitan Chicago.

Thea must overcome the expectation for women to marry; within this novel the demands of marriage and motherhood are antithetical to the demands of becoming and practicing her art. Despite the gender issue in Cather’s freedom story, the novel follows the basic freedom story in *The Adventures of Huck Finn* in many important ways: the hero is shown to be unique, an outsider within the hometown community. She makes attempts at escape that fail but eventually makes a successful escape. She succeeds in creating a community--in a primitive ‘wilderness’ setting-- and for a short time experiences a sense of liberation. She eventually goes on to succeed in self-definition and becomes an opera star. The community dissolves, and, the hero, changed because of this journey, cannot return to the original home and community.

The frame in Thea's story echoes Huck's freedom story in several ways. Cather begins with establishing Thea as an outsider in her hometown. She has a community in Moonstone, but it is made up of characters who are also outsiders and who recognize the differences in Thea. For a woman to be this questing hero, the issues of love and marriage must be addressed. It was understood that the impediment to the lone male hero's realization of his authentic individuality was stifled by the domesticating influence of women, so to create a believable female questing hero, Cather must portray Thea as free to begin her journey. She must be unencumbered by family or domestic responsibilities. Two possible husbands appear in her story; one dies and the other is married. Cather effectively introduces possible romantic complications and equally effectively twice disposes of the issue.

Thea's differences from others and 'outsider' status are developed in the "Friends of Childhood" section. For her first attempt at escape, she leaves the limits of Moonstone for Chicago to study piano, an acceptable pursuit for a young woman. This becomes a false escape because she loses health and energy in the city environment and feels lost and alien within the musical community. She travels to the Southwest next and finds community in this primitive place and its history. Thea forms a connection with the women potters of the Ancient People, and while in this setting she realizes her musical dream involves her voice. She resolves to study opera in Europe. This escape would be more daring, especially for a young woman without financial means who studied in the provincial setting of Moonstone.

Rather than following this artistic journey, Thea attempts a nearly disastrous false escape with Fred Ottenberg to Mexico. Momentarily she gives up the resolution to study

opera in Europe, and her choice of a romantic relationship suggests a nod to traditional expectations for a woman protagonist.

In fact this journey to Mexico, which began as a plan to marry Fred, becomes a serious mistake. She avoids marriage for the second time because she discovers Fred was already married—an odd but convenient escape. This female hero avoids love and marriage; Fred serves as her domesticator and impediment to her journey

This false escape leaves Thea in a serious situation for a young woman of the time: she has compromised her reputation by traveling with a married man who has no intention of marrying her. She has turned away from her artistic dream of training in Europe. She realizes her betrayal by Fred and is encouraged by him to doubt herself and others. Reaching her moment of decision, she chooses to return to her original artistic vision and her freedom journey. She rejects the cynicism of Fred as well as his financial offer for the European study. She chooses to believe in herself and her dream—a survival of her true identity discovered in Panther Canyon.

This leads to a need to restore one tie with her Moonstone childhood by asking Dr. Archie to rescue her. This restoration of community—she had renounced her connections with Moonstone--leads to her journey to Europe where she will salvage her original destiny to become an artist. If she had taken Fred's offer of money instead of Dr Archie's loan, she would have compromised her social situation as well. Cather thus successfully frees her female hero from the domestic responsibilities of a home and gives her the mobility more commonly expected in a lone male hero.

Not unexpectedly, the critical reaction to Thea's characterization has varied widely across time. The issue of Thea's interplay with the male characters causes one critic,

Mary Titus, to assert that it is possible to “suggest. . .that Thea was never fully at the center of her story” (Titus 33). This critic, reexamining the story in 1994, sees Thea’s character as dependent on the male characters throughout the novel rather than as a strong woman hero. Dismissing the role played by any female characters, Titus makes the case for a usurpation of Thea’s character: “Throughout *The Song of the Lark*, Thea is presented from the viewpoint of discerning men. Wunsch, Ray Kennedy, Spanish Johnny, Doctor Archie, Fred Ottenberg—they’ve been watching her since childhood. Cather treats this array of spectators with sentimental approval” (Titus 32). Women have little influence in Thea’s development; certainly the mother’s role is not central to the childhood section and her influence is only recorded by the narrative voice as background for Thea’s life in Moonstone. There are only a few direct scenes between mother and daughter. Summing up her view of this development of Thea’s character, Titus declares: “Admired by men, desired by men—even attired by men—Thea’s talent is discovered, confirmed, developed, and financed by men” (Titus 32). While feminist theory has done much to bring Cather back into the canon as a major writer, this reconsideration of Thea denies the power and hero status to her characterization.

Even though there are only two romantic interests and both men are made unavailable as marriage partners, one by accidental death, one by a secret earlier marriage, Titus declares this to be part of a pattern, which compromises Thea’s depiction as an independent hero: “With her changing advocates, from train engineer Ray Kennedy to brewery heir Fred Ottenberg, one can bluntly describe her as traded upward in a series of exchanges in which each successive patron is more wealthy than the last” (Titus 32). It seems that Cather cannot escape that charge of sentimentality. Creating a believable

and strong female hero in a freedom quest requires balancing gender expectations for the hero and avoiding the sentimental as the writer.

Cather ends the novel with Thea's success as an artist who has returned to practice her art in New York. The "Kronborg" section provides an uncomfortable resolution as Thea, the successful opera diva, appears completely encompassed within the artist's life and role, her male admirers awed and distanced from her. Her isolation and exhaustion, however, picture her as a weakened character compared to the elation, excitement, and energy in the depiction of the Thea of Panther Canyon.

In *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, the novel ends with a similar diminishment of the hero. When Huck arrives at the Phelps plantation, he finds himself in a place where reality will be skewed for the remainder of the book. Facts become fantasy as Jim is recaptured as a runaway slave although it is revealed later that he is legally free. In the world of the novel, Jim has been living on the raft as a free man in that community created with Huck on the river. On the plantation, Huck will find the ultimate usurpation: first his identity is changed as he takes on Tom Sawyer's name and position in the family. When Tom arrives, Huck falls into a nightmarish, civilized world--a world scripted by literary scenarios, the rules of slavery, and the expectations of the abandoned St. Petersburg--until the last moments of the novel.

Thea sleepwalks through the "Kronborg" section, living in the costumes and the world of her opera characters—as unreal a world as Huck finds himself. Both seem controlled by fantasy or story: Huck by Tom's creations, Thea by the opera's creations. Huck becomes Tom; Thea becomes Kronborg. Both their voices are nearly drowned out by the

other identity. Both characters seem less powerful characters in the final scenes of each novel.

The critical reaction to *The Song of the Lark* has mirrored the reaction to Cather's larger body of work and her place in the canon. Usually *The Song of the Lark* is placed with *O Pioneers!* and *My Antonia* as examples of the frontier or prairie novels, and sometimes it is considered the least important of the three.

Cather's position as an American novelist fluctuated; Sharon O'Brien sums up the change, "Willa Cather possessed canonical status during the 1920's only to lose it in the 1930's" (O'Brien 111). The reconsideration of Cather, especially as feminist theorists reevaluated her status, led to reconsideration of *The Song of the Lark* and Thea Kronborg. Annette Kolodny in "The Integrity of Memory: Creating a New Literary History of the United States" cautions that this process of reevaluating works and authors who have gained or lost favor must recognize the fact that "scholars have never functioned free of the inflections of sex, race, ethnicity, ideology, class and caste" (Kolodny 305).

Early in her career, Cather achieves a prominent status within American literature: "In the 1920's Willa Cather achieved both critical acclaim and popular success," Sharon O'Brien begins "Becoming Noncanonical: The Case Against Willa Cather," "But her literary reputation has not been maintained at the height it attained in the 1920s when critics and reviewers deemed her a major American novelist" (O'Brien 110).

O'Brien points out that Cather gained a strong literary presence by writing American stories, or as O'Brien notes:

After Cather left the drawing room for the prairies and turned to her Nebraska past in *O! Pioneers* and *The Song of the Lark*, she began to draw increased attention from reviewers who saw emerging an authentic American voice. . . . With the publication of *My Antonia* in 1918, critics who took as their mission to define and to encourage an indigenous and vigorous American literature promoted Cather from a promising to a major American novelist (O'Brien 112).

Later, critical opinions begin to question her major writer status and her thematic focus, describing her as being escapist in her themes and settings; she was no longer spoken of as a writer of realism. O'Brien marks a sharp contrast in critical reaction to the novel about World War I, *One of Ours*. First, women writers and war stories would be at odds in the American culture as O'Brien makes clear:

Mencken's attack, among others, on *One of Ours* suggest that Cather—the supposed realist—might not be able to deal adequately with contemporary social and political issues; at the same time, they equate such issues with masculine experience and claim that a woman writer's imagination could not encompass this expansive territory (O'Brien 115).

Even more directly O'Brien notes, "During the 1930s and 1940s, the politics of gender evident in the negative reviews of *One of Ours* became more prominent as a small but influential group of reviewers and academic critics decided to take on Willa Cather" (O'Brien 115).

It has been pointed out by a variety of critics that almost all women writers began to be excluded from the American literary canon beginning in the thirties. One such analysis of the process of exclusion is examined by Paul Lauter in “Race and Gender in the Shaping of the American Literary Canon: A Case Study from the Twenties.” Lauter asserts that “in the twenties processes were set in motion that virtually eliminated black, white female, and all working-class writers from the canon” (Lauter 435). Lauter notes that this narrowing of the canon removed and devalued some male and most female authors during this era.

Looking at social and educational changes of the time, Lauter chronicles changes in universities, in humanities departments, and within the literary establishment that limited the number of female students in higher degree programs, in professorships, and in the canon. He also discusses the conversation around the perceived need to revive or restore “masculine culture” in universities, in society, and in literature (Lauter 442-447).

O’Brien looks at two factors in Cather’s change in status. First, she is placed in a lesser rank of writer when her writing is said to have qualities associated with “feminine writers.” Critics began to use a “set of metaphoric equivalences” to describe women writer’s work: ‘feminine,’ ‘romantic,’ ‘sentimental,’ ‘soft,’ and ‘small’” (O’Brien 116).

Secondly, even though Cather would have been writing about “the individual’s rebellion against mediocrity” in the Twenties, in the same work she would have been writing of “bourgeois humanism and disdain for the masses” in the Thirties. This shift occurs, O’Brien states, because “Cather and her literary reputation were caught in the midst of a generational and ideological shift in American literary culture . . . “ (O’Brien 116).

The fluctuation in Cather's reputation and the critical reaction to *The Song of the Lark* also altered critical reaction to Thea Kronborg. Two reviews from the Twenties and Thirties illustrate the shift in the critical view of Thea with the change in Cather's status in American literature.

Percy Boynton calls Thea's characterization as an individual wishing to break free of her provincial world and as a portrayal of the "struggle for artistic self-fulfillment" in a 1924 review. Boynton goes on to characterize this struggle to become an artist in terms of Thea's journey: "Leaving home, eking out a livelihood in the big cities, accepting discouragement and rebuff, undeterred by lovers, or even by love itself, she comes through at last to a success whose chief reward is less in gold or plaudits than in the sense of fidelity to her own high purpose" (Boynton 375). Boynton identifies Thea as a strong, female character in the American mythic journey to freedom without concern for her gender or the appropriateness of women on the journey.

This focus on the individual in a journey toward 'self-fulfillment' as an artist, however, loses favor by 1938 in a piece by Robert Footman. Footman begins with a statement that diminishes Cather: he lists three of Cather's "limitations": "Miss Cather herself has three important limitations: 1) her relations to the symbols of authority, 2) her use of devotion, and 3) her style" (Footman 123). A shift in thinking is evident in Footman's statement that Cather's "values" are those of the "individualist," which he further defines as "those of the man whose symbols of authority are sanctioned more by himself and by individualists like himself than by man in the mass of society. This individualist does things for the society, yet society is seldom consulted about what it wants done. . . ." (Footman 124). The number of gender-referenced words in the quote is

interesting; the negative connotation of 'individual' is equally telling. Individualism has become anathema in the Thirties in America.

Also in this article, Footman repeatedly ties Cather's values to her childhood. The repetition of the connection would suggest a less than adult development, a view of the author meant to diminish her stature.

Footman's reading of *The Song of the Lark*, in particular, suggests a basis for a critical attack beginning in the Thirties: "As a matter of fact, *The Song of the Lark* and *One of Ours* are both evidences of sentimentality: the last section of the former could have been left out, if Miss Cather had not yielded to the attraction of the Cinderella plot; and the whole unreality of the latter is a kind of sentimentality, a glossing over of harsh facts" (Footman 136-7). Another way of demeaning Cather is to use her own story against her; Cather tells of having *The Song of the Lark* rejected initially and Footman declares, "She herself did not become conscious of the way to treat her own material until after Mr. Heinemann, the publisher, pointed it out to her . . ." (Footman 138). To discuss a formerly major American author in these terms seems demeaning.

This estimation of Thea Kronborg as a type of fairy tale heroine, specifically a Cinderella type, belies the work and sacrifice she exerts toward the attainment of her artistic vision. Critics refer to her Prince Charming as the beer 'prince' Fred Ottenberg. His characterization momentarily confuses Thea, yet this Prince Charming, described early in the narrative as unreliable, would have to be available as a knight to rescue her. Cather left little possibility in the narrative to consider a fairy tale romance in Thea's future.

These critical examples have seen Thea Kronborg as a strong hero, as a Cinderella figure, and as a 'kept' woman. When reconsidering Thea, a close look at her character in relation to the communities that shape her, Moonstone and Panther Canyon; the threats to her journey quest; and the portrait of her as an artist may reveal Cather's intent with this character.

Thea Kronborg

The motif of community is complex in *The Song of the Lark* and occurs at several critical steps along Thea's quest in Moonstone, Panther Canyon, and New York. The characters in her childhood story, her teachers, and her two love interests all contribute in some way to her journey to free herself to become an artist. Among her family, her mother and aunt provide support for her, encouraging her differences and celebrating her artistic desires. Her mother's gift of a separate space for her in the overcrowded family home serves as a critical step in her development.

Dr. Archie serves a special function in the text, often remarking on her differences and her special qualities. He serves a mentoring role early as he introduces her to new experiences and people, answers her questions about adult issues, and encourages her to explore. His last gift comes when he financially and emotionally supports her in the decision to study in Europe. Although some romantic attachment is suggested (his unhappy marriage is often alluded to as well as his fascination with Thea), he will play a platonic admirer from the beginning to the end of *The Song of the Lark*. The sense of community between Thea and Dr. Archie sustains and guides her in each of her stops on

the journey; he grounds her in a curiosity for the outside world in her earliest years and stands as a witness to her ultimate creation of the artist at the end.

Two Moonstone parts of her community provide Thea with colorful and extraordinary experiences. The Kohlers, German immigrants who live with old world customs strange to the ordinary citizens of the town and quite separate from the rest of Moonstone, provide a special place for Thea to share a different view of the world. When the Kohlers decide to bring Professor Wunsch into their home, showing him compassion in his struggle with alcohol brought on by the difficulty in transition from Europe to America, they also bring a musical gift to Thea. Wunsch provides Thea with a key part of her artistic search because he is a superior music teacher; Moonstone would have provided more mundane musicians if not for the Kohler's act of hospitality.

Also, Spanish Johnny and the small Mexican community (again on the edges of Moonstone) serve as another venue for Thea to experience differences in culture and music. Both exotic places and people provide refuge for Thea where she visits and feels less isolated—she may not fit in well with Moonstone but she feels a kinship with these 'outsiders'.

Another older and philosophical person in her community, Ray Kennedy, a railroad engineer, loves young Thea; he is her first romantic 'complication'. His tragic death on the railroad keeps her from the possibility of love and marriage; his bequest to her provides the money to go to Chicago to study music.

Her later romantic interest, Fred Ottenberg, provides the means and the place to leave the city and find her primitive community in the Southwest. Once he joins her in Panther Canyon, Cather describes what seems to be a love relationship that leads to an

ambiguous proposal of marriage, leading to the false escape with him to Mexico. On the trip Ottenberg reveals he is married and doesn't intend to marry her—Thea goes north to New York seriously compromised socially and ethically. The avoidance of love and marriage twice suggests that Cather sees the traditional role of women in relation to love and marriage to be a deterrent to the life of an artist.

Finally, her music teachers, Professor Wunsch in *Moonstone* and Andor Harsanyi and Madison Bowers in *Chicago* provide important pieces in this journey for the making of the artist. Thea forms a strong connection with Wunsch in *Moonstone*, learning about music and creativity in her early years; she will carry those lessons with her when she chooses opera. The Chicago music teachers, Harsanyi and Bowers, work unsuccessfully with her musical talents. Thea fails to form a supportive community with other artists or to discover her musical niche while under their training.

Thea's independence and strength are nurtured and celebrated early in the novel, and there are events that shape that independence. Two important developments are created by her mother who provides her with a room separate from the others and insists on Thea studying with Wunsch, as she points out to Dr. Archie: "He's a good teacher, doctor. It's good for us he does drink. He'd never be in a little place like this if he didn't have some weakness. These women that teach music around here don't know nothing. I wouldn't have my child wasting time with them" (Cather 15). This is one of only a few scenes with the narrative presenting the mother speaking rather than giving a report of the mother's thoughts or words; the emphasis on this critical support stands out in the narrative because of the rarity of the mother's spoken words.

Thea's mother's approach to child rearing works toward nurturing her differences as well: "Mrs. Kronborg let her children's minds alone. She did not pry into their thoughts or nag them. She respected them as individuals, and outside of the house they had a great deal of liberty" (Cather 16-7). Her other family supporter, Aunt Tille, champions Thea as an artist and encourages others to treat her in a preferential manner.

Cather herself was said to have experienced a portion of freedom growing up, exceptional to her sex and era. Blanche Gelfant in "'Lives' of Women Writers" considers the limitations and expectations for women of Cather's time: but asserts that Cather "refused early and adamantly to fulfill any of these expectations." Her method of rebellion echoes Thea's adventures in *Moonstone*:

From childhood on she assumed considerable freedom: she rode her pony where she wished through the open farmlands; she spoke her mind and was respected for her intelligence; she read promiscuously and asked incessant questions, was the terrible but indulged interrogator of neighbors and older friends who told her all she wished to know (Gelfant 74).

This description aligns well with the picture of Thea who visits the exotic folks on the outskirts of town, who wanders everywhere freely with her younger brother in a wagon, and who accompanies Dr. Archie on his medical rounds. Gelfant goes on to explain that Cather, so that she might "maintain her freedom in the future . . . decided early upon renunciation of a traditional woman's role," which Gelfant further describes as marriage and motherhood" (Gelfant 74).

The mother nurtures Thea's characterization as an independent and strong individual, who doesn't fit in well with the ordinary people of Moonstone. Three other important people in her childhood community, Dr. Archie, Professor Wunsch, and Ray Kennedy, serve as a chorus to praise her, educate her, and promote her creative nature.

Thea's connection with Doctor Archie is complex and sustained throughout the novel. He treats Thea as a special person and makes it clear to her that her destiny will be superior to others from the opening moments of the story. Dr. Archie goes so far as to assert that she is worth more than all the other children in her family when he is concerned for her life after discovering she has pneumonia. Dr. Archie, angry at the father for not calling him in to take care of Thea, declares, "The baby would have got into the world somehow; they always do. But a nice little girl like that—she's worth the whole litter" (Cather 8). He will raise similar praises to those in Moonstone as well as to Fred late in the novel.

Another developing force in her life comes from Professor Wunsch who teaches her about life, music, and beauty, values he shares with her that represent an unknown world outside of Moonstone. He brings an exotic--for Moonstone--approach to the artistic value of music, clearly divergent from the functional approach to art dominant in the small town. For most Moonstone inhabitants music should exist as a practical and functional part of social rituals, for example, playing at church, funerals, or community recitals. Women would be allowed this role in this social environment. Yet, in order for Thea to achieve her artistic dream, a different conception of the value of music and a much larger performance stage than Moonstone will be necessary.

Ray Kennedy is another important person to her early community. His death and bequest gives her the financial means to study in Chicago. This is a crucial step in her journey to become an artist and to be freed from a provincial future in Moonstone, but his death also ‘frees’ her from his love and the future he planned with her.

From the beginning of Thea’s story, a community of characters nurtures her differences and helps her begin the journey. Each plays a specific role to help her free her spirit and self from the Moonstone cultural depicted as barriers stifling her growth and creativity, the barriers to her chance to evolve into an artist. Rather than an individual journey, these characters form her community to produce the artist Kronborg, the opera star of the final section. Like Huck Finn before her, this misfit hero follows a path supported by other outsiders.

Willa Cather nurtured her personal image as an outsider in the literary community according to Deborah Williams in *Not in Sisterhood: Edith Wharton, Willa Cather, Zona Gale, and the Politics of Female Authorship*. Williams describes Wharton and Cather as facilitating the “creation of public personae that were positioned as outsiders,” and names Cather’s creation “as prairie writer in the city” (Williams 169). This deliberate cultivation of being an outsider Williams links to the notion of the artist represented later by R.B.Lewis in *The American Adam*, and suggests that this image is one of the factors that helped Cather retain a position in the American literary canon (Williams 169-170).

Similarly, Thea’s development from the beginning of the novel emphasizes her outsider status and this fact is often tied to her vocation as an artist. The final view of the opera star living in isolation with an extreme, singular focus on her art echoes Williams’

description of Cather's cultivation of her personal image. Williams in *Not in Sisterhood* chronicles Cather's resistance to being a part of the literary community of women writers.

Thea rejects forming connections with female artists in *The Song of the Lark*; she perceives the other women artists as less serious and less talented. When Thea finds a feminine community it will be with a long-dead community of women potters rather than her peers.

Panther Canyon

Cather depicts Thea as searching for and finding community when she travels to the cliff dwellers region in Panther Canyon. She insinuates herself into the history of the women potters of the Ancient people as her creative kin. These become her female and primitive antecedents and will serve as her inspiration, the source of her epiphany, and move her to recognize her creative role as a musical artist. Sharon O'Brien speculates the choice is between community or individuality as an artist: "Cather saw in their decorated earthen vessels the harmonious integration of gender and vocation she wanted in her own life, perhaps precisely because the Indian culture she valued did not possess the Romantic, individualistic, Western concept of the 'artist'." O'Brien continues: "Hence Indian women were not defying gender roles when they decorated their pots; unlike Cather or Thea, they were not aspiring to an individual vocation." Thea connects herself into this artistic community of women; something she was not able to create with her fellow female students in Chicago. Thea's building of community with these ancient artisans begins with a recognition that her experiences in Chicago were ineffectual in

moving her forward: “she had got almost nothing that went into her subconscious self and took root there” (Lark 260).

Cather writes in a special way about the land, and as Edward and Lillian Bloom describe her treatment, she “exalts the land,” specifically “as a place of communion for idealistic pioneers” (Bloom 82). Certainly, ‘idealistic pioneer’ would describe Thea’s retreat to Panther Canyon. The summary by Bloom of Cather’s use of wilderness describes Thea’s initial entry into this place and moment in her quest: “Miss Cather’s pioneers. . . have gone into the wilderness, at once searching for an ideal and seeking a sanctuary from a troubled existence. And there, in the wilderness, they often find their sanctuary” (Bloom 83).

The contrast between Chicago and Panther Canyon is fundamental to discovering self and freedom here: “But here in Panther Canon, there were again things which seemed destined for her” (Cather 260). She hears a “peculiar sadness—a voice out of the past, not very loud that went on saying a few simple things to the solitude eternally” (Cather 261). This mystical experience begins to tie her to this different type of community: it will not be fellow artists but historical, women artists. She will remain alone in her artistry except for her connection with a distant and safe community of women potters.

She flicks away carbon from the roof of the cave dwellings “the cooking smoke of the Ancient People” and thinks, “They were that near” (Cather 261). She begins “to have intuitions about the women who had worn the path, and who had spent so great a part of their lives going up and down it” (Cather 261). Her body is essentially transformed by the experience: as she walks the trails, “She found herself trying to walk

as they must have walked, with a feeling in her feet and knees and loins which she had never known before—which must have come up out of the ancestral dust of that rocky trail. She could feel the weight of an Indian baby hanging to her back as she climbed” (Cather 261). This mystical transformation, building from sounds from the past to a physical sense of walking with the people of the past, has taken Thea completely out of touch with the rhythm of Chicago’s city life that had left no real impression on her; in contrast, Cather depicts Thea as being transfigured in body and soul through this intuitive experience that finds her intermingled with this ancient community.

The notion of personally linking imaginatively to these ancient civilizations of cliff dwellers was encouraged and celebrated at the time in advertising for tourists. In “The Indian-Detour in Willa Cather’s Southwestern Novels,” the advertising images of the railroad that offered side trips to explore the cliff dwellings suggested tourists might become a part of the history of the place by imagining themselves one with these people. Caroline Woidat points out that tourists were already visiting these sites through the railroad trips: “Although the Southwest was already drawing tourists to the cliff dweller ruins at the time Cather was writing, in her fiction she creates an idyllic escape in a ‘private’ canyon. In *The Song of the Lark*, Thea’s stay enacts the fantasy of any tourist—perhaps even Cather’s own—as she enters the simple life of a cliff dweller” (Woidat 28). This fiction allows Thea to create a vision of her true identity as an artist.

She completes an important tie to the potters as she bathes in the stream one morning: It begins with a nonverbal revelation sensed by her body: “. . .something flashed through her mind that made her draw herself up and stand still until the water had quite dried upon her flushed skin” (Cather 263). She mentally voices her epiphany

revealed by her community with these artists: “The stream and the broken pottery: what was any art but an effort to make a sheath, a mould in which to imprison for a moment the shiny illusive element which is life itself” (Cather 263). And Thea completes her epiphany: “In singing one made a vessel of one’s throat and nostrils and held it on one’s breath, caught the stream in a scale of natural intervals” (Cather 263). Her artistic vision is complete and tied not to her contemporaries but to artists long dead. Also, the potter was creating usable art, a functional type of artistry.

She learns other important things about herself and her art while in the canyon: “She had begun to understand that—with her, at least—voice was, first of all, vitality; a lightness in the body and a driving power in the blood. If she had that, she could sing. When she felt so keenly alive. . .when her body bounded like a rubber ball away from its hardness [the floor of the cave], then she could sing” (Cather 265). Many of these images in this section emphasize her physical strength and spirit, suggesting traditionally male character qualities associated with her body and voice. The images are often sensual, in fact, sensual with a virile edge as in describing her voice as “a driving power in the blood” compared to a more feminine quality of “lightness in the body.” Thea’s music has become an essential life force, an integral part of her physical, her emotional, and her spiritual being. Art becomes as useful and concrete as the potter’s work.

Thus, Thea’s intuitive understanding and connection with the ancient potters involves their relationship to their art: she considers the meaning of their decorations—“This care, expended upon vessels that could not hold food or water any better for the additional labour put upon them, made her heart go out to those ancient potters. They had not only expressed their desire, but they had expressed it as beautifully as they could” (Cather

263-4). Thea continues to examine her inner thoughts and desires in terms of her approach to art in the midst of these solitary musings: “Here everything was simple and definite, as things had been in childhood. Her mind was like a ragbag into which she had been frantically thrusting whatever she could grab. And here she must throw this lumber away.” A clear picture emerges of this process of the hero discarding the debris of society, the domesticated ‘ragbag’ of civilization, and taking up a primal sense of self. Thea’s reverie continues: “The things that were really hers separated themselves from the rest. Her ideas were simplified, became sharper and clearer. She felt united and strong” (Cather 264). Cather creates a portrait of a strong, unified, and powerful woman hero.

Critics often note the quality of strength in Thea. The power of finding her voice is significant, especially significant for a female American character of the time. In this primitive awakening, Thea finds her self and her vocation: she “at last made up her mind what she was going to try to do in the world, and that she was going to Germany to study without further loss of time.” She rejects her family and Moonstone, a choice that will later be reevaluated: “no more of that. The Cliff-Dwellers had lengthened her past. She had older and higher obligations” (Cather 266). This moment of decision will not last and she will attempt another false escape; she will delay going to Germany because of Fred Ottenberg, and she will need to return to a connection with Moonstone to be able finally to complete her freedom quest.

Threats to the Quest

There are two strong threats to the success of this freedom quest: one, the liaison with Fred and second, the doubts within Thea. The possibility of choosing love and

marriage would result in a sacrifice of the trip to Germany and her musical dream. To realistically portray a woman hero, Cather must consider this impediment to the journey. Thea begins to experience self-doubt after she chooses to travel with Fred. She mistook Fred's invitation, believing he wanted marriage. Fred's dishonesty and her embarrassment combine to shake the foundation of her dream. Is she a small town girl without enough talent or means to complete the trip and become the artist she envisions? Fred's cynicism and her own fears work together to almost stop her journey.

In this turn in the plot involving Fred Ottenberg, the question of marriage is of some interest to critics. The relationship between Thea and Fred bears some importance for considering the life of the artist and the life of the independent woman. Williams in *Not in Sisterhood* comments on Thea's strength, "Cather introduced strong heroines who led unconventional lives," referring to Alexandra Bergson and Thea Kronborg. Williams asserts that they "do manage to escape conventional expectations for women's lives" but that "the endings of both novels circumscribe their heroines in the most conventional means possible: marriage. The marriages are not depicted as any sort of passionate fulfillment (Thea's is mentioned so quickly that readers could be forgiven for not realizing that it had happened at all), but each narrative nevertheless ends with an unusual heroine safely contained within the boundaries of heteronormative behaviors" (Williams 101). The issue of marriage is worked out differently in *The Song of the Lark*, yet the fact that whether or not she married exists for this critic, suggests the way Cather carefully manages the narrative, understating many of the aspects of the relationship which might have been controversial at the time. For example, the distance of Biltmer from the couple in the canyon understates the romantic scene played out on the cliffs.

Also, no part of the trip to Mexico is described in the text except as references after the fact. The moment when Thea finds out about Fred's earlier marriage and current wife or the moment when Thea decides to return to New York from the trip are not described or even discussed later by the characters.

Thea does reject early on a half sincere offer of traditional married life by Fred : "a comfortable flat in Chicago, a summer camp up in the woods, musical evenings and a family to bring up", with a response that this life would be "Perfectly hideous" (Cather 274). He restates her aversion that he understands and appreciates that she is "not a nest building bird" (Cather 274), but she returns with her reasons for rejecting the notion: "It's waking up every morning with the feeling that your life is your own, and your strength is your own, and your talent is your own. . ." (Cather 274). Surely this sentiment would have been nontraditional for a woman of the time.

Nevertheless, Thea compromises this conviction in her life when she accepts what she assumes to be a marriage commitment from Ottenberg and travels with him to Mexico rather than "going to Germany to study without further loss of time." This compromise could speak to the fact that conventional thought would have led to marriage. The time leading up to this ambiguous marriage proposal and the events following it say a great deal about the creation of Thea's character.

Fred is first introduced into the story in Part III, "Stupid Faces," as a student of sorts, as a beer "prince", who "can't stick to work and is always running away" (Cather 231). From this very first introduction, Cather continuously describes Fred in negative yet subtle ways, often in terms of his inability to be responsible or trustworthy. The female impediment to the freedom journey is reversed beginning with this introduction to Fred.

The earlier possible love for Thea, Ray Kennedy, exhibited positive and strong characteristics. His death released Thea from that chance of marriage. In contrast to Kennedy's character, Cather begins early in Ottenberg's characterization to show his limitations.

Thea's reaction to him often suggests a lighthearted flirtatiousness: in reaction to an exchange with him she seems to think of herself as equal to teasing with him: "Thea continued to frown, but she also smiled. She was confused, but not embarrassed. She was not afraid of Ottenburg. He was not one of those people who made her spine like a steel rail. On the contrary, he made one venturesome" (Cather 234). The subtle suggestion that she might have reason to be afraid of him is carefully placed in the text. Later, her reaction to him continues to be developed: "And Ottenburg *was* jolly! He made you want to come back at him. . .He had some go in him" (Cather 244).

Cather follows with a suggestive description of his past at Harvard: "In his third year Fred left the university because of a serious escapade which had somewhat hampered his life ever since" (Cather 245). By now in the narrative it is obvious that not only is there a difference in their ages, Thea, 19 and Fred, 28, but also in her innocence and his sophistication. Thea is aware of his inconstancy, however, because while she is ill it worries her that she will miss seeing him since he "was always running away" (Cather 247). Thea compares him to her earlier hometown friends and decides they were always teachers but she wants "him for a sweetheart" (Cather 248).

Thea does question why Fred would give her the summer holiday on his father's ranch freely, but he assures her he will benefit from coming to see her there, and when she continues to question he states: "I'll show you what I'll get out of it" (Cather 251).

The narrator insures his dubious intentions are understood by ending the scene with his thought that he will “attack her when his lance was brighter” (Cather 251). The hints about Fred’s less than heroic character grow less subtle and more ominous.

When Fred comes to the ranch, he is always shown directing and controlling her, and the depiction of their relationship suggests more occurs between them than is stated. Henry Biltmer was said to be “keeping his eyes open,” when he goes out to watch the couple (Cather 266). He sees them from a distance, a narrative distance, too, which avoids clearly explaining the nature of their romantic situation. First, they are said to have “looked like boys” and dressed alike (Cather 267). From this distance their sexuality has been veiled.

This sense of viewing the characters at a distance also minimizes their stature against the massiveness of the landscape. Edward and Lillian Bloom see Cather as using this distance symbolically to create a human reduction in the phase of nature: Cather, they say “always portrays man on a reduced scale and at the same time she projects the phenomena of nature in heroic proportions” (Bloom 84). This distance is especially pronounced in these scenes as Biltmer watches Thea and Fred. The distancing also creates a sense that this episode reduces the relationship in importance to the earlier moments of epiphany when the narrator was within Thea’s thoughts and sensations while alone in the caves.

Biltmer hears laughter, watches them playing at games, sees Fred pin her arms and kiss her, and sees him approach her from behind and whisper something in her ear, but what is whispered is never reported. Finally we learn Biltmer’s reaction to his secretive spying: “Old Biltmer had been somewhat embarrassed by the turn the game had

taken. He had not heard their conversation, but the pantomime against the rocks was clear enough” and he remarks “I guess that young lady can take care of herself,” he chuckled. ‘Young Fred, though, he has quite a way with them’” (Cather 269). Fred as a womanizer has been suggested several times before in the story.

Biltmer’s distance from the couple allows for much ambiguity about what is said or felt by the couple; the distance also throws into question the author’s treatment of love and sexuality. Twice Thea avoids marriage by circumstance, not by choice. Here Cather brings the character to the edge of romance per expectations for a female character yet keeps the scene and the importance of the relationship in the shadows. Ottenberg’s impact on Thea is diminished and minimized by this treatment.

The treatment of love, marriage, and family becomes important in these freedom stories; for example, in *The Adventure of Huckleberry Finn* and *The Song of the Lark* there are no weddings or births celebrated. One birth begins the story, but this birth of Thea’s brother causes disgust in Dr. Archie because he judges that the parents have been more interested in the birth than in saving Thea’s life. From the opening of *The Song of the Lark* traditional family connections create more difficulties than community.

Looking at this treatment of sexuality, the voyeuristic view and the distance, along with Biltmer’s embarrassment at what he imagines is happening (he expressly had gone there to find out what the couple was doing), raises several questions about Cather’s intent. One possibility is expressed by Blanche Gelfant who, when writing about *My Antonia*, asserts that Cather suggests the view that sex endangers the integrity of the individual: “Sex unites one with another. Its ultimate threat is loss of self” (“Reaping

Hook” 79). As Thea’s autonomy and focus diminishes after the reuniting with Fred, something of this idea plays out in the story.

Fred tells her at one point that she is “rather lucky to have found” him, and that he likes her artistic striving, adding, “Most fellows wouldn’t you know. I’m unusual” (Cather 273). In this negative compliment, he begins to create doubts about her artistic vision and the strength of her commitment to it by suggesting it would not be appealing to most men. He soon suggests the idea of marriage indirectly: “suppose I were to offer you what most young men I know would offer a girl they’d been sitting up nights about” (Cather 274). A direct marriage proposal is not made at this point and cannot be made later.

Broaching the subject again during the storm in the canyon, Fred offers another choice: “If I run away, will you go with me?”(Cather 280). Thea’s answer is undecided now; he asks her to run away again as they return to the ranch without agreement.

The conversation takes a more serious turn on the train. Thea believes they are returning to Chicago, but Fred has sent their luggage on to the next stop in anticipation of convincing her to go to Mexico. There is a clear difference in their understanding of the situation, for Fred invites her to “make a run for it,” but she responds by wondering why she couldn’t marry him in Chicago. He mentions marriage in an odd way considering his married status when he tells her that if she decides she doesn’t want to marry him, she could then go to Chicago.

He then begins to make it clear that this isn’t simply a trip for marriage, and that they will disguise the fact they are traveling together along the way (Cather 284-5). It is

difficult to see within Thea's characterization that she would not be concerned about the plans Fred is now revealing to her but no concerns are voiced in the text.

In fact, from this point on, her character seems to have lost self-confidence and self-assertion as well as voice. Within this romantic relationship, something of Thea's autonomy is lost along with her journey quest. When she finally agrees to follow him, it is with a less than passionate or hopeful assertion: "One would rather have a new kind of misery" (Cather 286). Cather leaves no room for the reader to assume this is a conventional marriage ending; Fred's earlier marriage described as the "unfortunate state of his personal affairs" insures that even the possibility of a not so idyllic marriage for Thea will not occur (Cather 287).

After traveling with Fred and learning at some point about his marriage, she realizes her compromised position and finds herself unable to repair it, so she reaches out to her past community of Moonstone and asks Dr. Archie for help, a critical step in realizing her journey.

Just as Huck and Jim experienced many false escapes when they were caught up in the world on the shore of the river, so this added detour from Thea's previously unswerving drive to the artistic life has been a threatening development. She has however "escaped" married life, a suggested block to her artistic career. Just as the death of Ray Kennedy eliminates the possibility of marriage early for Thea, the discovery of Fred's wife allows Thea the freedom to pursue her artistic life with financial help from Dr. Archie.

In some ways the detour in the story with Ottenberg seems contrived in order to dispose of an expected gender based issue, specifically the possibility of marriage with

Ottenberg as an encumbrance stopping her plans to be trained in Europe. The character of Thea has diminished in strength and capability, especially when comparing Thea's characters thoughts and goals with the imagined reactions of Ottenberg: "She held out her hands with a smile so eager that it made Ottenberg feel how much she needed to get away from herself" (Cather 274). This judgment follows immediately after the thoughts about realizing self that Thea experiences in the canyon.

Whether this appears as a token to the expected plot development in traditional novels, or if it is a way to answer those who would question a woman wishing to live a single, artistic life, the intrusion of Ottenberg into the story of the canyon alters Thea's course. Thea, as Fred sees her, is as different from the earlier triumphant Thea of Panther Canyon as Huck's character on the river is to Huck on the Phelps' Farm when Tom reappears and begins manipulating him. The detour to Mexico is similarly dangerous for Thea's freedom.

It is, though, an important 'lesson' for Thea to interact with someone like Fred who, so different from her heroes of childhood, views all the world in grey rather than black and white or right and wrong. He assumes that everyone treats everyone else falsely, that lying or justifying a lack of truthfulness is the norm. Part of the freedom journey seems to demand a loss of innocence in the traveler, a time of learning that the world outside Moonstone (or the world of the shore for Huck and Jim) operates under different assumptions and philosophies. Fred, a representative of the cynical view outside of Moonstone, confronts Thea, questioning the nature of her relationship with Doctor Archie. Despite all that he observes, he claims to disbelieve that Thea and Doctor Archie's relationship could be authentic.

Thea's hesitance to tell the facts of Fred's deception leads to Fred's questions:

Have you been really frank with this preceptor of your childhood even *when* you were a child? Think a minute, have you? Of course not! From your cradle, as I once told you, you've been 'doing it' on the side, living your own life, admitting to yourself things that would horrify him. You've always deceived him to the extent of letting him think you different from what you are. He couldn't understand then, he can't understand now. So why not spare yourself and him? (Cather 306).

This moment for Thea parallels Huck's moment when he struggles to decide which is the moral choice—to follow his own experience and not turn Jim in as a runaway or deny all of civilization, as he knows it, and save Jim. Thea must know herself and turn aside Fred's version of her life.

Thea rejects the argument, and intermittently Fred continues to claim his role as her teacher and mentor, even claiming that she was “a sullen little drudge eight months ago,” and “Nobody could tell anything about you. . . . I saw more than anybody else” (Cather 307). Unable to force agreement from Thea, he becomes even more personally critical: “It's only since you've known me that you've let yourself be beautiful” (Cather 308). There is a growing emphasis on Fred's destructive influence on Thea's confidence and self worth.

She finally stands up to him and claims knowledge of herself: “You say I was too much alone, and yet what you did was to cut me off more than I ever had been. Now I'm

going to try to make good to my friends out there. That's all there is left for me" (Cather 310). Recognizing this as a false escape, Thea will reenter her true journey to become an artist and renew connections with her Moonstone mentor. Dr. Archie serves as the key back to the original community required before she can realize her journey. Just as Huck cannot realize a freed self without surrendering to the community created with Jim, so Thea is unable to continue on without relinquishing her isolation.

Dr. Archie shares his knowledge of Thea with Ottenberg when Fred says of her: "She is as hard-headed as the worst of you—with a difference." The doctor responds, "Yes 'with a difference' something that makes a good many revolutions to the second. When she was little I used to feel her head to try to locate it" (Cather 318). His financial help and his complete belief in Thea and her vision becomes the community power to help Thea reject Fred and continue her journey in "Doctor Archie's Venture".

Connections between these false escapes are numerous in the freedom stories of Huck and Thea. Huck suffers a similar time of confusion when subjected to Tom's distorted influence. As Huck went along without protesting and setting things straight, so Thea is momentarily taken in by Fred's skewed view of her and of the world. Both Fred and Tom hold exceptional ethical views; Fred distorts his marital status to pursue Thea, creating a fiction of himself as a suitor and supporter to convince her of his sincerity. Tom creates fictions around his identity and his intentions of freeing Jim while misusing him cruelly. Huck and Thea both suspend their own sense of self and reality while under the influence of Tom and Fred respectively.

Before she leaves for Europe to study voice, Thea recalls her connection to her Moonstone childhood, recalling images ". . .of the Kohler's garden, of Thor's sled, of

dressing by lamplight and starting off to school before the paths were broken” (Cather 320). She enthusiastically tells Fred that Dr. Archie brought the “ old Moonstone feeling” and “the feeling of starting out, early in the morning, to take my lesson” (Cather 312). In the same process of reliving the past when she called up the daily life of the Ancient People, she now recalls her life in Moonstone.

This renewed joy in her Moonstone connections reverses her earlier denial of that life. She chose the Ancient People as her tradition, rejecting her hometown and family traditions and claiming instead the distant tribe of Panther Canyon: “Yet she had clung fast to whatever was left of Moonstone in her mind. No more of that! The Cliff-Dwellers had lengthened her past. She had older and higher obligations” (Cather 266). Despite that earlier conviction, she turns from the vision of the potters and her voice; she follows a false escape with a pseudo love and abandons her original journey. Cather returns Thea to her Moonstone connections before she can begin her true journey to complete her artistic self.

A second threat arises at this moment of decision, a moment of indecision and self-doubt. The night before leaving for Europe, she questions her decision: “Why was she going so far, when what she wanted was some familiar place to hide in? –the rock-house in the canon, her little room in Moonstone, her own bed. Oh, how good it would be to lie down in that little bed, to cut the nerve that kept one struggling, that pulled one on and on: to sink into peace there, with all the family safe and happy downstairs” (Cather 324). Comparable to Huck’s indecision about writing a letter to betray Jim, Thea momentarily turns from her vision toward a safe harbor.

She even questions her need to be herself and her identity: “After all, she was a Moonstone girl, one of the preacher’s children. Everything else was in Fred’s imagination. Why was she called upon to take such chances? Any safe, humdrum work that did not compromise her would be better. But if she failed now, she would lose her soul” (Cather 325). Similar to Huck’s decision to go to Hell rather than turn Jim in to the authorities, Thea makes a courageous choice to trust her own knowledge of the world and her “soul”.

Like Thea, Huck has a chance to return home. Tom suggests he go back to St. Petersburg at the end of the novel and reclaim his wealth. He decides instead to go to the unknown territory; Thea journeys to Europe. To turn from the safest but most deadening life, a life acceptable to everyone else, is an important turning point in both stories. The hero must begin these journeys, the successful and true ones, with full consent and awareness of the need and the consequences of the journey.

For Thea, a dream the night before forces her to make a decision: “That night she taugh in Moonstone again: she beat her pupils in hideous rages, she kept on beating them. She sang at funerals, and struggled at the piano with Harsanyi” (Cather 325). She sees herself shrinking in a mirror, in Ray Kennedy’s eyes, and hears the trains “as she used to hear them in her sleep when they blew shrill in the winter air” (Cather 325). She wakes “breathless” from a dream of difficulties with a student, sending her out to the journey: “After all, it was not too late. She was only twenty years old, and the boat sailed at noon. There was still time” (Cather 325). Tantamount to lighting out for the territory, Thea chooses to leap into her artistic future.

After this moment of decision, the reader views Thea first through the conversation of Dr. Archie and Fred, then through a memory of Dr. Archie's about Thea not being able to return to see her mother before she died: Thea writes that she cannot leave the opera at Dresden—"It was not that she chose to stay; she had to stay or lose everything" (Cather 342). Little is written about her experience in Europe and when she returns to the novel as a successful opera star, the Thea of Panther Canyon has changed significantly.

Thea's Portrait as an Artist

In this final section of *The Song of the Lark*, we hear of only the one moment of crisis for Thea during her journey to become an artist. The section concludes with a view of Dr. Archie's and the narrator's reporting about Thea as opera star. Archie's view of the artist Kronborg is quite disconcerting: "What he felt was admiration and estrangement . . . Instead of feeling proud that he knew her better than all those people about him, he felt chagrined at his own ingenuousness. For he did not know her better. This woman he had never known; she had somehow devoured his little friend as the wolf ate up Red Riding Hood" (Cather 349). He feels, in fact, that she is even more distant than when she was in Germany: "The ocean he could cross, bet there was something here he could not cross" (Cather 349).

When he meets her after the opera he recognizes more of her, even intuiting her emotional connection to the operatic character: "She looked like a fugitive who had escaped from something in clothes caught up at hazard. It flashed across Doctor Archie that she was running away from the other woman down at the opera house, who had used her hardly" (Cather 352). At this juncture, descriptions and judgments by another

character replace the voice and personality of Thea, which was prominent and powerful earlier in the novel.

Only momentarily we hear Thea's personality in this final section of "Kronborg". Thea the artist is almost exclusively viewed through the eyes of others--an abrupt shift from earlier sections in which Thea's viewpoint and voice are prominent. Half the length of "The Friends of Childhood" section, "Kronborg" contains only a few lines of Thea's voice at the moment when she first sees Dr. Archie and expresses her thoughts about her new life to him. The boisterous and joyous Thea of earlier chapters seems diminished and defeated by the reality of her artist's life: she dreads seeing Dr. Archie, "A reality like Doctor Archie pulling up out of the past, reminded her of disappointments and losses of a freedom that was no more: reminded her of blue, golden mornings long ago, when she used to waken with a burst of joy at recovering her precious self and her precious world. . ." (Cather 359.) This statement questions the ultimate success of her freedom quest and her choice to live this sacrificial life as an artist. As with the ending of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, the ending of *The Song of the Lark* succumbs to a diminishment of community and freedom for the hero.

Her meeting with Dr. Archie and Fred becomes a superficial connection, focusing on her work and reputation. Little genuine feeling passes between them throughout the week that Dr. Archie is in New York. Little of Thea's voice or personality emerges.

The one moment when her longings emerge occurs again in a moment of reverie when she is trying to sleep and uses memories to soothe her: "She entered her father's front door. . ." and she relives walking through the house, passing her brothers and sisters, and proceeds to prepare herself for sleep: "In the kitchen she stopped for her lantern and her

hot brick” and she proceeds to the attic room where she fights “a short, fierce battle with the cold” between the red blankets. “She could hear her father shaking down the hard-coal burner for the night. . . everybody was warm and well downstairs. The sprawling old house had gathered them all in like a hen, and had settled down over its brood. They were all warm in her father’s house” (Cather 394). These memories lull her to sleep, “She slept ten hours without turning over. From sleep like that, one awakes in shiny armour” (Cather 394). This image of Thea in armor connects with the description of her in her wigs and costumes in this chapter, taking on alternative personas. She distances herself from her own identity as well as her old friends.

We are afforded one view of Thea in her artist’s state: “While she was on the stage she was conscious that every movement was the right movement, that her body was absolutely the instrument of her idea. Not for nothing had she kept it so severely, kept it filled with such energy and fire. . . . She felt like a tree bursting into bloom. And her voice was as flexible as her body; equal to any demand, capable of every nuance everything in her at its best and everything working together...” (Cather 398). This contrasts severely with the ghostlike figure that leaves the concert hall.

The following scene accentuating her isolation undercuts this image of her as a virile, powerful, and accomplished singer and actress. Her friend from Moonstone is in the audience, “one man there, whom nobody knew” who especially enjoyed the performance (Cather 398). Spanish Johnny, a Mexican guitarist who had been one of Thea’s exotic friends in Moonstone, sits in the audience “praying and cursing under his breath, beating on the brass railing and shouting “Brava! Brava!” until repressed by his

neighbours” (Cather 398-9). This connection suggests another chance for community reconnections for Thea.

Rather than a reunion, Spanish Johnny’s presence resolves into a poignant moment of disconnection at the end of “Kronborg”. Thea leaves the theater unaware of his existence and seems to sleep walk as she leaves the theater through a crowd of people: “She bowed graciously to the group, through her veil, but she did not look to the right or left as she crossed the sidewalk to the car. Had she lifted her eyes an instant and glanced out through her white scarf, she must have seen the only man in the crowd who had removed his hat when she emerged, and who stood with it crushed up in his hand. . . .she passed so near that he could have touched her” (Cather 399). In this chapter she appears so withdrawn into an artistic isolation that she could not be touched or reached by others. Left isolated in this ending portrait, Thea seems greatly diminished from the hopeful and primal creature experiencing “intuitions” in Panther Canon, looking out of her womblike caves on the possibilities of becoming an artist. The demands of the artist’s life exact a dramatic toll on the character, and again the freedom story ends with a successful journey that descends into a state of diminished community for the questing character.

The Song of the Lark ends on a discordant note much as Huck’s ending chapter. After the unreality of Phelps plantation, Huck’s decides not to return to St. Petersburg, its world of civilized expectations, and the wealth he left behind, but instead to “light out” for the territory. In *The Song of the Lark* Cather returns Thea to the company of her childhood friends, although they exist in a distant circle around her. Kronborg clearly could not return to the world of Moonstone any easier than Huck could have returned to his childhood home. Changed by the freedom journey, neither Huck nor Thea will ever

return to earlier homes or sentiments. Both stories alter the original American myth of the lone male escaping the city, the wife, and the expectations. Now an orphan who rejects the culture of his upbringing and a woman who transcends cultural barriers and social ties to achieve the freedom of the artist have both changed the conversation about the freedom journey.

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Chapter 4

Their Eyes Were Watching God:

Zora Neale Hurston Explores Gender and Race

In the American Freedom Story

In *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* Mark Twain enlarges the freedom frame quest by changing the hero from a traditional adult white male to a young ‘orphan’ of questionable social status. In *The Song of the Lark* Willa Cather enlarges the possible hero with the journey of a woman wishing to be an artist. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God* Zora Neale Hurston expands the idea of the American freedom hero even further by creating an African American woman as hero.

From Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* in 1885 to Cather’s *The Song of the Lark* in 1916, there are several changes in the freedom story, some changes connected with the gender of the hero. For example, even though the traditional American myth involves a male protagonist escaping the limitations imposed by domesticating women, in Cather’s novel a male becomes the domesticator and the one who creates impediments to Thea’s success at finding freedom. To be free to complete her journey and become an artist, the character must extricate her self from love and marriage.

Hurston uses a freedom frame story with many of the same elements examined in Twain’s and Cather’s stories. As in both of these, Janie’s differences and separation from her family and community are established early in the story. Her domesticators have expanded as well. Janie experiences several false escapes, as did Huck and Thea; her serial marriages work much like Huck’s visits to the shore as the false stages in her

freedom journey. Finally, she reaches a moment of community in a primitive setting, the Everglades, even as Huck thrives on the river and Thea thrives in the Southwest. Just like Huck and Thea, Janie eventually loses that community and needs to choose whether to continue her quest, a choice echoing the final steps in Huck's and Thea's journeys.

Janie chooses a very different goal for her journey and a different kind of freedom in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. In fact, Janie Crawford proves to be a different kind of freedom questor in several ways. She recounts her story after the journey to a friend, her journey involves several attempts and failures at marriage, and although her goal ostensibly is love, the journey turns on other issues related to race and power as well.

Janie's domesticators include her grandmother, Nanny, who tries to control her sexuality and economic situation, two husbands who control her power, her voice, and her sense of self, and the forces in American culture that define her by the color of her skin and the texture of her hair. The critical sense of what role her third husband plays in limiting or freeing her remains mixed. Although in plot the movement from one husband to the next is the journey, ultimately for Janie it is the journey to find a community that will allow her to reach her self-realization without limitations on her gender or race.

The plot turns on this journey, which begins with her return to Eatonville after her quest. Janie tells her story to her best friend Pheoby, detailing her life from childhood to her return to Eatonville.

The false escapes for Janie correspond to the four men who influence her life. When she is sixteen, Johnny Taylor provides her first notion of love and sexuality and his presence in her life forms the impetus for her grandmother to force her into a marriage with a successful middle aged farmer, Logan Killicks. She finds no intimacy or comfort

in the marriage, and she leaves Logan when he buys a second mule so she can also plow. When she refuses, he threatens her with an ax. She runs away and marries Joe Starks, who creates an all black, self-sustaining town in Eatonville, becomes its mayor, and spends the next twenty years stifling Janie's voice and sexuality. Their marriage ends with his death after their relationship has completely dissolved under his mistreatment. Janie chooses a different sort of husband in Tea Cake and follows him to the Everglades where she finds community and wholeness before a hurricane destroys their paradise. She will ultimately defend herself by killing Tea Cake who tries to shoot her after he was bitten by a rabid dog during the escape from the hurricane. She is acquitted in a trial by an all white male jury and chooses to return to Eatonville rather than return to the community she shared with Tea Cake. For some critics, this act of returning home to tell her story is the successful culmination of her freedom story; for others it is the proof of the failure of her journey. All critics now agree that the nature of her quest is far more complex than simply love, romance, and the drama of hurricanes and murder trials.

The nature of her quest has been defined in a variety of ways. Lillie P. Howard in the *Journal of Black Studies* defines it as "the grail-like search for self-awareness and body and soul fulfillment" ("Nanny and Janie: Will the Twain Ever Meet?" 404). Dolan Hubbard describes it as a "narrative in the context of the Christian journey," and adds that "Hurston overrides reader expectation that the protagonist should marry her black prince charming and live happily ever after" because of the solitary nature of the Christian journey frame ("Recontextualizing the Sermon to Tell (Her)story in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*" 102). Mary Helen Washington, describes the novel as possessing the "standard features of romance fiction" ("I Love the Way Janie

Crawford Left Her Husbands’: Zora Neale Hurston’s Emergent Female Hero” 37).

Kathleen Davies in the *African American Review* ties the race and gender issues together as she proclaims that the *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is an “incredibly affirmative novel. . .that also portrays a black woman’s poignant yearning to merge her quest for liberation with that of the black man, while maintaining her right to live without his abuse” (“Zora Neale Hurston’s Poetics of Embalmmnt: Articulating the Rage of Black Women and Narrative Self-Defense” 157).

Both the style and the genre have interested critics who have labeled it autobiography or focused on its connection to the oral tradition. The novel has now taken on myriad themes and served as an exemplar for African American literature and feminist literature, yet, initial responses to the work placed it in the limbo of being in the minstrel tradition, that is, written to provide white readers with amusement at the expense of the depiction of black lives. In fact, early critics found little meaning or value in it.

To write a freedom quest story for an African American female character, Zora Neale Hurston would have needed to define in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* the nature of the freedom desired by her heroine within racial and gender constraints dictated by the America of 1937, constraints imposed by both the social and literary culture of that time. The focus of these constraints involved depicting the African American in a positive light, a need stemming directly from racial and historical issues. The use of ethnic dialogue and the depiction of African American women’s sexuality were considered unacceptable by some in the African American community and her peers in the literary establishment. Hurston’s life or writing rarely fell into expected categories and restrictions, however.

Early critics focused on gender and race issues; concerns were expressed about theme and style as well. First reviews questioned Hurston's choice of a quest moved by love and sexuality; critics have continued to question her narrative intent but now often emphasize this theme in a positive light. Other reviews questioned her depiction of African American characters and language. The question was raised: Was Hurston avoiding the most sensitive issues of the era in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* or confronting gender and racial issues through a subversive narrative text? Further, the resolution of Janie's journey continues to interest critics. Feminist and African American criticism have expanded this conversation in areas never considered by earlier critics.

When the novel first appeared, critics focused on Hurston's depiction of African American life and dialect. A review from the *New York Herald Tribune Books* (1937) spoke of her earlier works and described her style in terms of racially connected language, describing her early writing as containing "vibrant Negro lingo with its guitar twang of poetry, and its deep, vivid humor" ("Vibrant Book Full of Nature and Salt" 73).

Comparing *Their Eyes Were Watching God* to earlier Hurston writing, Sheila Hibben described the style as "not quite as full blown and striking" but that "the sap flows more freely, and the roots touch deeper levels of human life" (Hibben 73). This critic gave her the credit of having "crossed over from the limbo of folklore into the realm of the conventional narrative" (Hibben 73).

This review illustrated that Hurston stood on the edge of the writer's enclave with this novel; in other reviews, she was simply relegated to literary outsider. One fact is clear in the Hibben review: the reviewer consistently referred to the characters as "them", "her

own people,” and referred to “homely, unforgettable phrases of colored people,” and a “gleaming riot of black people.” Race made the characters ‘them’ not ‘us’. The relationship between Janie and Tea Cake is described as “the perfect relationship of man and woman whether they be black or white” (Hibben 74). These early reactions provide a glimpse of how a black woman writing in 1937 would be read as an outsider by the white reader or critic; her black characters would also have been considered outsiders.

Other early critics were not so positive about her work. An important example appeared in Richard Wright’s article (1937) that summed up the expectations and restrictions Hurston found in her literary world. Wright’s tone and valuation of her work rang clear with this statement: “Miss Hurston seems to have no desire whatever to move in the direction of serious fiction” (“Between Laughter and Tears” 75). While his reference to *Miss Hurston* suggests a traditional politeness, it is worth noting that in the review, which also critiqued a male writer, the male writer (who gained a measure of respect from Wright for his work) was always referred to simply by his last name. Also, Wright referred to the “highly-charged language of Miss Hurston” (Wright 75). Throughout the review, positive reactions were always veiled by negative factors: “Miss Hurston can write; but her prose is cloaked in that facile sensuality that has dogged Negro expression since the days of Phillis Wheatley. Her dialogue manages to catch the psychological movements of the Negro folk-mind in their pure simplicity, but that’s as far as it goes” (Wright 76). Thus, her characters remained outsiders—“in their pure simplicity”—even within this review by an African American writer.

In early reactions, race was openly the issue, whether the focus was the depiction of “Negro” life and speech or the “Negro” writer. Gender was represented a little less

openly, although the displeasure at the romantic content spoke to the sense of a female author writing of a less serious theme, writing of love rather than politics or war.

Wright went further to devalue Hurston's work politically and ethically. He accused her of writing within a "tradition. . .forced upon the Negro in the theater. . .the minstrel technique that makes the 'white folks' laugh" (Wright 76). Wright clearly listed the behaviors that he objected to reading about in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*: "Her characters eat and laugh and cry and work and kill; they swing like a pendulum eternally in that safe and narrow orbit in which Americans like to see the Negro live: between laughter and tears" (Wright 76). Racial and gender issues were embedded in this argument decrying the depiction of African Americans in these all too human activities in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

Today it is difficult to understand the objection to writing about African Americans with these common human responses to life, but in 1937 the portrayal for Wright obviously carried a sense of betrayal of the disempowered race presented to a white readership. Wright's anger at her "politically incorrect" portrait of black life resulted in an extreme devaluing of her work: Wright asserted that the "sensory sweep of her novel carries no theme, no message, no thought" (Wright 76).

There is no doubt as well that his response to Hurston's work carried a personal revulsion towards the writer: "In the main her novel is not addressed to the Negro, but to a white audience whose chauvinistic tastes she knows how to satisfy" (Wright 76). Yet, if his damnation was not clear enough, he elaborated: "She exploits that phase of Negro life which is 'quaint,' the phrase which evokes a piteous smile on the lips of the 'superior' race" (Wright 76). Certainly, after this review, Hurston would have

understood how completely she had violated the clear code surrounding the African American writer of 1937.

One possible reason for Wright's revulsion to the novel was the portrayal of Janie's avowal to escape male power represented by leaving her first two husbands. Her interest in gender politics would be less acceptable than racial or social politics. Also, as Barbara Johnson points out, Hurston's "work is often called nonpolitical simply because readers of Afro-American literature tend to look for confrontational racial politics, not sexual politics" ("Metaphor, Metonymy, and Voice in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*" 53). Zora Neale Hurston was writing in a gender and race minefield.

Henry Louis Gates, Jr. in *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*, 1988, suggests the expectations for an African American female writer early in the twentieth century would have been widely known at the time Hurston wrote *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Gates notes that, in particular, African American writers understood the clear restrictions on writing about female characters in relation to sexuality. One violation would have centered on Hurston's heroine, Janie, who pushes the limits of several of these writing restrictions by expressing her wish for fulfillment and freedom in her marriages.

A list of rules written by George Schuyler was published as "Instructions for Contributors" in *The Saturday Evening Quill* in 1929, explicitly detailing how African American characters must be depicted (Gates 276). One admonition illustrates the distance Hurston strayed from the expected focus of black writers: "Nothing that casts the least reflection on contemporary moral or sex standards will be allowed. Keep away from the erotic! Contributions must be clean and wholesome (Gates 179)." In addition,

the guidelines stated, “The heroine should always be beautiful and desirable, sincere and virtuous” (Gates 179). It is likely the author of these rules would have seen Janie as less than virtuous and Hurston’s subject matter as leaning toward the erotic. Without a doubt, Janie’s openly sexual quest for a fulfilling love relationship would have been outside of these limitations. In fact, all American writers would have encountered some restrictions on writing about sexuality during the Thirties; these constrictions were compounded however by the history of racism for the African American writer, especially as it related to female sexuality.

In describing the economic and class issues related to African American women’s sexuality, Carol Bakter describes two opposing camps that were discussing the issue at the time of Hurston’s work. In “Love Me Like I Like to Be”: The Sexual Politics of Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, the Classic Blues, and the Black Women’s Club Movement,” Bakter writes in *African American Review* (1998) of a clear division by economic and class status along the issues of the correct depiction of African American women, particularly in relation to the issue of sexuality. Bakter examines the lyrics of female Blues artists and the discourse of middle-class, educated women in the Black Women’s Club Movement. In fact, this critic sees Hurston involved in “early Twentieth-century black feminist politics” in her depiction of Janie Crawford (Bakter 199). Bakter notes “To develop a context for the sexual politics of earlier writers, critics and historians have turned to the discourses of the black women’s club movement, which had its origins in the anti-lynching campaign, and the classic blues, written in large part by African American women” (Bakter 199). Although as with Gates, no direct link with Hurston is available to prove her knowledge of these discourses, Bakter notes her

friendship with a few prominent blues artists and her possible exposure to the anti-lynching campaign and the club movement in college.

Neither Hurston nor *Their Eye Were Watching God* will fit neatly into these categories. “It is my contention that Hurston has been left out of this debate primarily because her text disrupts neat dichotomies between respectability and desire, middle- and working-class discourses, and club and blues women,” Bakter explains. Further Bakter notes, “The politics of both the largely middle-class club movement and the largely working-class classic blues were striated. Each discourse struggled with class issues and with legitimating black female sexuality in a racist context which positioned African American women as libidinous” (Bakter 200). Janie moves between classes in her marriages: she is forced into a middle-class farmer’s home and then moves to an upper-class life with her second husband as the mayor and landowner in Eatonville. She chooses a working class life with Tea Cake and even joins the work crew. Janie never wavers from her desire to reach physical and emotional fulfillment.

In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Bakter points out a connection between the attitudes expressed by the club women and by Janie’s grandmother, Nanny: “. . . Hurston raises questions of respectability and class bias in the figure of Nanny” (Bakter 201). To explain this connection, the critic points to the contentiousness between Nanny and Janie over her budding sexuality at sixteen: “Although Nanny’s focus on middle-class respectability and her regulation of Janie’s sexuality seem to reinforce polarities between middle-class sexual repression and working-class expressivity, Hurston works to dismantle the dichotomy, in part, by positioning Nanny as a former slave and a member of the working class” (Bakter 201). Bakter sees Tea Cake as clearly being associated

with the working-class blues tradition, yet she notes that Hurston avoids viewing Janie as simply sexually promiscuous by combining her sexual interest with a loving relationship and marriage to Tea Cake. Within the novel, the two viewpoints surface but always maintain a balance of sorts, at Bakter points out: “*Their Eyes Were Watching God* concerns itself with the question of African American women’s sexual legitimacy. Hurston’s novel is framed by scenes that represent Janie as oversexed, especially in the initial porch scene and at the trial. Nanny also represents Janie as libidinous and, like some club women, uses middle-class respectability as a strategy of containment” (Bakter 205). Significantly, Bakter raises the judgment of the people who watch Janie reenter Eatonville at the beginning of the novel; they conjecture that she has been used and discarded by Tea Cake. Janie emphasizes Tea Cake’s love and constancy in her story to answer the townspeople’s conjectures that she returns alone because he has taken her money and left her for a younger woman; they “position Janie as the victim of a ‘mistreating man’ and of her own desire” (Bakter 205). a representation often found in classic blues, but her testimony to her best friend will dispute those assumptions.

Similarly, Jennifer Jordan in *Studies in Women’s Literature* (1988) notes the difficulty in pinning down Hurston’s position, something which she felt caused early critics to disregard her work: “Instead, these critics, Hurston’s contemporaries—found her aggravatingly contradictory and amazingly complex” (“Feminist Fantasies: Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*” 105). Jordan also points out that the Hurston personality and lifestyle may figure into more recent assessments of her work: “Hurston’s independence, her refusal to allow her love interests and marriages to hamper her career, and her adventuresomeness in confronting the dangers of anthropological research in the

violent turpentine camps of the South and in the voodoo temples of Haiti make her a grand candidate for feminist sainthood” (Jordan 106). Jordan cautions, however, “Difficulties arise however, when critics transfer their narrow conception of Hurston’s personal attitudes and history to their readings of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, a novel that reflects Huston’s ambiguity about race, sex, and class. The result is the unsupportable notion that the novel is an appropriate fictional representation of the concerns and attitudes of modern black feminism” (Jordan 106-7). This concern parallels recent attempts to view *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and Mark Twain using recent developments in literary criticism and American culture. It is difficult to view a work with a new set of lenses, particularly when the work relates to freedom, a notion constantly in flux in American culture.

Jordan’s argument in this article considers that problem: “In approaching *Their Eyes Were Watching God* with a feminist perspective, critics often view the text through ideological prisms that color their conclusions” (Jordan 107). Specifically, Jordan deliberates the expectations for African American feminist literature to address both race and gender issues in specific ways: expecting “a literature of protest that condemns interracial and intraracial oppression and discrimination,” and further “that the literature go beyond mere protest and redefine the roles and values necessary in a new society free from sexism or racism” (Jordan 107). Clearly, an African American woman would encounter a combination of different but strict restrictions and expectations on her work whether writing in 1937 or today.

Jordan however sees *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as receiving some critical support from this new perspective: “the attempts of black feminists to accommodate the

often conflicting imperatives of individual transformation, feminine bonding, and racial communalism have had a powerful effect on the reinterpretation of Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*," noting that "The novel is seen as a vehicle of feminist protest through its condemnation of the restrictiveness of bourgeois marriage and through its explorations of interracial sexism and male violence" (Jordan 108). Janie's complaints of her stifling twenty-year marriage to Jody Starks in which her voice and sexuality are stifled, in this new perspective, become protests against "bourgeois marriage," and the verbal and physical assaults exchanged with all three husbands become struggles against sexism in present day estimations.

Returning to the African American writer's directives listed by Gates, one admonition insisted that the heroine should be "of the brown-skinned type" (Gates 180). Hurston directly confronts the issue of skin color several times in Janie's quest; her skin type, resulting from her mixed racial heritage, figures into part of the source of her quest from the time she first realizes she is a child of color, throughout her marriages, and finally erupts into a conflict even in the wilderness paradise where she had found community in the Everglades.

In fact, one critical factor in Janie's quest becomes the need to not be defined and limited by her markedly "white" features. Her freedom quest reaches deeper into issues of race and gender roles in the America of 1937 than simply as a search for the right husband.

At the end of those same guidelines, the reason for all of these restrictions was openly declared: "Nothing will be permitted that is likely to engender ill feelings between blacks and whites" (Gates 180). Hurston's novel dares to breach this limitation directly. Strong

examples that illustrate the distance *Their Eyes Were Watching God* strayed from those essentially middle-class concerns occur in Nanny's stories of racial and gender violence.

For example, one of the most graphic and dramatic stories told to symbolize the nature of the racial story could create "ill will" in the white reading audience. It comes directly from Nanny, the most sympathetic character, telling of her mistreatment in slavery. She tells of a violent confrontation after the birth of her child (Janie's mother) fathered by the slave owner. The owner's wife plans for retaliation, promising to have Nanny tied up and whipped until she bleeds to death, and then hauntingly, furthers the horror by threatening to sell Nanny's newborn away (Hurstons 17).

Nanny continues their family history with Janie's mother's story: even though she is the first generation free African American woman, she suffers rape and the loss of a promising future. Nanny tries to explain her need to marry Janie to a "safe" man, recalling the moment when Leafy returns after the rape by her white teacher, seeing her daughter "crawlin' in on her hands and knees. A sight to see" (Hurstons 18).

To punctuate the lesson she hopes Janie will learn from this history, Nanny delivers her "mule" speech, one of several times the story will compare Janie's possible fate as a "mule." This pronouncement makes no attempt to soften the racial and gender issues that could offend the white reader. For Nanny, it is her life's duty to save Janie from this fate: "So de white man throw down de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up. He pick it up cuz he have to, but he don't tote it. He hand it to his womenfolks. De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see" (Hurstons 14). This speech is key to the journey; Janie's goal in her quest will be to discover a different answer to that lack of hope, for the freedom to not become the "mule".

When describing the mule speech, Rachel DuPlessis sums it up as “an open-ended narrative of severe sexual as well as socioeconomic bondage for black women” (DuPlessis 111). This issue leads DuPlessis to name Janie’s quest: “With that racially and socially inflected sexual history as Janie’s matrilineage, it is significant that one could read the novel as a quest for autonomous, pleasurable sexual choice . . .” (DuPlessis 114).

Of course, the result of Nanny’s sermon about the mule and her concern for Janie’s budding sexuality is to force her into the marriage with Logan Killicks. Lillie Howard noted that this decision was reasonable given the history Nanny had experienced: “While Nanny is guilty of limiting her granddaughter by shackling her to a middle-aged farmer—all in the name of safety and ‘protection’—her intentions are wholly good, her actions understandable, her advice well-meant” (Howard 404). Janie, however, never acknowledges or understands this within the context of the novel, and, in fact, Janie at several points in her journey expresses her need to live life differently than her grandmother had intended.

Cultural changes over time, compounded by different critical approaches to the work, have led to a rediscovery of the work and reconsiderations of Hurston’s narrative intent. One interesting change involves the nature of Janie’s quest. Questions arise as to the time it begins, the impetus for it, and the ultimate goal.

For example, Robert Hemenway notes the scene when Joe Starks has cared for a starving mule and the town decides to stage a funeral for it under his direction. Janie is not allowed to go with the others because Stark insists that she be above the common people because she is the mayor’s wife. Hemenway asserts that following the moment

when Janie is left behind her journey begins: “The rest of the novel documents Janie’s search to liberate herself from a world that imposes artificial distinctions of class, a world that imposes male fantasies of socialization that deny women the right to autonomous decisions” (“The Personal Dimension” 43). Further, Hemenway develops this search to be: “. . . Janie seeking her place—and her voice. . . in the African-American community as an individual woman, a task that becomes a struggle to live as something other than ‘de mule uh de world,’ which her grandmother claims is the lot of the black woman” (“The Personal Dimension” 43).

Nellie McKay sees Janie’s journey as much more than a simplified search for a husband, as well, and notes an interrelation between Hurston’s personal experiences and Janie’s story: “The circumstances of the autobiography and the fiction were indeed different but writer Hurston—the experiencing self—and character Janie—the narrative self—take us on a journey of personal discovery to the place where language, gender, and culture merge to give full voice to the otherwise often marginalized black female self” (McKay 54). Both of these assessments of Janie’s journey follow the change in critical viewpoint about the author and the character.

Interestingly, the issues of Janie’s voice and autonomy are debated among critics. One example comes from Mary Helen Washington in “I Love the Way Janie Leaves Her Husbands,” who sees Janie as silenced and subjected to male domination throughout the novel: “As many feminist critics have pointed out, women do get silenced, even in texts by women, and there are critical places in *Their Eyes* where Janie’s voice needs to be heard and is not, places where we would expect her as the subject of the story to speak” (Washington 32).

Washington sees a serious misplacement of focus as well in the novel: “Passages that are supposed to represent Janie’s interior consciousness begin by marking some internal change in Janie, then gradually or abruptly shift so that a male character takes Janie’s place as the subject of the discourse; at the conclusion of these passages, ostensibly devoted to the revelation of Janie’s interior life, the male voice predominates” (Washington 32). Although these critics disagree on Janie’s nature and Hurston’s intent, they each take the character and the theme seriously, rather than trivializing, as earlier critics have, the theme, the character, and the writer.

In earlier freedom stories, Twain and Cather first demonstrate the distance between the searcher and his or her early community. Similarly, Hurston emphasizes Janie’s outsider position repeatedly in the story of her early childhood. Janie tells of the personal moments when she recognizes how different she is from others. Racial issues are at the heart of her story; separateness and estrangement issues surround the core issue of race.

Janie’s separateness focuses on her abandonment by both parents. Just as Huck’s details about his parentage points out his difference from the other boys, so Janie chooses the important details to tell her friend of her parentage: Janie says she doesn’t know where to start her story, so she begins with her abandonment by both biological parents: “Ah ain’t never seen mah pap. And didn’t know ‘im if Ah did. Mah mama neither. She was gone from round dere long before Ah wuz big enough tuh know. Mah grandma and de white folks she worked wid, she had a house out in de back-yard and dat’s where Ah wuz born” (Hurston 9). Janie’s beginning will always insure her outsider status; she is crippled by the violent circumstances of her conception, by her racially mixed parentage, and by her grandmother’s life intermingled with this white family. With the first details

of Janie's telling of her story, the character's outsider status carries the ultimate notion of isolation and loss—to be left alone by both parents before an age when memory will capture them.

This separation from home and community is especially important for the woman hero beginning a freedom quest: she must seem free to leave her family, something the male questing hero was empowered to desire and undertake. Huck's gender and his pseudo orphan status gave him a license to wander. Thea was considered unique and superior to her siblings and peers; it was established early in *The Song of the Lark* that Thea would not be tied to Moonstone. Also, her need to study music encouraged her travels from her hometown. Similarly, Janie's history creates that crucial element in the frame of the freedom story; she will be free to venture into the world, not bound to her hometown or absent parents.

Gordon Thompson, writing in *American Literature* (1994), notes an important element to the journey in Hurston's work: "If travel in Hurston is depicted as a specific male need, as a privilege even, Janie in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is a masterful exception" ("Projecting Gender: Personification in the Works of Zora Neale Hurston" 753). Hurston, in the tradition of the freedom story, unleashes Janie from her hometown and sets her on the freedom road.

In tandem with Janie's outsider status, Hurston earned her own outsider status in the writing community of her day by the use of dialect in Janie's reported storytelling to Pheoby as well as choices about the depiction of Janie's sexuality. Richard Wright, as perhaps her strongest critic, was not alone in his assessment of her writing. In another early critical response of note which appeared in *The New Republic* (1937), Otis

Ferguson criticized the form of the dialogue and places it in a racial context: he first mildly praised the language as “a gold mine of traditional sayings ,” but then objected to the dialogue, especially the misspelling of words to depict speech as promoting “a mood of Eddie Cantor in blackface” (“You Can’t Hear Their Voices” 77-8). This theme of Hurston promoting white misinterpretations of African American life blended into a strong distaste for her portrayal of dialect. Hurston at that time was judged as an outsider to the literary community, both the white and black communities, even as her main character finds estrangement from both worlds.

The concerns about minstrel show writing disappear and are replaced with concerns about how her work fits in newer critical theories. Another example of this change as expressed by Nellie McKay, for example, speaks to that very breaking of expectations and suggesting Hurston play the role of pioneer: “As a writer in the twentieth century, she was among the early black women unequivocally to assert women’s rights to self-fulfillment outside of their allegiances to men.” McKay further expands Hurston’s groundbreaking role from issues of gender to issues of race, describing the novel as promoting “. . .the significance of black folk life to the psychological health of black people, and women’s right to autonomy. . .” (McKay 55). McKay views the story as a “delineation of Janie’s psychological journey from a male-identified female to assertive womanhood. . .” and “. . .a vehicle that restores black voice to the as-told-to slave narratives of the nineteenth century. . .” among other achievements (McKay 55). This viewpoint directly counters the earlier judgments that Hurston promoted negative images of African Americans.

Robert Hemenway asserts that Janie, “the narrator of the novel, is eventually able to tell her story because she reclaims her communal narrative endowment, an oral tradition that ignores the representational boundaries of fact and fiction, and documents a complex system of cultural communication that we label black folklore” (“The Personal Dimension” 43-44). In fact, Hemenway sees Hurston’s writing as highlighting the representation of African American life rather than exposing that internal culture to ridicule: “Time after time in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Hurston tries to represent the ‘difference’ of blackness through a representation of the folk process. That is why talking buzzards, a ceremonial yellow mule, big picture talkers on Joe Clark’s store porch, Bahamian fire dancers, and lying sessions on the Muck appear so frequently” (“The Personal Dimension’ 44). It would be easy to imagine that these same representations would have raised the ire of earlier critics who feared she was representing ‘minstrel’ images to the white reader.

John Trombold considers this issue of the use of folklore in Hurston’s work in “The Minstrel Show Goes to the Great War: Zora Neale Hurston’s Mass Cultural Other” (1999). Trombold notes that there was a tension between country and city African Americans during the time of the Great Migration and the Harlem Renaissance. With the large displacement of Southern blacks to the North, those connections with country-styled African American life became unacceptable to some people, and there was a growing conflict with the use of folklore, for example, in depictions of African American characters. Again, there was a concern about the image portrayed in literature before a white audience. He asserts that Hurston “was a partisan in the culture wars dividing the respective identities of city and country” (Trombold 86). Coming from the Deep South

to Harlem and studying folklore as an anthropologist centered her interests in the country identity. According to Trombold, “Her cultural strategy involved tactical redefinition of the meaning, in a culture segregated by Jim Crow laws, of racially charged figures of speech such as black crows” (Trombold 86). This idea, that Hurston was confronting racism by refiguring folklore figures, sets up a direct opposition to objections to her depiction of black lifestyles. Once more, neither Hurston nor her writing will fit easily into any stringent expectations or viewpoints.

The characterization of Janie and her journey involve several elements of the earlier freedom stories, yet with important differences. Even though, like Twain and Cather, Hurston shows the separation of the hero from the native community, there is a significant difference in Janie’s estrangement. Huck doesn’t fit into the socially learned habits of his hometown; Thea doesn’t fit into the world her siblings experience in Moonstone. Hurston adds another dimension to her character’s outsider status with an episode resonating with the racial history of naming and identity.

First, Janie’s story focuses on how she blends into the white family’s four grandchildren and learns to name her own grandmother as they do: Nanny (Hurston 8). These children and Janie’s life in the backyard of the white family’s home combine to create difficult identity issues for Janie.

The child’s thoughts encompass this identity split: “Ah was wid dem white chillun so much till Ah didn’t know Ah wuzn’t white till Ah was round six years old” (Hurston 8). Her discovery humiliates and confuses the child. The narrative stance understates the racial injustice even while framing it.

Much of the later quest is tied up in the next event in Janie's history. Explaining her first knowledge of her race, Janie tells of the children being photographed, but when the family gathers around and points out each child, Janie notes "there wasn't nobody left except a real dark little girl with long hair standing by Eleanor. Dat's where Ah wuz s'posed to be, but Ah couldn't recognize dat dark chile as me. So Ah ast, 'where is me?' Ah don't see me'" (Hurstun 8-9). Derision and laughter follow and her lack of self identity is highlighted: "' Dat's you, Alphabet, don't you know yo' ownself?'" (Hurstun 9). This question and the iconic portrait of identity confusion and racial difference becomes Janie's quest. Significantly, her skin color isolates her from whites and some in the African American community where her lighter skin promotes her separateness. In this case, she sees herself as "real dark." The child speaks simply and innocently and again the narrative stance remains clear yet diverted to the child's viewpoint.

Sigrid King focuses on the racial history of naming when discussing this "Alphabet" anecdote (1998): "From their earliest experiences in America, Afro-Americans have been made aware that those who name also control and those who are named are subjugated. Slaves were forced to abandon their African identities when they were captured, and were renamed with their masters' identities when they arrived in America" ("Naming and Power in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*" 115). The white family calls her by this oddly generic name, and, in the midst of her shock at recognizing herself as different amongst the white children, Hurston emphasizes her estrangement by having the child's memory relate the humiliation of their laughter but without narrative comment. Concerns about black and white history and the power of race to skew individual histories remain at the center of Hurston's text.

The child's perception that her naming has blurred her identity is clarified: "Dey all uster call me Alphabet 'cause so many people had done named me different names." It is not clear exactly who named her or what they have named her. Her innocence is displayed before all the assembled whites when she studies the picture, recognizes the dress she was wearing, and her hair, and realizes something completely new: "Aw, aw. Ah'm colored!" The laughter that follows leaves an uncomfortable sense of the cruelty of the moment: "Den dey all laughed real hard. But before Ah seen de picture Ah thought Ah wuz just like de rest" (Hurstun 9). The distance created by the memory of childhood undercuts the harshness of the laughter and the shock but the words, "Ah thought Ah wuz just like de rest," emphasizes the significance of her journey to find her identity on this freedom journey and her racial place in the world. With a child's voice telling the story, the cruelty is slightly undercut, perhaps a necessary stance in Hurston's estimation while exploring these racially charged issues in the America of 1937. Also, this extreme separation from community, abrupt and startling, especially emotionally searing because of the lack of empathetic response from the adults who witness this moment, brings her separation into high relief. At an age of complete dependence on others, she finds herself without a clear family or family structure, she loses her own personal image of who she is and what she looks like, and she finds herself without 'others' she is like--unable even to be claimed clearly by name. Her reality becomes smudged at the earliest age, and her sense of separateness is only compounded by her youth.

Perhaps in the same way that Huck's discussions highlighting racism and hypocrisy in his society are easier to accept because of his youth and his innocence, hearing the words

of the child rather than the writer Hurston would have made the story less antagonistic to the reader of 1937.

This episode suggests a psychological discomfort and brokenness not seen with the outsider characterization of Huck or Thea. Huck knows his social manners are not acceptable for the dinner table; he comes to realize his ethics will not allow him to accept racial divisions of his society. It is not an inner identity crisis: Huck always seems comfortable in his independent individuality. When confronted with the choice of turning Jim in as a runaway slave, after struggling with the decision, once he chooses, there is no mention that he suffers emotional uncertainty or angst over his separateness from the prevailing white code.

Thea never seems to question her differences emotionally or psychologically. For example, she wanders to the exotic immigrants outside the town of Moonstone because she feels more comfortable there. No psychological distress arises over her obvious differences from her siblings who are comfortable in their roles in a small town preacher's family. In neither freedom story will psychological components of identity confusion appear.

Hurston from this earliest part of Janie's history introduces this sense of identity confusion, a psychological pain as evidenced in the child's questions and memories. Janie's quest is different from Huck and Thea's quests in this need to discover an emotional wholeness within the process of her social journey. At several points in her journey, Hurston introduces this emotional discomfort as part of Janie's impetus for continuing her search.

Rachel Blau DuPlessis notes another perspective to this naming and identity incident. DuPlessis defines this moment in terms of Hurston's writing method: "Janie can be seen from the first moments of the novel to be made of signs, like 'Alphabet,' her childhood nickname." DuPlessis notes that the 'signs' are "constructed by Hurston to be conflictual and heterogeneous in the array of race, gender role, age, class, and sexual markers" ("Power, Judgment, and Narrative in a Work of Zora Neale Hurston" 95). DuPlessis adds another caveat about analyzing the novel and Janie only in terms of race: "The paradox of Janie—her fascination—is Hurston's narrating Janie's efforts to spell her life with more than that one word 'colored,' while necessarily her life is focused by the social, economic, and cultural meanings of blackness" (DuPlessis (95)). In fact, this critic declares "Hurston wants to analyze race without being reduced to race" (DuPlessis 96). 'To analyze race without being reduced to race' parallels the need Janie has throughout *Their Eyes Were Watching God* to realize her identity as a woman of color, but to not be "reduced" and defined by either her gender or race.

Ultimately, McKay takes an interesting stance on the connection between the character and the author and places both within a tradition: "Unlike the solitary but representative hero of male autobiography, Janie Starks and Zora Neale Hurston join to produce a personal narrative that celebrates an individual and collective black female identity emerging out of the search for an autonomous self" (McKay 68).

An interesting variation on physical journey and escape lies in Hurston's introduction of psychological escapes when physical escapes are not possible. One of the first internal escapes arises in Janie's first marriage when she learns to feel anger but not express it. By the end of her second marriage she has learned to have an "inside and an outside."

When Logan Killicks buys another mule so that Janie can plow his land, Nanny's 'mule' speech becomes a tangible reality for Janie and results in anger and resentment, yet she consciously holds back her inner emotions about this insult. Logan studies her face, but she doesn't react or speak, so he doesn't know what she thinks about becoming another 'mule.' She has learned already to separate out her emotions and to control her reaction (Hurston 26). With this inner breaking of her internal emotions and her outside demeanor, the novel introduces her ability to escape inwardly.

With her second husband, Joe Starks, this emotional break into inner and outer realities will grow in intensity. The psychological escapes become more pervasive, and after Joe Stark's death she thinks about her long time separation of her internal self from her public self: "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." This figure of saving a portion of the self against harm arises often in the narrative. Another expression of the separation of inner/outer selves appears in her conscious control of facial expression. After finding that the "young girl was gone, but a handsome woman had taken her place," she lets down her hair and studies her face but afterwards "starched and ironed her face forming it into just what people wanted to see" (Hurston 83).

Another emblem of her confinement in her marriage became the head rags Jody insisted she wear because he wanted no one to admire her hair. The camouflaging of her inner self has taken a toll: "The years took all the fight out of Janie's face. For a while she thought it was gone from her soul" (Hurston 72).

The silencing of her voice is critical to her confinement and her eventual escape: "No matter what Jody did she said nothing. She had learned how to talk some and leave

some” (Hurstun 72). She sums up the result of all of the suppression: “She was a rut in the road. Plenty of life beneath the surface but it was kept beaten down by the wheels” (Hurstun 72). This is a dire portrait of a character originally described in vibrant and powerful terms.

Even though she tried thinking of a change in her world as “She struck out into the future,” she realizes “mostly she lived between her hat and her heels, with her emotional disturbances like shade patterns in the woods—come and gone with the sun” (Hurstun 72).

After his death she realizes that the relationship only gave her “what money could buy, and she was giving away what she didn’t value” (Hurstun 72). Part of her journey will be to find something she can again value.

At times during the marriage, Janie considers escaping by leaving Jody: “Now and again she thought of a country road at sun-up and considered flight. To where? To what? Then too she considered thirty-five is twice seventeen and nothing was the same at all” (Hurstun 72). Physical escape seems impossible even as the internal escape grows deeper.

The relationship dies before Jody’s death when she publicly lashes out at him after twenty years of keeping silence. Her verbal violence is followed by physical violence from her husband. This is the final breaking of their marriage, a marriage that had changed dramatically, so much so that “The spirit of the marriage left the bedroom and took to living in the parlor. It was there to shake hands whenever company came to visit, but it never went back inside the bedroom again,” another example of living an inner and outer life (Hurstun 67). Her internal brokenness from the physical violence is pictured in

this way: “She stood there until something fell off the shelf inside her. Then she went inside there to see what it was” (Hurstun 67-8). She finds her “image of Jody. . .shattered” and realizes that he was “Just something she had grabbed up to drape her dreams over” (Hurstun 68).

This inner search provides her with knowledge about herself and her failed marriage: “She found that she had a host of thoughts she had never expressed to him, and numerous emotions she had never let Jody know about. Things packed up and put away in parts of her heart where he could never find them. She was saving up feelings for some man she had never seen. She had an inside and an outside now and suddenly she knew how not to mix them” (Hurstun 68). The picture of this emotional separation and conscious control of emotional expression illustrates the beginning steps in her quest for wholeness and freedom.

After Jody’s death, aware of her interior self, Janie again chooses to protect that inner self: “Janie starched and ironed her face and came set in the funeral behind her veil. It was like a wall of stone and steel. The funeral was going on outside.” But her inside self remains safe; she realizes she is untouched by the grief: “. . .nor did the things of death reach inside to disturb her calm” (Hurstun 84). In fact, “she sent her face to Joe’s funeral, and herself went rollicking with the springtime across the world” (Hurstun 84-5). This creates a portrait of psychological divisions, growing intellectual awareness, and a painful yet healthy growth toward selfhood for Janie.

After the funeral she takes primary steps on her freedom quest--this time the beginning of a true escape. When she returns from the funeral she destroys her emblem of Jody’s control: “Before she slept that night she burnt up every one of her head rags and went

about the house next morning with her hair in one thick braid swinging well below her waist” (Hurstun 85). Joe Stark had admired her hair and his need to control Janie was so extreme that he feared another man might brush against it. She allows this one “outside” change for other people to see, she chooses not to make other changes public for she has made a crucial decision: “She would have the rest of her life to do as she pleased” (Hurstun 85).

Janie must reject the values of her past and search her inner self. She decided to ask “lonesomeness some questions” (Hurstun 85). She considers what ties she has to people in her past and realizes that her mother and grandmother are not the part of her life she wants now. She sees her journey’s goal: “She had been getting ready for her great journey to the horizon in search of people. It was important to all the world that she find them and they find her” (Hurstun 85). Love and people will be her goal; she doesn’t yet know what she will need to complete this quest, only that she must do it. In a moment of catharsis, she realizes the purpose of her freedom story just as Huck realized his need to reject conventional views of the slave holding society and Thea gained the vision to become a singer in the tradition of the women potters of the Ancient People. Janie in this moment begins to know more about herself: “Besides she liked being lonesome for a change. This freedom feeling was fine (Hurstun 86).” She avoids suitors and over the months “She was just basking in freedom for the most part without the need for thought” (Hurstun 88).

Nellie McKay notes the similarities between the two past marriages, specifically the circumstances that led to this brokenness for Janie: “Although the men were different, twenty years of life as Joe’s wife proved equally as confining for Janie as her shorter time

with Logan Killicks. Logan saw his identity reflected in the success and respect that came to him through hard work, ownership of property, and possession of a young and pretty wife. Joe's god was the lust for power and control over the whole community, including his wife" (McKay 60). Janie learns the benefits of silence and hidden emotions; she survives by the psychological break into an inside and outside.

Acquisition of voice and the progression of men in Janie's life are considered by Maria J. Racine in *African American Review* (1994): "Throughout the course of the novel, the evolution of the male voices seems to parallel the evolution of Janie's: Increasingly, Janie's men have voices, and her voice develops as her relationships improve" ("Voice and Interiority in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*" 283). The escape to an inner voice and vision increases from the first to second marriage and becomes her means of survival against the oppression from Starks. With his death, her inner voice remains the stronger one and thus the narrator must still express all the feelings she experiences. Racine sees that power to separate the inside and outside as a step toward finding her voice: "Having learned to separate her mind and her spirit from her physical surroundings Janie has taken a step toward attaining her own voice and thus control over her life. Initially she begins *mentally* to challenge Starks' control over her. Soon, however, she will challenge Starks *with words*, and make clear that he has not completely subdued or dominated her" (Racine 287).

Starks marked his ownership of Janie by the head rags he forced her to wear and that she burned the first night he was gone; Racine points out the connection Hurston makes with hair and control. "Hurston makes connections between Starks' manifestation of his insecurities and slavery." Racine points to the story Nanny tells of her master coming to

see her before leaving for the Civil War. He ran into her cabin, made her let down her hair, and wrapped his hands in it. Starks' insistence that Janie keep her hair covered, holds a similar significance: "Nanny's oppression is exemplified by her master's forcing her to display her hair, which represents her sexuality, just as Janie's oppression is exemplified by Joe's forcing her to cover her hair, and thus her sexuality, with the head rag. To some degree, whether out on a farm or withdrawn into a store both Killicks and Starks remove Janie from the community" (Racine 286-7).

Janie slowly begins the process of escaping her emotional constraints when she meets Tea Cake. She begins to enjoy something like freedom when he asks her to play checkers: ". . .she found herself glowing inside. Somebody wanted her to play" (Hurstun 91). He counters Jody's opinion of her that she doesn't have intelligence by telling her she has "good meat on 'yo head'" (Hurstun 92).

Tea Cake's talk is different from Starks whose conversation was directed at directing, denigrating, or defining Janie in relation to him or his position as mayor/husband. Often he would explain the role she played in town and the status he had provided her in the community. As Tea Cake's talk acknowledges aspects of her personality or appearance, he shifts the conversation from power to compassion; this becomes one factor in the building of their intimacy and community. Donald Marks in *Black American Literature Forum* (1985) connects the role of play to building a role for Janie in the community: "Johnny Taylor, and, more significantly, Tea Cake represent opportunity for Janie to play; in other words, to move out from herself and participate meaningfully in an organic community" ("Sex, Violence, and Organic Consciousness in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their*

Eyes Were Watching God' 152). This role of play and moving out of her interior self progresses slowly but continuously in the course of their relationship.

The next renewal of her knowledge of herself comes when Tea Cake insists on her beauty so that she finds herself looking in a mirror to study her "mouth, eyes, and hair" (Hurstun 101). Janie noticeably reacts to his compliments and comments by studying the information silently, in this case looking in the mirror for the beauty he has noticed.

The first person openly to recognize her withdrawal into her inner self is Tea Cake who finds her increasingly distant as he tries to make a connection with her: "Yo' face just left here and went off somewhere else'" (Hurstun 100). The first step in Janie's quest becomes this wavering attempt at community as she struggles to share her "inside" and "outside" even after she has seen herself as just a "rut in a road."

Much later in their relationship, Janie reaches a point of trust and community that will allow her an important internal freedom: ". . . her soul crawled out from its hiding place" (Hurstun 122). Clearly, Hurstun with this image signals Janie's first steps on the journey to wholeness of her inner and outer selves.

Even while Hurstun draws a decidedly positive portrait of their relationship at the beginning of their courtship, Peter Kerry Powers in "Gods of Physical Violence, Stopping at Nothing: Masculinity, Religion, and Art in the Work of Zora Neale Hurstun (2002)," cautions against misreading Tea Cake in terms of contemporary standards of maleness: "While contemporary criticism has emphasized Tea Cake and Janie's mutuality as if Tea Cake were a precursor to contemporary forms of enlightened masculinity, Tea Cake also falls into any number of stereotypical masculine behaviors. Tea Cake is . . . willing to use violence . . . he is a risk taker who makes his living by gambling, and he is a traveling

man who feels restless if he stays in one place too long” (Powers 241). Powers insists that the present day reader should see Tea Cake as “embodying everything stereotypically ‘masculine’ that Hurston has given every indication she finds attractive. Tea Cake on this score is Janie’s androgynous counterpart embodying ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ in such a way that leaves such categories largely indeterminate” (Powers 241).

In *Dust Tracks* (1942), Hurston links her personal life to the portrayal of Tea Cake and the novel. After describing an alternately ecstatic and tortuous love relationship with a man only identified as A.W.P., Hurston describes the work circumstances and the impetus for *Their Eyes Were Watching God*: “The plot was far from the circumstances, but I tried to embalm all the tenderness of my passion for him in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*” (*Dust Tracks* 188-189). Kathleen Davies points to the word *embalm* in Hurston’s statement and considers the choice: “*Embalm* implies that she has in effect already ‘killed him off’ but that she will kindly preserve him with the sweet balm of memory—the balm perhaps, of honey” (Davies 148). In association with this choice of words, Davies notes that the primitive place Tea Cake and Janie travel to for work could be viewed as a “version of Eden,” and considers the violence that occurs when Tea Cake slaps Janie as “the Fall.” Davies remarks this configuration may “suggest the origins of black women’s oppression” (Davies 153). The precursors to the violence are especially significant according to Davies: “What precipitates Tea Cake’s violent betrayal of Janie are the anti-black sentiments of Mrs. Turner, a black woman who, worshipping a white god and whiteness itself, plots to drive the light-skinned Janie away from the dark-skinned Tea Cake and into her brother’s arms” (Davies 153). Davies points out that Tea Cake strikes Janie, not Mrs. Turner, bringing Nanny’s version of the “mule” story to

Janie's reality. White racism, although emanating from an African American source, oppresses the African American male who then passes on the difficulty to the woman. Of course, significantly as well, Janie will kill Tea Cake literally and "embalm" him in memory in the final scene of the novel.

While psychological escape provides a part of the tale of Janie's journey, the physical journey to the "Muck" will draw her toward a larger community and the primitive paradise where she will finally find kinship within a black working class community. Hurston centers her freedom story on two pillars: the "pear tree" and ships seen on the horizon. The events surrounding the "pear tree" moment, the moment Janie discovers sexuality, leads through an emotional confrontation between Nanny and Janie, and ends with the disappointing marriage to Logan Killicks. The difference between Janie and Nanny's opposing approaches to life and relationships become invested in the 'mule' speech and the 'pear tree' moment; these remain symbols for issues of race and gender throughout the novel.

Hurston introduces the image of the pear tree in bloom to represent Janie's first sensual and sexual awakenings. The 'pear tree' moment reverberates throughout the novel, connecting to several needs and desires including, but not limited to, sexuality. It will run counter to Nanny's "mule" speech and carry Janie through several escapes.

Early in the novel, Janie watches a pear tree bloom, "spending every minute that she could steal from her chores under that tree" (Hurston 10). She recognizes this experience as a mystery connected with her own changing self, naming it in several ways: "It was like a flute song forgotten in another existence and remembered again." And again she

names it: “The rose of the world was breathing out smell. It followed her through all her waking moments and caressed her in her sleep” (Hurston 10).

Further, she perceives this part of nature to be related somehow to changes she has noticed in herself: “It connected itself with other vaguely felt matters that had struck her outside observation and buried themselves in her flesh. Now they emerged and quested about her consciousness” (Hurston 10). Janie’s journey begins with these thoughts.

Hurston’s picture of Janie’s fascination with the blooms of spring points to her growing wonder at what life offers, what it could be—a key to the questing that will focus her life. She watches the pear tree and recognizes the story of sexuality: “She saw a dust-bearing bee sink into the sanctum of a bloom; the thousand sister-calyxes arch to meet the love embrace and the ecstatic shiver of the tree from root to tiniest branch creaming in every blossom and frothing with delight. So this was a marriage!” (Hurston 10-11). Of course, this notion of bliss does not become reality for Janie until her final marriage/relationship with Tea Cake. Despite the fact that the society, the husbands, her family, and her friends will place limitations on her, Janie continues to look for wonder and possibility in the world throughout her freedom story.

Janie names the experience as “the voice and vision” (Hurston 11). She seeks an answer to her place in this story but sees only “a personal answer for all other creations except herself . . . she felt an answer seeking her.” She sums up the beginning of her need to quest: “She was sixteen. She had glossy leaves and bursting buds and she wanted to struggle with life but it seemed to elude her. . . .She searched as much of the world as she could from the top of the front steps and then went on down to the front gate and leaned over to gaze up and down the road. Looking, waiting, breathing short with

impatience. Waiting for the world to be made” (Hurston 11). This enthusiasm for the possibilities outside of the front gate bump up against the wall Nanny has described to her as a future of being a ‘mule’ because of her race and gender.

Dolan Hubbard deems this the focus of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*: “The end product of Hurston’s vision is to create a new black woman, through a critique of the past. In looking back, Janie also looks forward to the day when American women of African descent will no longer be the mules of the world” (Hubbard 101).

Predictably this discovery leads to estrangement from Nanny. The grandmother insists on a marriage for security because the dawning of sexuality revives all of Nanny’s fears, well grounded in her own sexually abusive past and Janie’s mother’s rape and subsequent promiscuousness. These fears must negate Janie’s search for an understanding of love and sensuality in her grandmother’s worldview. Rachel DuPlessis sums up the differences in their viewpoints in sociological terms: “Protection as Nanny construes it—gender and class based—is in the most articulate contradiction to sexualities. And Hurston does not stint in our understanding of this by her lavishly sensual and orgasmic description of the pear tree, Janie’s own articulation of her desire” (DuPlessis 110-111).

After Janie experiences difficulty in the marriage, Nanny refuses to listen to Janie’s pain and despair. Janie rejects Nanny’s fears and chooses to make her next escape, leaving behind her childhood and only family.

Janie uses the ‘pear tree moment’ to evaluate her relationships as well as her path on the journey. The coerced marriage to Logan Killicks brings her first disappointment. She convinces herself that when she marries Logan (and his 60 acres) that she will find

solace and answers to her “springtime” and “pear tree “ questions. She convinces herself that she will “love Logan” after marrying him because “Nanny and the old folks had said it, so it must be so. Husbands and wives always loved each other, and that was what marriage meant. It was just so. Janie felt glad of the thought, for then it wouldn’t seem so destructive and mouldy. She wouldn’t be lonely anymore” (Hurston 20). A description of his house proves to be descriptive of their coming married life: “It was a lonesome place like a stump in the middle of the woods where nobody had even been. The house was absent of flavor” (Hurston 20-21). Undaunted, Janie enters the house anyway “to wait for love to begin” (Hurston 24).

Her wait does not result in love. When she tries to find out why from Nanny and her friend, she only finds resistance to the notion that she even needs love. The advice is that she should be satisfied with the 60 acres, her legal status, his protection, and her organ in the parlor. Eventually she realizes a key idea: “The familiar people and things had failed her so she hung over the gate and looked up the road towards way off. She knew now that marriage did not make love” (Hurston 24). This becomes a key push for a journey: “Janie’s first dream was dead, so she became a woman” (Hurston 24).

Logan Killicks is her first false escape on this freedom quest. Jody Starks will promote her second false escape, and again she will measure her choices and her path by the pear tree experience. She doubts the path with Jody “because he did not represent sun-up and pollen and blooming trees,” but she will follow him because “he spoke for far horizon” (Hurston 28).

At this moment she is caught between two men defining her and creating her story; Nanny still lies in the back of her mind as well. Jody tells her about how her life will

change if she leaves Logan and follows him: he promises he will “make a wife outa ya,” not “a dog outa you” (Hurston 28). He wants to change her present life: “You ain’t never knowed what it was to be treated like a lady and Ah want to be de one tuh show yuh” (Hurston 28).

Hurston explains that Janie “debated” the matter, and Logan begins to appear as the oppressor of the mule speech rather than the springtime of the pear tree. He reminds her of the scandal of her parentage, mixed racially and illegitimate; he reminds her that she was raised in the white’s back yard (Hurston 29). He announces how he will define her life and her story: “Ah thought you would ‘preciate good treatment. Thought Ah’d take and make somethin’ outa yuh. You think youse white folks by de way you act” (Hurston 29). Their argument leads to volatile racial issues and contrasts sharply with Jody’s promises. Hurston emphasizes that each man plans to “create” the meaning of Janie’s future.

This statement in itself pictures a volatile racial issue; throughout the novel Janie’s mixed ethnicity holds an emotional and political value. Janie in this instance avoids the racial question and pushes the relationship issue by saying out loud what she has already thought of inwardly. She directly asks Logan what he would do if she ran off. Even though Logan is pained by the possibility, he chooses not to let her know and instead insults her personally: “‘T’aint too many mens would trust yuh, knowin’ yo folks lak dey do” (Hurston 29). These verbal jabs continue as Logan insists she come to the barn to move a pile of manure, and when she refuses he tells her that she must do whatever her ‘place’ is where he needs her and to “Git uh move on yuh, and dat quick” (Hurston 30).

Janie fights back in anger and derision, something she will learn to avoid in her next marriage. She defends her worth and identity asserting that she is not his mule: “you ain’t done me no favor by marryin’ me” (Hurston 30). Logan reacts with a gesture of violence and a threat to kill her with an axe (Hurston 30). She will save herself by leaving without further confrontation of Killicks. This will be the first of three versions of a violent break with a husband.

Leaving Killicks for Starks becomes a lengthy false escape in which she loses more of the hope of the ‘pear tree moment’ and becomes even more broken emotionally, living an outer life distinct from her inner life.

Other moments arise when she measures her path in comparison to the pear tree moment. After seven years of a broken life with Jody, she measures her connections with him: “She wasn’t petal-open anymore with him” (Hurston 67). And she considers what this brokenness has caused in her: Janie knows “she had no more blossomy openings dusting pollen over her man, neither any glistening young fruit where the petals used to be” (Hurston 68).

In Janie’s rejections of both marriages there are two factors operating; she rejects the values inherent in both relationships as well as the control the two men attempt to exert.

McKay sees the action of leaving both marriages as a critical piece of Janie’s quest, declaring that Janie “asserted her individuality by refusing to conform to her husbands’ dreams of her,” and that she continued to hold onto the hope of the ‘pear tree’ moment, by “holding on to her dream of a loving partnership that recognized true equity between each member of the marriage team” (McKay 60).

After Jody's death and a time of freedom from relationships, she meets Tea Cake who measures up to that vision she discovered at sixteen. Tea Cake "looked like the love thoughts of women. He could be a bee to a blossom—a pear tree blossom in the spring. He seemed to be crushing scent out of the world with his footsteps. Crushing aromatic herbs with every step he took. Spices hung about him. He was a glove from God" (Hurston 101-2). For the first time, she finds a man who seems to fit in her "pear tree" picture although, after more than twenty years of disappointment in marriage, she hesitates and slowly builds trust and hope again.

These glowing statements by Janie suggest Tea Cake's role in her quest and in her personal growth, but as McKay points out, Tea Cake's role is questionable: "Hurston scholars disagree on the extent of Tea Cake's contributions to the subsequent full emergence of Janie's voice and self. That he was instrumental in showing her the possibilities of a life outside of materialistic and social restrictions, one built instead on honest love and respect between people, is not in dispute. But Janie had spent the greater part of her second marriage in a journey seeking her selfhood. By the time Tea Cake came into her life she was ready to embrace life willingly and fully" (McKay 61). The conviction to 'embrace life willingly and fully' is placed in the initial image of the novel, ships on the horizon.

The 'pear tree' moment represents the opposition to Nanny's mule speech, often associated with love, marriage, and sexuality. Hurston uses another freedom image to typify the freedom journey and comment upon its relative meaning to men and women. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* begins with the sight of a ship on the horizon: "Ships at a distance have every man's wish on board. For some they come in with the tide. For

others they sail forever on the horizon, never out of sight, never landing until the Watcher turns his eyes away in resignation, his dreams mocked to death by Time. That is the life of men” (Hurston 1). The narrator makes a distinction between this questing need within men and within women: “Women forget all those things they don’t want to remember, and remember everything they don’t want to forget. The dream is the truth. They act and do things accordingly” (Hurston 1). This horizon image with the narrative interpretation appears at key turns in Janie’s journey.

Gates points out the connection this beginning image has to the African American literary tradition. Frederick Douglass writes in 1845 of ships in the harbor: “I would pour out my soul’s complaint, in my rude way, with an apostrophe to the moving multitude of ships:--‘You are loosed from your moorings, and are free; I am fast in my chains, and am a slave! You move merrily before the gentle gale, and I sadly before the bloody whip! You are freedom’s swift-winged angels, that fly around the world; I am confined in bands of iron! O that I were free!’” (Gates 170). Gates sees Hurston’s “revision” of Douglass as “one example of many such instances of a black textual grounding through revision” (Gates 171). Fittingly then, the horizon becomes an icon of freedom for Hurston, even though the ship as the transporter of slaves to America arises from the image as well.

Janie ties together the horizon and her journey after Joe Clarke’s death: she realizes that “she had been getting ready for her quest journey to the horizons in search of people; it was important to all the world that she should find them and they find her” (Hurston 85). This statement speaks to a quest for community and connection, not just “marriage” as she had envisioned it at sixteen. For Janie, her journey will be about ‘people’ rather than things. At this moment, Janie’s thoughts draw on all three viewpoints—her own,

Nanny's, and the horizon motif: "It was all according to the way you see things, some people could look at a mud-puddle and see an ocean with ships. But Nanny belonged to the other kind that loved to deal in scraps. Here 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 into such a little bit of a thing that she could tie it about her granddaughter's neck tight enough to choke her" (Hurst 85). This musing about Nanny causes her to launch into a description of her knowledge of herself that has matured since that teenage vision: "She had found a jewel down inside herself and she had wanted to walk where people could see her and gleam it around. But she had been set in the market place to sell. Been set for still bait" (Hurst 85-6).

This vision of herself has led her to a larger vision of the world: "When God had made The Man, he made him out of stuff that sung all the time and glittered all over. Then after that some angels got jealous and chopped him into millions of pieces, but still he glittered and hummed. So they beat him down to nothing but sparks but each little spark had a shine and a song. So they covered each one over with mud. And the lonesomeness in the sparks made them hunt for one another, but the mud is deaf and dumb. Like all the other tumbling mud-balls, Janie had tried to show her shine" (Hurst 86). All of these moments of self-realization for Janie provided by the narrator speak to the definition of what Janie wants to escape and what she wants to discover on her quest. It relates directly to some inner emotional healing that will also be the aim of her journey.

After the end of both marriages, the freedom story has operated with similar stages to Huck's and Thea's stories. Huck would go ashore, seemingly unscathed by the earlier shore disaster, each time attempting and failing at connection with the people he finds

there. Each time he will barely escape and find solace on the raft with Jim. For Thea, her journey begins in childhood as she explores the worlds of immigrants from Europe or Mexico who have come to make Moonstone home. She has learned about the world outside of Moonstone from her older mentor, Dr. Archie, and learned about the essence of music and art from several of her mentors. Yet, when she travels out of Moonstone, she finds disappointment in the lifestyle of Chicago, she is disappointed by the social relationships there, and her music development withers in this pressurized world. Janie has tried to settle for the world her grandmother promises will nurture her, and she has stepped out on her own to find what she believes might fulfill her, but finally must escape into an isolation and brokenness. Like Huck's trips ashore, she barely escaped unscathed; she has reached a dangerous psychological separation before escaping the second marriage. She escapes into her vision of the possibilities of natural fertility in the memory of the "pear tree" moment and finds the vision to go on in this vision of journey to the horizon.

Striking out for the 'horizon' is a series of major steps in Janie's quest for McKay as well as a clear break with Nanny's vision of life: "First, in her literal abandonment of Logan Killicks, and later in her psychological separation from Joe, Janie rejects her grandmother's misguided vision of black women's lives in favor of the journey to the horizon in search of the independent self" (McKay 62). Her marriage to Tea Cake and the community she joins in the Muck will provide her with the 'horizon' she values. Of course, Janie has had ample opportunity to live some of the truth of Nanny's cynicism; she has lived over twenty years as a "mule" of sorts carrying the load of expectations and roles both husbands had imposed. Her decision to continue the journey towards hope and

fulfillment corresponds with Thea's night of despair before finally leaving for Europe and her vision of becoming an artist. Within the despair caused by disappointment in the escape stages, somehow in each character, a little hope seeps in and their vision is renewed.

The notion of horizon also works into the resolution of her story. After telling her friend of the story of her life, she speaks of the treasure she finds in her journey. She tells of deciding to return to Eatonville after Tea Cake's death and her trial for his murder. Janie decides to leave the 'Muck' because it "meant Tea Cake and Tea Cake wasn't there" (Hurston 182). She tells her friend Pheoby "Ah done been tuh de horizon and back and now Ah kin set heah in mah house and live by comparisons. Dis house ain't so absent of things lak it use tuh be befo' Tea Cake came along. It's full uh thoughts, 'specially dat bedroom'" (Hurston 182). She knows that her life is changed and tells Pheoby she should tell the story to the community of Eatonville, especially the story of her love with Tea Cake. She realizes they will still judge her, not understanding her love because it is different from theirs: "Then you must tell 'im dat love ain't somethin' lak uh grindstone . . . Love is lak de sea. It's uh movin' thing, but still and all, it takes its shape from de shore it meets, and its different with every shore (Hurston 182)." She answers her potential critics with her understanding she has gained from this journey: "Two things everybody's got tuh do fuh theyselves. They got tuh go tuh God, and they got tuh find out about livin' fuh themselves'" (Hurston 183). This pronouncement harks back to the people who had limited Janie from Nanny to Joe Starks; Janie has finally had to experience life and find a connection with others.

She returns to her home with the memory of her love for Tea Cake and her journey to the horizon. She finds Tea Cake alive for her in this sanctuary where she knew him: “He could never be dead until she herself had finished feeling and thinking. The kiss of his memory made pictures of love and light against the wall. Here was peace. She pulled in her horizon like a great fish net. Pulled it from around the waist of the world and draped it over her shoulder—So much of life in its meshes! She called in her soul to come and see” (Hurston 183-4). Full circle to the original image of the horizon, she chooses what to remember from her quest.

One critic declares this ending to be a failure for Janie’s journey. Discussing this scene, Mary Helen Washington sees the closing as another entrapment: “And Janie, having returned to the community she once rejected is left in a position of interiority so total it seems to represent another structure of confinement” (Washington 35). Further, Washington insists that the “language is deceptive. The horizon represents the outside world—the world of people and a value system that would allow her real life to shine. If the horizon is the world of possibility, of journeys, or meeting new people and eschewing materialistic values, then Janie seems to be canceling out any further exploration of that world” (Washington 35-6).

Finally, for Washington, the novel and its journey depicts Janie in a very different light, as defeated: “Like the heroine of romantic fiction, left without a man she exists in a position of stasis with no suggestion of how she will employ her considerable energies in her now—perhaps temporarily—manless life” (Washington 36).

Gordon Thompson sees a gender reversal in the final scenario. Janie’s return to Eatonville and to her former home, Thompson points out, illustrates a changed woman

from the young girl who first came to Eatonville with Joe Starks and the woman who left Eatonville after Joe's death. Thompson notes the changes in her dress, actions, and abilities: "By text's end, with Tea Cake gone, Janie begins—but not so miraculously—to impersonate (or personify) the image of the independent male. And here personification takes on still another guise: that of the mask. She inherits all the trappings the text had hitherto ascribed to men . . . she is, relative to the other members of her community, independently wealthy, and she wears overalls, knows how to fish, but more important, how to shoot a rifle—all gifts (except the wealth) she inherits from living with Tea Cake" (Thompson 746).

One other picture created by the final retreat to the sanctuary of the house and the memories of Tea Cake, especially given Hurston's representations of psychological states throughout the narrative depiction of Janie, could represent a psychological state of grief, a time of healing and rest before attempting another stage of her journey. As in the ending to Huck Finn's journey with its muted promise of adventures in the "territory," and the ending of Thea's story with the shell of the person isolated in an artist's role, each of these freedom stories ends with questions about the meaning and value of freedom, the possibility and sustainability of community, and the personal success or failure of each journey.

One overriding question in each freedom story is the nature of and the subsequent loss of community. Echoing Huck's primitive world on the river and Thea's land of the Ancient People, Janie finally reaches community after making her true escape. Her quest to find community succeeds when she decides to marry Tea Cake and to travel to the

Everglades, the 'Muck,' to work and play with the migrant African American community there.

When talking about that primitive place where Janie will find a community in which to let her 'jewel' of her self 'shine', the Everglades, Henry Gates, Jr. defines how Hurston changes this place from a traditionally negative image to a quite different one: "for Hurston the swamp is the trope of the freedom of erotic love, the antithesis of the bourgeois life and order that her protagonist flees . . ." (Gates 193). Janie finds a voice, freedom to be her self, a wholeness that allows for her 'inside' and 'outside' to be expressed openly, and community within the workers on the Everglades.

From the beginning of her life, tensions developed between Janie and her successive domesticators. This swallowing up of Janie's life by someone else's vision is repeated in several relationships in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. This co-option becomes significant in Janie's journey to freedom and community. Not until she reaches the wilderness of the Everglades with Tea Cake is she able to claim independence and fit into the African American working class community rather than being subjugated to gender and racial limitations. When she reaches the apex of her journey and becomes a part of her community in the Everglades, she works in the fields as part of a team, she tells stories in groups that gather at her cabin, she plays cards and 'plays the dozens' — she joins in all the communal interactions she had earlier been denied.

Place is especially important for Janie's sense of identity and wholeness. Beginning life in the white's backyard and playing with their children, only to find out she doesn't fit in their world, begins her sense of being outside of the community. When she moves to Logan Killicks' farm, it is an isolated and lonely existence away from other people;

even though the house is located within the woods, there is no sense of beauty in the natural world like that of the ‘pear tree’ moment. Living in Eatonville, entrapped by the role of being the mayor’s wife, no sense of pleasure or play creeps into the narrative during this phase of Janie’s life, at least until she meets Tea Cake. Only when she enters the “Muck” are there references to her laughter, her talk, and her inclusion in social games.

Janie struggles to be a part of the African American community of Eatonville for twenty years but is denied this place as well. Her mixed race skin and hair and her position as the mayor’s wife keep her separate from the others lives.

Finally in the primitive fecundity of the Everglades she is able to make a place where she can share life and love. Significantly, she also finds voice. The fertility of the area, its black and nurturing soil, contrasts however with one aspect of Janie’s life never considered by the author; Janie’s three marriages never result in children. The narrator never expresses any thoughts of Janie’s concerning parenting. Births and weddings are not celebrated in these three freedom stories; even with three marriages there is only a glimpse of the celebration of Janie’s wedding with Tea Cake. There are two marriages mentioned in Thea’s stories as unsatisfactory or dysfunctional: Dr. Archie’s and Fred Ottenberg. The one marriage celebrated in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, the elopement, leads to all out warfare between the feuding families. Only on the “Muck” in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* will community celebration and rituals exist.

Tea Cake and Janie’s cabin becomes the equivalent of Jody’s store’s porch where everyone gathered; the difference is that Janie is a part of all of the life on her doorstep now. “But outside of the two jooks, everything off that job went on around those two”

(Hurston 127). This equal partnership extends to work, for Janie learns to work like the other women on the ‘Muck,’ picking beans alongside Tea Cake. “Sometimes Janie would think of the old days in the big white house and the store and laugh to herself. What if Eatonville could see her now in her blue denim overalls and heavy shoes? The crowd of people around her and a dice game on her floor” (Hurston 127). And the difference is all important to Janie: she sees the same life on her doorstep as she did on the porch of the store, “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 from listening to the rest” (Hurston 128). Janie’s voice is valued in this community, a basic human need never fulfilled in her earlier worlds. Janie has followed her goal to reach the horizon and meet people.

Mary Helen Washington judges the time in the Muck differently. She in fact denies that Hurston is successful in her creation of Janie, asserting the characterization actually is a “problem she could not solve—the questing hero as woman.” Nevertheless, while conceding that Hurston “puts Janie on the track of autonomy, self-realization, and independence” and depicts Janie in terms of the “outward trappings of male power,” Washington maintains “Like all romantic *heroines*, Janie follows the dreams of men” (Washington 36). In this estimation, Janie’s decision to follow Tea Cake to the life of the ‘Muck’ is judged by Washington to be simply following Tea Cake’s dream.

All of her domesticators insisted that Janie was unable to fend for herself; she ends the novel, returning to Eatonville to redeem her story. She tells the story to her best friend who will shape it for the town. Pheoby will have to correct her story in defense of the town’s doubts about the success of Janie’s journey. When Janie rejected the security

of her status as the mayor's widow with property, most turned against her, speculating that the younger man would dupe her and leave her penniless and abandoned. Instead, she returns undiminished, having survived a hurricane, Tea Cake's death, and a murder trial. She has transfigured into a competent, free woman, one who is able to tell her own story, something she had been denied throughout her life. She has replaced the sixteen year old at the garden gate, yet she has succeeded in finding a life she hoped for and envisioned.

She has survived even the worst punishment: “. . .to kill her through Tea Cake was too much to bear. Tea Cake, the son of Evening Sun, had to die for loving her” (Hurstun 169). In fact, she names the importance of this time: “It was the meanest moment of eternity. A minute before she was just a scared human being fighting for its life. Now she was her sacrificing self with Tea Cake's head in her lap” (Hurstun 175). She is ultimately strong enough to love, to form this community with Tea Cake, and to survive even his loss: “She had wanted him to live so much and he was dead . . .Janie held his head tightly to her breast and wept and thanked him wordlessly for giving her the chance for loving service. She had to hug him tight for soon he would be gone, and she had to tell him for the last time. Then the grief of outer darkness descended” (Hustun 175). That she is able to survive this grief, survive a trial, and survive the need to continue on, to return to Eatonville and to tell her story illustrates how far her journey has taken her—to a realization of her inner strengths and her human capacity for love and finally survival in loss.

It is this return to Eatonville and the story-telling act that contrasts sharply with the two earlier characters. Huck Finn chooses not to return home to St. Petersburg but to

continue West, and Thea chooses not to return to the life of Moonstone but remain in New York. Janie returns to Eatonville but with a difference. Even though returning to the town, she cannot return to her grandmother's or Joe Starks' version of her identity. Changed forever, she returns to Eatonville as a newly invented, whole person.

One critic sees the act of storytelling, the successful development of voice, as the culmination of Janie's quest. Although certainly the 'pear tree moment' and Janie's series of relationships in search of that moment are sexually grounded, the nature of Janie's true quest is still debated. One critic looks at the significance of Janie's quest in "The Erotics of Talk" with a focus on the pear tree analogy. Carla Kaplan begins the article with a provocative statement: "Reduced to the basic narrative components Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is the story of a young woman in search of an orgasm" (Kaplan 137).

This critic, however, sees the image develop into something more complex in the course of the novel. Kaplan develops her argument to question if in fact Hurston is successful in being able to "rewrite desire itself as the desire to tell one's story" (Kaplan 138). Kaplan insists that perhaps Janie's quest that begins with the pear tree imagery is not a journey toward "marriage or a husband or sex, but talk itself, the experience of conversation, the act of storytelling and self-narration" (Kaplan 138). Certainly, the ability to speak, either in a communal situation or to speak up for one's self, remains a part of Janie's quest from her first marriage until her trial for Tea Cake's murder. She begins with the sometimes ill advised bravado to speak up to her first husband, she is repeatedly silenced by her second husband, but she begins to speak communally in storytelling and for personal self satisfaction with her third husband. However, she does

not speak in the text for her trial in front of white jurors. Her final act, however, is to tell her story to her best friend, certainly a triumph of her voice.

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Chapter 5

The Journey to Find Self and Community Through Story: Maxine Hong Kingston's

The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts

Almost forty years after Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* was published, an Asian-American writer opened her novel with a similar warning scene to begin her hero's freedom journey. In Hurston's novel, the grandmother, Nanny, tells a story of powerlessness and rape to warn Janie Crawford about the dangers of her budding sexuality. Prior to forcing her into a 'safe' marriage, Nanny insists that as an African American woman she will be "'de mule uh de world'" (Hurston 14). To emphasize the seriousness of this fate, Nanny describes the terrors she suffered as a woman in slavery, and she tells her own freedom story of becoming a runaway slave to save her newborn from being sold away. The newborn was Janie's mother; Janie's birth was the result of the mother's rape. Sufficiently warned about the dangers of gender and ethnicity, this interaction between Nanny and Janie forms the key to Janie's freedom story as she spends her life trying to find a new story of hope to replace her grandmother's story of despair.

Maxine Hong Kingston begins *The Woman Warrior: Memoir of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* with a similar interaction; in this case the storytelling scene occurs between mother and daughter. The mother tells the daughter the horrific story of her aunt's suicide in China after giving birth to an illegitimate child. The tale, meant to temper the

daughter's developing sexuality, serves as a warning of the fate of women who violate family and community expectations. The mother warns the young daughter, "Don't let your father know that I told you. He denies her. Now that you have started to menstruate, what happened to her could happen to you. Don't humiliate us. You wouldn't like to be forgotten as if you had never been born. The villagers are watchful" (Kingston 5). Nanny's stories serve as the impetus for Janie Crawford's freedom story; Janie must seek a version of reality different from her grandmother's. In similar ways, the mother's story of the aunt's fate becomes a driving force for Kingston's freedom journey. She must create a different reality for her life from her mother's. Her journey must include coming to terms with her aunt's fate as well as finding her own voice.

The mother's warning to Maxine carries far-reaching consequences; the warning promises the loss of family and community while it emphasizes the vulnerability of women. Just as Nanny's story spoke to Janie's African American ethnicity, her family heritage, and her outsider status as part of the black community, this story speaks to Maxine's Asian American ethnicity, her family heritage, and her outsider status as a member of the Chinese emigrant community. This beginning story is one key element among others that corresponds to the freedom stories in Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Willa Cather's *The Song of the Lark*, and Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

Veronica Wang in "Reality and Fantasy: The Chinese-American Woman's Quest for Identity," praises Kingston for the way in which she "explores with uncanny frankness and sensitivity . . . the dilemma of the Chinese-American woman as she struggles for selfhood in a chaotic and hostile environment" (Wang 23). Wang expands on the

depiction of a 'chaotic and hostile' situation: "Straddling two cultures, Maxine, the author/heroine, has to confront the reality or fiction of her Chinese heritage that reaches her mainly through her mother's mythical yet authoritative 'talk-stories', and the equally puzzling realities of her American birth, education, and experience" (Wang 23). All of these circumstances make Maxine a misfit in both cultures. In each of the earlier freedom stories, the narrator separates the hero out of his or her initial community; however, Kingston's position, living at the edge of two demanding cultures, creates isolation from both worlds.

As a clear statement of the forces that must be overcome in this freedom journey, Wang points out that "Both heritages impose external limitations and demand prescribed behaviors even though she is constantly aware of the remoteness of ancestral China and her essential separation from it, as well as her marginal status of exclusion and alienation in the American society" (Wang 23). Each of the heroes in the freedom stories must recognize his or her distance from a childhood community. Huck Finn recognizes he does not fit within the St. Petersburg world or the world of his father. Thea Kronborg learns that neither the life of a preacher's daughter in Moonstone nor the social circle of musicians in Chicago can be her possible homes. Janie Crawford knows she cannot live in either her grandmother's version of the life of an African American woman or Jody Starks' version of a materialistic, pseudo-white life.

From a different critical perspective, a Chinese national, Zhaig Ya-Jie, tries to come to terms with Kingston's work, even though she finds herself personally offended by opinions about her homeland. After reflection, she recognizes the substance of the narrator's struggle: "Kingston's purpose is to make use of all these stories to show how a

Chinese-American finds her own identity, how much she has to struggle through--the old culture as well as the new--and how she uses words and stories to rebel against the old and to contribute to the new. Viewing the book from this perspective, I can accept her distortions of the stories which have always been so lofty and sacred in my homeland” (“A Chinese Woman’s Response to Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*” 104). This is a particularly interesting turn of phrase--Kingston “uses words and stories to rebel against the old and to contribute to the new”--that highlights the uniqueness of Kingston’s freedom story as a verbal and intellectual journey. Rather than a physical trip down the Mississippi, to the Southwest’s Panther Canyon, or to the Everglades, this interior journey travels through the word and the mind.

Although the journey in *The Woman Warrior* is less an outward physical movement than an interior expedition, this freedom story encompasses many of the same elements as the earlier stories considered in this study. Concerns about voice and personal expression mark both Kingston’s and Janie Crawford’s quest. Kingston’s struggles to understand what it means to be Chinese-American parallel Janie’s racial struggles. Both Maxine and Janie confront issues of gender and sexuality. The notion of the freedom to rewrite and tell your own story play out in this novel and echo the central act of storytelling in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Kingston’s vision to become a writer requires a rigorous and demanding path exclusive of other social ties, in many ways reminiscent of Thea Kronborg’s journey to Europe to study opera after leaving behind social and family ‘impediments’. Each hero has, as Kingston does, a prescribed set of beliefs and expectations to overcome. Huck Finn repeatedly flees from the cruelties and prejudice he experiences in St. Petersburg and each shore visit. Thea Kronborg escapes

the web of restrictions for a preacher's daughter in a small town, including expectations related to marriage and family. Janie Crawford's journey carries her away from racial, gender, and economic biases that limit her power to complete her identity. Kingston's story focuses on her flight from the limitations of gender, ethnicity, and nationality imposed by both the American and Chinese-American communities.

Despite the use of important elements seen in the earlier freedom stories, this story follows a different, non-chronological order unlike the three earlier freedom stories. Its structure and unexpected twists of genre have, in fact, garnered a great deal of critical attention. The expectations for autobiography, memoir, fiction, and non-fiction genres all come into play in the reception and criticism of the novel. LeiLani Nishime presents an example of genre concerns in "Engendering Genre: Gender and Nationalism in *China Men* and *The Woman Warrior*:" "Perhaps some of the loudest uproar over *The Woman Warrior* centered upon Kingston's blurring of the boundary between non-fictional autobiography and a fictional retelling of her life story. She insists on an eccentric voice, telling her memoirs from a highly personal point of view and making no attempt to 'objectively' review her subjective, skewed vision of her world" (Nishime 68). This comment involves an interesting limitation for a writer of autobiography and memoir: to tell your life story from an objective, impersonal viewpoint.

According to this critic and others, genre expectations relate specifically to minority writers: "The problem of generic distinctions appears endemic to Asian American literature, since 'ethnic histories' almost always threaten the boundaries between genres, because the term is traditionally seen as an oxymoron. In some senses, all minority writing is considered to be always/already autobiographical" (Nishime 69). Expounding

on this idea, Nishime asserts: "Asian American writing, like much minority writing, is perceived as autobiographical in the sense that writing by Asian Americans is "about" their experience as Asian Americans in a way that Anglo-American writing, with its assumption of universality, is never "about" being white" (Nishime 69). These statements could equally apply to the expectations for Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Although not suggested to be autobiographical, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, nonetheless, was critically received as a story representing universal African American life.

Hurston's critics were concerned about her depiction of African-Americans to a white audience; Kingston's critics question her depiction of the Asian American and the old China to the white audience, with a particular concern about her depiction of Asian women. Sau-ling Wong traces the critical concerns tied to ethnicity in the article "Necessity and Extravagance in Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*: Art and the Ethnic Experience," noting that "Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, by its very commercial success and its popularity with the literary establishment and the mainstream audience, seems to have become ideologically suspect to some Asian-American critics" (Wong 3). Wong lists concerns of different critics and summarizes the underlying beliefs that inform those judgments: "Implied in all such accusations of 'selling out' is the premise that a definitive version of the life of an ethnic group exists, one which it is the ethnic writer's moral responsibility to present. To do anything else is unconscionable, and crass ulterior motives are the only explanation. Presumably, this definitive version would represent the given ethnic group in a favorable light, purged of annoyingly "unique" features, and free of useless fantasy which diverts attention from the

sordid facts of oppression in American society” (Wong 4). Within this analysis of critics’ expectations for minority writers is an echo of Hurston’s critics who tied her depictions of African Americans to minstrel traditions and objected to her depictions of race and gender.

A feminist scholar, Amy Ling, writes in “I’m Here: An Asian American Woman’s Response,” about her initial reaction to Kingston’s novel, drawing a personal connection between her response to the work and a scene from Hurston’s novel: “For example, when I, a Chinese American woman trained in the traditional classics of Western European and American literature--the ‘malestream’--first read Maxine Hong Kingston, my overwhelming reaction was discomfort and embarrassment. My self-alienation had been so complete that I experienced my first reading of another Chinese American woman's book as ‘foreign’ and ‘other’ before I relaxed into the realization that I was actually and finally at home as I had been with no other writers I had previously read. My reaction was akin to the child Janie Crawford's experience of not recognizing herself in the photograph in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*“ (Ling 152). Ling’s first view of Kingston’s perspective as ‘other’ sounds a powerful note about the expectations for minority writers.

Kingston’s structure creates a dynamic portrait of growing up female, Chinese-American, and bilingual in relation to the preparation to become an artist. This portrait is made up of five sections, each a significant impression of her experiences growing up. The five sections act in similar ways to the stages of the first three freedom stories; each event with all of its surrounding impressions will move the hero further on her quest.

Each of the five sections of the novel describes a turning point in her emotional and

intellectual journey. In the first section, the “No Name Woman” tale of her aunt in China who became pregnant while her husband had been in America for ten years begins Kingston’s quest to become a writer as she struggles to piece together missing details and tell her aunt’s story. Kingston struggles to understand whether the aunt was raped or willingly participated in a liaison; this process brings Kingston’s compassion and imagination into the story. The resulting punishment for the pregnant aunt and her parents is the central focus of the story. When she is to give birth, the whole community storms the house and terrorizes the woman and her parents. She gives birth later that night and drowns herself and her child in the well. She has no name because she has so disgraced her family that no one may speak her name. According to several critics, part of Maxine’s journey leads to becoming a writer and telling her aunt’s story, thus redeeming her aunt by speaking her name.

Marjorie J. Lightfoot in “Hunting the Dragon in Kingston’s *The Warrior Woman*” considers the multiple layers of the story represented in the first section. First, the most concrete meaning of the story lies in its psychological effect: “In “No Name Woman” Kingston reveals her childhood fear of Chinese violence and sexism” (Lightfoot 59). This basic fear, Lightfoot asserts, becomes a rebellion: “Kingston’s adult refusal to enter into the Chinese conspiracy of silence as a final punishment of her aunt is evident in her insistence on publishing the tragedy” (Lightfoot 60). Finally, Lightfoot places the impetus for Kingston’s quest to become a writer within the story’s retelling: “But this brief tale implies one of the reasons why she writes: to discover as much as possible of the truth - through fact and inference - and make it known to the world through art. She publishes this story in defiance of traditional values, determined to foster a more humane

society” (Lightfoot 60). Kingston may be following her mother’s lead in this endeavor to redeem the aunt’s life despite the expurgation of her name; King-Kok Cheung points out that the mother defied her husband’s edict and her culture’s expectations to tell her daughter the story (“Don’t Tell’: Imposed Silences in *The Color Purple* and *The Woman Warrior*” 167).

This example of storytelling, according to the daughter, represents the way her mother continuously told her children stories “to warn us about life . . . a story to grow up on (Kingston 5).” The mother’s *talk-story* to impart history and life lessons, her daughter declares, “tested our strength to establish realities” (Kingston 5). This narrative mixing of reality and fantasy marks Maxine and her peers: “Those of us in the first American generations have had to figure out how the invisible world the migrants built around our childhood fits in solid America” (Kingston 5). Huck Finn, Thea Kronborg, and Janie Crawford experience a similar outsider status in their communities: Maxine feels alienation from the emigrants’ lost world her mother describes in these stories, and this history and culture brings her isolation from the American community, as well. Two differences are apparent immediately in her isolation. First, the narrator expresses openly in her narrative her consciousness about these differences unlike the earlier freedom story heroes, and, second, Kingston includes others in the misfit category by placing “this generation” outside of the other ethnicities in the American community.

The No Name Woman’s story holds other elements beyond the personal warning about the dangers of being ostracized for unacceptable sexual behavior. One critic notes the significance of the aunt’s silence in the story; King-Kok Cheung points out “she can neither talk herself out of rape nor declare her innocence afterward” (Cheung 163).

Cheung considers the extent of her punishment: “When she gets pregnant, she is harassed by villagers and repudiated by her own family even after her death” (Cheung 163).

Cheung ties the silence of the aunt to the Philomela myth “in which the tongue of the raped woman is cut off,” representing the lesson that “victimization incurs voicelessness” (Cheung 163). This connection Cheung points to with the Philomela myth suggests another connection with Kingston’s work; Philomela weaves a tapestry to tell of the rape. Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* “weaves” together several disparate elements: reality and fantasy, old China and new America, legend and nonfiction, creating a text defying multiple genre expectations. The weakness and enslavement of silence or the power and freedom of voice will be central to each of the five sections of this book for a central character: the no-name aunt, the woman warrior, the mother, the second aunt named Moon Orchid, Ts’ai Yen, and Kingston as a child all experience struggles with communication. Both aunts fail to find voice and both die tragically. The woman warrior’s revenge succeeds through the words etched into her back, the mother survives a ghost who tries to take her breath away and keep her from speaking by having her fellow students speak her name, and Ts’ai Yen communicates her heritage through song even though her language is foreign to her listeners. Underlying all of these stories is Kingston’s struggle to find voice. This struggle for voice is a literal struggle to speak up and be heard as she shifts from Chinese to English. It is also her journey to train herself in this second language so that she may succeed in her quest to become a writer. Internally, it is also the need to speak up as a victim of being an Asian woman in the American culture and a woman in the emigrant community she sees as devaluing women.

The question of “voice” is central for many critics in Janie Crawford’s story in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, as well. Breaking away from controls over her speech, especially during her second marriage, became an essential part of her freedom journey. In *The Song of the Lark*, Thea Kronborg’s voice represented her vision to become an artist. For Maxine in *The Woman Warrior* the silence and need for voice are recurring elements in her freedom story, and her journey to become an artist--a writer--revolves around that same need that Janie eventually found in her life in the Everglades: to be able to tell stories for her community. Maxine will need to possess the power her mother has to *talk-story*, yet she must overcome the obstacles of language, culture, and identity to succeed as a writer. Of course, telling this story, finding her voice, is the realization of her journey.

An alternative reading of the significance of the No Name aunt’s story focuses on the interconnections with several aspects of ‘appetite’ that arise in the novel. Paul Outka in “Publish or Perish: Food, Hunger, and Self-Construction in Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*” points to other elements, including food and hunger references, that appear throughout the novel. Outka begins his discussion by stating the need for an approach to the multiple genres present in the novel: “Understanding Kingston's autobiography as a mixing of fact and fiction, an activity of self-creation that must always include both terms in some shifting ratio, means not privileging either one” (Outka 448). Further, he remarks on the sources of struggle for developing her identity: “For Kingston, selfhood is an interaction between often hostile and misogynistic social forces and her own imaginative will, a simultaneous assertion of a provisionally stable self-identity and an insistence on the dynamic, creative, unstable nature of that identity”

(Outka 450). Outka points to the underlying symbols--‘tropes’--as important to the structure and theme: “Indeed, my point is that careful attention must be paid to the particularity of the tropes that marginalized autobiographers deploy in their narratives, letting those tropes inform the theoretical framework rather than vice-versa” (Outka 452). Outka points especially to the abundance of references to food throughout the novel: “Maxine's struggles are local, they often concern food and hunger, and my interest lies mainly with those struggles and concerns” (Outka 452). For Outka, food and hunger become symbols for female desire, especially beginning with the aunt’s story: At the point of Maxine's own sexual maturity, her mother, acting as a conduit of Chinese patriarchy, warns her of the consequences of bodily appetite. Kingston declares that the villagers punished her aunt's adultery not so much because it was sexually deviant, but because it created another (female) mouth to feed in a time of scarcity” (Outka 452-3).

This story of the aunt’s suicide has garnered much critical attention, creating a discomfort particularly among Chinese-American critics about the depiction of the treatment of women which some have considered to be stereotypical. Again, as in the arguments against Hurston’s use of folklore and dialect in her depictions of African Americans, Kingston’s use of this story raises concern about the depiction of Asian Americans to the white audience. Yuan Shu in “Cultural Politics and Chinese-American Female Subjectivity,” develops an interesting analysis of this concern. First, Shu questions the political context of the story:

However, Kingston does not situate the tragedy of the no-name woman or the consequent attack upon the family by the villagers in any historical and cultural context but mystifies these stories and leaves them to the imagination and

speculation of an uninformed white readership, who, she knows, would never be able to figure out the cultural twists behind. First, Kingston takes for granted that her aunt as a Chinese peasant woman could not develop any romantic relationship in defiance of the Chinese feudal tradition. In making such a general assumption, Kingston plays a double role here. On the one hand, to an uninformed white readership, Kingston serves as an insider informant telling an authentic story about her own ancestral culture and society (Shu 208).

Next, Kingston's cultural and political status and the assumed viewpoint of her white readership becomes the dual focus of questioning:

On the other hand, to the Chinese and Chinese-American readership whom she does not target, Kingston assumes the position of a privileged first-world woman in investigating and speculating upon the tragedy of a third-world subaltern who cannot represent herself and has to be represented by the first-world feminist writer. Such a double positioning enables the narrator to identify with the predominant white readership who are constructed as secular, liberated, and privileged in having complete control over their own lives (Shu 208).

Shu continues with a rewrite of the context of the story: "Considered in such broader political and economic contexts, the villagers' attack upon the family could be construed as a symptom of the restlessness of a feudal and colonial society which would readily direct its own energy of confusion and frustration towards anything accessible, rather than as a premeditated moment of Chinese patriarchal practice or a ritualistic pattern practiced at the village level in China" (Shu 209). This interpretation moves away from whatever relevance that political and social connection may have had to the young

daughter coming to terms with her mother's folklore, however. Shu continues in this same vein, specifically naming what responsibilities Kingston has in terms of her role as a Chinese-American writer: "Furthermore, Kingston as a Chinese-American does not examine the no-name woman's tragedy in relation to the US history of exclusion, which not only prevented Chinese laborers from leaving and returning to the US freely, but also forbade Chinese women from coming and joining their laborer husbands in the U.S." (Shu 209). These and similar concerns about the depiction of Chinese or Chinese-American life to a white readership seem to be inevitable in the criticism of non-white writers in American literature.

Naming, often a focus in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, plays an essential role beginning in this first chapter. Of course, the aunt is denied even her name because of her actions. Early in the narrative, the importance of names to the emigrant generation is noted: "The Chinese I know hide their names; sojourners take new names when their lives change and guard their real names with silence" (Kingston 5). Throughout the book, the daughter is not referred to by name by her family or friends; her mother addresses her once in the "Shaman" section by a nickname, Little Dog, and even that we learn is a name chosen to fool the gods because she was actually born in the year of the dragon (Kingston 109). Several references note that Chinese emigrant children are embarrassed in school when they cannot give their parents' names to the American teachers (Kingston 177). The shifting form of names--sometimes the children are given wrong names to tell the teachers and protect their parents' real names--may be related to distrust of the American power structure, particularly related to immigration laws. The need for being named by your community is critical in this culture as evidenced by the

act of refusing to name the aunt. Misunderstanding between the Chinese emigrant and the American community also comes into play. Even as Janie Crawford grew up being called Alphabet by the white family because they did not know her real name, the fact that the narrator remains nameless for most of *The Woman Warrior* points to her issues of identity. Kingston as hero shares that component of her journey with Janie Crawford: each go in search of an identity recognized by others in the community.

The novel's heroine explains early on this difficulty, this state of not fitting in to the two worlds she inhabits: "Chinese-Americans, when you try to understand what things in you are Chinese, how do you separate what is peculiar to childhood, to poverty, insanities, one family, your mother who marked your growing with stories, from what is Chinese? What is Chinese tradition and what is the movies?" (Kingston 5-6). Identity and reality become questions for this character, paralleling racial identity in Janie in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Ethnicity creates a dual split in identity for Maxine. She experiences difficulty fitting into the Chinese emigrant community as well as the American culture.

Weak or cruel fathers are common to each of the freedom stories. Pap's violence and ignorance set him at odds with Huck Finn. Thea Krongborg's father plays only a background role in his daughter's life. Janie Crawford's father was the schoolteacher who raped her mother and disappeared from her life. Kingston's father exerts a distant role for the daughter, representing the Chinese patriarchal culture. Rarely quoted directly in the book, this picture of his seriousness and silence highlights his impression on her childhood: "Whenever we did frivolous things, we used up energy; we flew high kites" (Kingston 6). One picture of him after the rare occasion of going with him to a carnival,

adds to that constricting impression of him for the daughter: “After the one carnival ride each, we paid in guilt; our tired father counted his change on the dark walk home”

(Kingston 6).

The one forbidden subject of her father’s, her aunt who could only be called “Father’s drowned-in-the-well sister,” becomes Kingston’s focus. She struggles to understand the story without being able to question anyone. She tries to create possible details of the story, realizing how difficult this would be even “if you could overlook the taboo keeping you from even asking about her, imagining her story.” Kingston decides that aunt would not have been moved by love: “it would not have been romance in that culture . . . Adultery is extravagance in the old China” (Kingston 6). Only one possible explanation seems reasonable: “His demand must have surprised then terrified her. She obeyed him; she always did as she was told” (Kingston 6). When this aunt in the old China was ready to give birth, the villagers came masked to destroy the family’s fields and house. Kingston speculates further: “I wonder whether he masked himself when he joined the raid on her family” (Kingston 6).

Early in her life Kingston learns this lesson of being outcast. This notion of being outside the community becomes concrete when her parents talk of an “outcast table . . . in a communal tradition, where food is precious, the powerful older people made wrongdoers eat alone . . . the Chinese family, faces averted but eyes glowering sideways, hung on to the offenders and fed them leftovers. My aunt must have lived in the same house as my parents and eaten at an outcast table” (Kingston 7). Another detail of her loss of place in that society is revealed by the fact she had been sent back to her mother and father by her husband’s parents: “a mysterious act hinting at disgraces not told me”

(Kingston 8). There is an important connection with this aunt for the narrator: “Unless I see her life branching into mine, she gives me no ancestral help” (Kingston 8).

One way her life may have connected with her aunt’s fate relates to her sense of male and female relationships. As she matures she remains distant from males. One way she achieves this distance involves the act of adding brother to their names to make them harmless to her (Kingston 12). Her culture insists she must only attract boys within her ethnic group, so she chooses to avoid all difficulties of romance by resorting instead to this tactic: “Sisterliness, dignified and honorable, made much more sense” (Kingston 12).

Kingston remains haunted by the need to complete the aunt’s story. She imagines her aunt giving birth alone in the darkness and then choosing death for both: “Carrying the baby to the well shows loving. Otherwise abandon it. Turn its face into the mud. Mothers who love their children take them along. It was probably a girl; there is some hope of forgiveness for boys” (Kingston 15). The devaluing of the female within the Chinese emigrant community weaves throughout each of the five sections.

All of this story and the stories of other family traditions have created a specific view of the world: “I have believed that sex was unspeakable and words so strong and fathers so frail that ‘aunt’ would do my father mysterious harm. I have thought that my family, having settled among immigrants who had also been their neighbors in this ancestral land, needed to clean their name, and a wrong word would incite the kinspeople even here. But there is more to this silence: they want me to participate in her punishment. And I have” (Kingston 15-16). By never speaking her name or asking for details, she has done what the rest of the family did—so that “they saw to it that she would suffer forever, even after death,” they chose the punishment of “deliberately forgetting her” (Kingston

16). The ultimate danger of becoming a misfit in a communal/tribe society becomes a powerful lesson to Kingston.

As the narrator explains: “My aunt haunts me—her ghost drawn to me because now, after fifty years of neglect, I alone devote pages of paper to her . . .”(Kingston 16). And as she notes, “I do not think she means me well. I am telling on her, and she was a spite suicide, drowning herself in the drinking water. The Chinese are always very frightened of the drowned one . . . the one who “waits silently by the water to pull down a substitute” (Kingston 16). This new view of the aunt as dangerous and foreign, directly in opposition to Kingston’s obvious compassion for her distress, signals a shift, especially in terms of Kingston here aligning herself with ‘the Chinese’. Rufus Cook insists that this type of reiteration of the story, in effect turning the stories inside out and considering other possible realities, dominates Kingston’s storytelling method: “This practice of offering alternative versions for every story and alternative explanations for every set of events is one that seems to appeal particularly to Kingston as a means of emphasizing the inadequacy to human experience of any one language, any one moral or cultural or political point of view” (“Cross-cultural Wordplay in Maxine Hong Kingston’s *China Men* and *The Woman Warrior* 138). This relates to the difficulty for Kingston of straddling the edges of her mother’s world and the American world of her adolescence. It suggests as well the power she wields with her pen to rewrite the story of her drowned aunt and more importantly her own story. This idea was evident in Janie Crawford’s act of storytelling to her best friend in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. She was determined to correct the assumptions of others who did not understand the love she and Tea Cake shared. The need to explain a personal story to the community underlies both Janie’s and

Kingston's storytelling.

As the first section ends, the narrator has not been called by name, tying her namelessness to the no-name aunt. This points to the struggle for identity and self-creation that moves her journey. Linda Hunt in "I Could Not Figure Out What Was My Village": Gender Vs. Ethnicity" points out the multiple struggles inherent in her need to find a place to belong: "Maxine Hong Kingston's autobiographical *The Woman Warrior* suggests that we need to pay attention to the contradictions male dominance creates for women who are at one and the same time subordinated by a culture, and yet, embroiled in its interstices; such women may be painfully at odds with themselves. A woman like Kingston, who is doubly marginal (i.e. not a member of the dominant race or class) is likely to feel this conflict with particular acuteness because an affiliation with a minority culture tends to be particularly strong" (Hunt 4). In the freedom stories, the hero has been marginal in similar ways to this narrator. They have each been outsiders to their families, peers, and communities, and in Janie Crawford's case, to the whites she lives with as a child. In the freedom stories examined, this alienation allows the hero to leave on that quest to find a place to create a true identity.

The next section, "White Tigers", provides the imaginative tool through the woman warrior myth to bridge that chasm of gender and ethnicity; by creating this story and tying it to her own perceptions of being a woman and being a Chinese American, Kingston redefines the Chinese woman as strong, powerful, and avenging. This inventive process works much like the scene in which Thea Kronborg recreates her history when she imagines herself akin to the Ancient People of the Southwest. In that adopted history she ties her ancestral heritage to a group of strong, female artists who

created useful and beautiful pottery. Thus, she was able to make the leap from the story to her vision of becoming an artist and using her voice as the vessel to create beauty through music. Similarly, Kingston creates community with Fa Mu Lan, the hero of the ancient fable of an avenging woman who trains diligently to hone magical powers through control of her body and mind. Kingston thus makes the leap to her vision of becoming a writer by diligently training to control her tongue and the words of both languages.

At the beginning of the “White Tigers” section, the childhood myth, the story of Fa Mu Lan, teaches a powerful lesson; Chinese American girls learned “. . .that we failed if we grew up to be wives or slaves. We could be heroines, swordswomen” (Kingston 19). This story taught the lesson that “a swordswoman got even with everybody who hurt her family” (Kingston 19). A speculation arises from these stories: “Perhaps women were once so dangerous that they had to have their feet bound” (Kingston 19). One thing the daughter begins to understand is the power of her mother’s stories. “My mother told these [stories] that followed swordswomen through woods and palaces for years. Night after night my mother would talk-story until we fell asleep” (Kingston 19). The girls also watched movies with swordswomen who could jump over houses from a standstill; they didn’t even need a running start” (Kingston 19). And significantly the daughter professes: “At last I saw that I too had been in the presence of great power, my mother talking story” (Kingston 19-20). This connection between mother and daughter will be powerful throughout the daughter’s life: “After I grew up, I heard the chant of Fa Mu Lan, the girl who took her father’s place in battle. Instantly I remembered that as a child I had followed my mother about the house, the two of us singing about how Fa Mu Lan

fought gloriously and returned alive from war to settle in the village. I had forgotten the chant that was once mine, given me by my mother, who may not have known its power to remind. She said I would grow up a wife and a slave, but she taught me the song of the warrior woman, Fa Mu Lan. I would have to grow up a warrior woman” (Kingston 20). As Kingston points out, balancing the need for an image of a strong woman with the need to feel a part of her Chinese heritage proves to be essential for her self-construction: “The most difficult double-bind has been the need to reconcile her loyalty to her Chinese-American heritage, a background which devalues and even insults women, with her own sense of dignity as a female” (Hunt 6). This myth provides that balance.

King-Kok Cheung points out the significance of the story in relation to Kingston’s vision of becoming a writer. “For someone besieged by silence, self-expression is a heroic act, an offensive with verbal artillery. In her fantasy Maxine merges with the warrior, who must train rigorously and endure harsh discipline before wielding a sword in battle. In her real life, Maxine has to take speech therapy . . . before she can control the voice and the pen that are her weapons. Her apprenticeship as a writer is strenuous, her achievement remarkable” (Cheung 163).

Following the tale of the warrior woman, Kingston measures her ordinary life against this world of the marvelous: “My American life has been such a disappointment.” When she tells her mother that she had perfect grades, her mother replies: “Let me tell you a true story about a girl who saved her village” (Kingston 45). In response, the daughter thinks: “I could not figure out what was my village” (Kingston 45). The young woman knows her search is for a community, a village, and about belonging, either belonging to the new American world or the lost Chinese world her mother preserves in story. So, she

lives in this limbo and knows there is pressure to be more than an American girl: gender is critical in this culture: “. . .it was important that I do something big and fine, or else my parents would sell me when we made our way back to China. In China there were solutions for what to do with little girls who ate up food and threw tantrums. You can't eat straight A's” (Kingston 45-6). She recalls many times when gender was all important, when she heard proclamations from the emigrants about the value of girls: “When you raise girls, you're raising children for strangers” (Kingston 46). When her Great-Uncle would call for the children to join him for shopping on Saturdays, he would reject the girls who had already grabbed their coats to go: “At my great-uncle's funeral I secretly tested out feeling glad that he was dead—the six-foot bearish masculinity of him” (Kingston 47). The novel's structure, the non-chronological collections of memories, creates the impression that these statements denigrating females resounded pervasively and repetitively throughout her life. The words devaluing girls recur as a chorus, of sorts, reminding her of the path she travels.

The descriptions of the father and the Great-uncle show them to be inconsequential people in the girl's life. In each of the freedom stories, the father or father figure provide little guidance or support for the hero, either because they are weak, voiceless, and distant or sinister, cruel, or murderous. Kingston reflects that her father's insistence that the aunt should not be named shows his weakness and the aunt's power.

Language and story are all important in this gender battle: “There is a Chinese word for the female *I*—which is ‘slave’. Break the women with their own tongues!” To confront the gender and ethnic issues (to be free of both constraints) she goes to Berkeley and “studies, and I marched to change the world, but I did not turn into a boy.” She says

that she “did not plan ever to have a husband,” and she “. . .refused to cook. When I had to wash dishes, I would crack one or two” (Kingston 47). In fact, when she did these counter-female things, her mother called her a “bad girl” which she enjoyed because, she reasoned, “Isn’t a bad girl almost a boy?” (Kingston 47). When asked what she wanted to be, she responds, a “lumberjack in Oregon” (Kingston 47). This attitude persists into her adulthood: “Even now, unless I’m happy, I burn the food when I cook. I do not feed people. I let the dirty dishes rot. I eat at other people’s tables but won’t invite them to mine, where the dishes are rotting” (Kingston 47-8). Again, this sense of avoiding the powerlessness of being female by impersonating males or avoiding conventional feminine actions or dress echoes the androgynous portrait of Janie Crawford in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Janie dresses in overalls, works in the fields next to her husband, learns to shoot a rifle, and tells stories on the porch of her house.

This novel’s view of a woman avoiding the restraints of being female does not exempt the possibility of marriage or sexuality. Looking back to Willa Cather’s Thea Kronborg who narrowly avoided love and marriage twice to be able to fulfill her journey to be an artist, this concept of a swordswoman is especially compelling and unique: “Marriage and childbirth strengthen the swordswoman, who is not a maid like Joan of Arc. Do the women’s work; then do more work, which will become ours too” (Kingston 48). Again there is an echo of Thea Kronborg’s acts of inner storytelling in Panther Canyon in which she glorifies the Native American women artisans as strong and hard working, imagining them walking the cliffs with children strapped to their sides. In both circumstances, this is a tie to an ephemeral female past; for this Asian American woman just as for Thea Kronborg, the community they are forming is with long dead (or even mythical) women.

This warrior icon overlaps Kingston's contemporary life: she professes: "No husband of mine will say, 'I could have been a drummer, but I had to think about the wife and kids. You know how it is.' Nobody supports me at the expense of his own adventure" (Kingston 48). She imagines herself as independent as her mythical warrior.

She imagines being called to her journey as the woman warrior was called: ". . .what bird might call me; on what horse would I ride away?" (Kingston 48). She sees the freedom from marriage and community as carrying a price in real--not fantasy--life: "I am not loved enough to be supported. That I am not a burden has to compensate for the sad envy when I look at women loved enough to be supported. Even now China wraps double binds around my feet" (Kingston 48). Her war path is clear to her; she feels the need to avenge racists she has encountered, urban renewal that took her parent's laundry, and the Chinese communists who forced her people's immigration (Kingston 49).

The attitudes against the value of women, the failure to be an avenger, and her inability to be valued for herself amongst her family and the emigrants who know her--all of these conditions force her to escape this community: "I live now where there are Chinese and Japanese, but no emigrants from my own village looking at me as if I had failed them . . . But I am useless, one more girl who couldn't be sold" (Kingston 52). But her new life gives her an identity: "When I visit the family now, I wrap my American successes around me like a private shawl; I am worthy of eating the food. From afar I can believe my family loves me fundamentally . . . I had to get out of hating range . . . I refuse to shy my way anymore through Chinatown, which tasks me with the old sayings and the stories" (Kingston 52-3).

Yet, she still wishes for the ability to return home: “The swordswoman and I are not so dissimilar. May my people understand the resemblance soon so I can return to them. What we have in common are the words at our backs. The idioms for revenge are ‘report a crime’ and ‘report to five families.’ The reporting is the vengeance—not the beheading, not the gutting but the words. And I have so many words—‘chink’ words and ‘gook’ words too—that they do not fit on my skin” (Kingston 53). The woman warrior myth provides her with the vision and the communities she will keep for her journey, and the myth will be a part of that journey on several levels. The years of training will correspond to her years of preparation to find her identity between two worlds and her use of two languages.

Rufus Cook points out the connection with the woman warrior myth and the vision of the writer avenger by listing the grievances she is determined to address: “Particularly in the story “White Tigers,” Kingston makes it clear that the vengeance she craves as a literary woman warrior is not only for the sexist abuse she suffered as a girl from the Chinese emigrant community but also for the racial bigotry she has had to endure from white American society” (Cook 143-144). Cook explains that when Kingston points to the word ‘revenge’ she is “playing on the two meanings of the Chinese word *bao*” (Cook 144).

Kingston’s power of storytelling in the creation of the warrior woman myth should not be overlooked. Even as the young Kingston gives the power of the story to her mother’s talk-story, Feng Lan points out the significance of Kingston’s creation of the story from several sources: “The depiction of Mulan’s experience in the wilderness, which forms one of the most poetic portions of the book, is highly original, full of enchanting images that

testify to Kingston's unusual imaginative power. Indeed, it establishes the surrealistic tone that characterizes the overall style of *The Woman Warrior*, a style constructed largely from fragments of traditional Chinatown literature (notably martial arts fiction), ghost stories, myth, and kung fu movies. In Kingston's hands these narrative sub-genres, which are often marginalized in the Chinese literary tradition, become illuminating strategies to sustain a story that generates meaning allegorically. It is largely through such a stylistic choice that Kingston establishes her own voice as something more than that of a mere re-teller of old stories" ("The Female Individual and the Empire: A Historicist's Approach to Mulan and Kingston's *Woman Warrior*" 237).

Within each of the freedom stories studied, another character's freedom story is told. In *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Jim's flight from slavery is told within Huck's story. In *The Song of the Lark* the story of other immigrants serve as freedom stories in Thea's childhood. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Nanny's flight from slavery creates the powerful embedded story within the midst of Janie's journey. In *The Woman Warrior* each of the five sections contains an embedded freedom story. Although Maxine's freedom story is not told in chronological order like the stages in the earlier freedom stories of Huck, Thea, and Janie, the sections in this novel correspond to those stages by moving the hero through an internal development leading her toward the creation of identity and the realization of her artistic vision. The freedom story in each section provides the impressionistic development of these learning stages.

The first freedom story results in a false escape; the no-name aunt's suicide seems to her the only path to flee from the humiliation of herself and her family. She sees no recourse for her newborn child. The aunt's story is professed by the mother to be true

although there would be no way of finding out the truth about the story because the family has shunned her name and denied her existence. The next section, “White Tigers”, tells a fictional freedom story although a possible model for the legend may have existed in history. Fa Mu Lan journeys for fifteen years to become the supernatural warrior capable of avenging her family. In the third section, “Shaman”, the freedom story tells of the mother’s journey to study medicine and become a healer. Next, In the section, “At the Western Palace,” Kingston tells another nonfiction story of her aunt who journeys to America where she loses her sanity after meeting her husband she has not seen for years. The final section details both the nonfiction journey of Kingston’s childhood and the fictional story of Ts’ai Yen in “A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe”. The mixture of fiction and nonfiction characters mixes fantasy and reality on the level of story; within the nonfiction stories there are often elements of the supernatural as well.

Ruth Y. Jenkins questions the literary reception of the mixture of reality and fantasy, especially as it relates to acceptance in the canon: “Authors have long woven supernatural elements into their fiction for a variety of reasons: to heighten suspense, enhance setting, or complicate plot. The use of the supernatural, however, can also reveal alternative experiences that formal realism can neither portray nor contain sufficiently, and while present in both male- and female- authored texts, the use of the supernatural by women may also serve as a specific rhetorical strategy both to expose and counter the andocentric social and literary scripts that circumscribe ‘acceptable’ behavior. In the Eurocentric canon, however, the presence of the supernatural as a plot device has traditionally marginalized the work- whether male or female authored-reflecting the dominant values of Western culture, which privilege formal realism, the understandable

and ordinary rather than the unexplained and fantastic” (“Authorizing Female Voice and Experience” 61). Jenkins goes on to consider how the literary value may be changed by the use of the supernatural in writing about a culture that values the mystical: “What happens, though, when the female writer produces supernatural fiction within a culture that embraces the other-worldly? How is that fiction received not only in her own culture but in terms of the Western literary canon? Does she find her writing doubly marginalized—first because it articulates female experience and then because it reproduces that which seems ‘unrealistic’?” (Jenkins 61). Jenkins judges Kingston’s mixture as successful in writing about both cultures and the different views of the realistic and nonrealistic: “Kingston produces a multivoiced narrative reflective of her girlhood among ghosts—both American and Chinese. In *The Woman Warrior* Kingston balances her childhood experiences against those of female ancestors and Chinese legend” (Jenkins 62). This mixture of fantastic legend and ordinary life works within the structure of the chapter.

In the structure of “White Tigers” Kingston allows for the commingling of very different perspectives. Her real life surrounds the story of Fa Mu Lan, letting the two stories bleed into each other. The world of fantasy surrounded by reality mimics the world Kingston grows up in that imagines ghosts all around and the grandmother in China sending the granddaughter candy when she senses a sweet taste suddenly in her mouth. It seems only natural for Kingston to adopt the power, strength, and dedication of the woman warrior into her ordinary life.

In the third section, “Shaman,” her mother’s life in China becomes the focus. Operating as a freedom story within the daughter’s freedom story, the daughter finds

herself measuring her mother's strength in similar ways to the dedication of the woman warrior's story. Brave Orchid, the mother, had used the money sent back from America by her husband to study medicine. This involves a difficult journey of leaving the village, community, and family, a difficult step for a woman in old China. Kingston will later follow in her mother's footsteps by leaving her family and the emigrant Chinese community to go to college.

The daughter imagines the mother arriving at the school. To leave her village and study, her mother would have necessarily been childless. Kingston speculates that her mother had lost her first two children to disease although the facts of the story are unknown. She pictures her mother enjoying the moments getting settled in her dormitory:

Not many women got to live out the daydream of women—to have a room, even a section of a room, that only gets messed up when she messes it up herself. The book would stay open at the very page she had pressed flat with her hand, and no one would complain about the field being plowed or the leak in the roof. She would clean her own bowl, and a small, limited area; she would have one drawer to sort, one bed to make (Kingston 61-2).

The list lengthens as Kingston imagines this female dream: “To shut the door at the end of the workday, which does not spill over into the evening. To throw away books after reading them so they don't have to be dusted. To go through boxes on New Year's Eve and throw out half of what is inside. Sometimes for extravagance to pick a bunch of flowers for the table” (Kingston 62). And her daughter makes it clear this is her dream, too: “other women besides me must have this daydream about a carefree life” (Kingston

62). This journey her mother took to study medicine was a successful escape: “Free from families, my mother would live for two years without servitude” (Kingston 62). The mother becomes a healer in China yet works endlessly in a laundry when she must leave China for America. Kingston openly connects family and servitude in this piece. In each of the freedom stories, family life is often depicted in a negative light, a less overt way of tying family connections to limitations on personal freedom.

The mother’s freedom story does not move her into independent isolation even though she has left her family behind; she forms a community with the other students. They provide her comfort and assistance after battling a ghost: “She rested after battle. She let friends watch out for her” (Kingston 72). In terms of the freedom story, this community with the women training to be healers becomes the place in her freedom journey where she will experience self-fulfillment and create her identity. Even misplaced in an American Chinatown, she never loses the sense of herself as a successful doctor.

Her return home from the school is triumphant. After finishing her training and returning to her village, Brave Orchid “had gone away ordinary and come back miraculous, like the ancient magicians who came down from the mountains,” and she is “treated in the highest regard” (Kingston 76). Surely this story of the mother’s freedom story fuels the daughter’s wish to become useful, to be an avenger. Maxine states that she must do something important, surely an echo of this idea that the mother had ‘gone away ordinary and come back miraculous’. Even though Maxine must eventually separate herself from her mother’s control so that she might follow her own freedom journey, this story of Brave Orchid’s education and the stories of strong Chinese

legendary women provide the daughter with the idea for the journey and the manna to sustain her in her quest.

When her mother returned to the village, she bought a slave (a girl) to become a nurse. Her daughter feels envy: “My mother’s enthusiasm for me is duller than for the slave girl, nor did I replace the older brother and sister who died while they were still cuddly” (Kingston 82). Part of this daughter’s journey will be to seek her mother’s approval, something she always imagines to be lacking. Kingston speculates in her mother’s story, just as she did in the aunt’s story, filling in missing pieces. For example, the first-born children who died are Kingston’s speculation.

She discusses how her mother gave her nightmares from talking-story of her experiences as a mid-wife in China: “To make my waking life American-normal, I turn on the lights before anything untoward makes an appearance. I push the deformed into my dreams, which are in Chinese, the language of impossible stories. Before we can leave our parents, they stuff our heads like the suitcases which they jam-pack with homemade underwear” (Kingston 87). Telling stories is so integral to the family life that when the heat in the laundry reached “one hundred and eleven degrees on summer afternoons, either my mother or my father would say that it was time to tell another ghost story so that we could get some good chills up our backs” (Kingston 87).

We learn late in the story about Kingston’s birth: “My mother left China in the winter of 1939 . . . I was born in the middle of World War II” (Kingston 96). Her nightmares stem from the wartime stories her mother tells her about the planes that had come from Japan to bomb the Chinese: “. . . I dream that the sky is covered from horizon to horizon with rows of airplanes, dirigibles, rocket ships, flying bombs, their formations as even as

stitches . . . When the story seems clear in my dreams and I would fly, if I look too closely, there so silent, far away, and faint in the daylight that people who do not know about them do not see them, are shiny silver machines, some not yet invented, being moved, lots always being moved from one continent to another, one planet to another. I must figure out a way to fly between them” (Kingston 96). So much of that dream speaks to her quest to construct an identity not constricted by the emigrant life; *The Woman Warrior* tells of Kingston trying, even in her dreams, to “fly” between more than one world.

The world she grows up in is an “America . . . full of machines and ghosts” (Kingston 96). She names the various types of ghosts: “Taxi ghosts, Bus ghosts, Police ghosts . . . and the Five-and-Dime Ghosts” (Kingston 97). All of the others, White or Black ghosts, affect her physically as well as emotionally: “Once upon a time the world was so thick with ghosts, I could hardly breathe, I could hardly walk, limping my way around the White Ghosts and their cars. There were Black Ghosts, too, but they were open eyed and full of laughter, more distinct than White Ghosts” (Kingston 97). She learns that “Human beings do not need Mail Ghosts to send messages” when she tells her mother that she “tastes something” without eating: “Your grandmother in China is sending you candy again” (Kingston 99). This very different reality causes her to be afraid of the world’s enormity because she realizes “How large the world must be to make my grandmother only a taste by the time she reaches me” (Kingston 99). American life becomes transformed into a magical state, mystical and powerful, full of unseen life. Yet this seems a burden to the young child. As she grows more practical, she loses faith in the supernatural world her mother and family have given her, even this idea of her

grandmother's candy must be discarded: "When I got older and more scientific, I received no more gifts from her" (Kingston 99). Again, becoming a practical Westerner has a price; she loses at least part of her mysterious notion of the world.

"Shaman" ends with a return visit to her family home after she has established an adult life, and she finds herself a misfit in her former home; she "had trouble falling asleep, too big for the hills and valleys scooped in the mattress by child-bodies" (Kingston 99). Her return confirms that she has outgrown this familiar world.

On this trip to the family home, she and her mother perform a small drama; while she pretends to sleep, her mother sits next to the bed, staring. Maxine speculates about her mother's motives: "What did she want, sitting there so large next to my head? I could feel her stare—her eyes two lights warm on my graying hair, then on the creases on the sides of my mouth, my thin neck, my thin cheeks, my thin arms. I felt her sight warm each of my bony elbows, and I flopped about in my fake sleep to hide them from her criticism" (Kingston 100). Once she finally opens her eyes, the criticism and lamenting begins; her mother complains that Maxine has gotten old but hasn't fattened up, that this world is too difficult, and expresses fears that she will leave her mother and not come back. Her mother insists that she can't stop working; the daughter insists she should. The mother believes her life would be easier in China; the daughter tells her they now "belong to the planet" (Kingston 107). The mother continues to insist that she and even her siblings should all come back to the family home: "Then I'm happy and your father is happy" (Kingston 107). The daughter, who had only momentarily escaped her mother's influence, remarks that "she pries open my head and my fists and crams into them responsibility for time, responsibility for intervening oceans" (Kingston 108).

For the daughter, this confrontation involves the psychological and cultural entrapment that she has separated herself from in her new life. As Veronica Wang points out in “Reality and Fantasy: The Chinese-American Woman’s Quest for Identity:”

She has to understand that what is considered truth in Chinese is but fiction to her even if it is regarded as truth by those who are in positions of authority and command, chiefly her mother, who is the main disseminator of truth and wisdom from China to her. Furthermore, she must reject all externally imposed authorities in order to allow her own voice a chance for expression. It is this instinctive voice from within that can free her from stereotypes and taboos and open the way towards growth and selfhood (Wang 24).

Maxine attempts to express to her mother this need to be free of the emigrant’s world with its mixture of fantasy and reality.

To break free again, she tells her mother that when she’s away from home she doesn’t get sick, she doesn’t “hear ghost sounds. I don’t stay awake listening to walking in the kitchen. I don’t hear the doors and windows unhinging” (Kingston 108). And in probably the most defiant of stances: “I’ve found some places in this country that are ghost-free” (Kingston 108). She liberates herself one more step with an even more direct declaration: “’And I think I belong there, where I don’t catch colds or use my hospitalization insurance. Here I’m so sick so often, I can barely work. I can’t help it, Mama” (Kingston 108). In this freedom story, the hero returns to the person and the place of her original entrapment and breaks her bonds with words.

In an image of how great the mother’s world presses on her, she asserts, “’ . . . my chest doesn’t hurt when I breathe. I can breathe” (Kingston 108). All of these words

magically allow her mother to let her go, and she releases her: “It’s better, then, for you to stay away. The weather in California must not agree with you. You can come for visits . . . Of course, you must go, Little Dog” (Kingston 108). This use of a pet name, actually the first time the mother directly names the daughter, points again to the importance of names in the novel. The daughter notices the act: “She had not called me that endearment for years—a name to fool the gods. I am really a Dragon as she is a Dragon, both of us born in dragon years (Kingston 108-9).” Her mother thus signals her acknowledgment of her new identity by directly naming her.

It is magical for the daughter when she receives the mother’s permission, creating a freeing experience: “A weight lifted from me. The quilts must be filling with air. The world is somehow lighter” (Kingston 108). As “Shaman” ends, she finds a moment of community with her mother and a vision of the freedom she needs to continue her journey. This moment is told at the center of the memoir, out of chronological order. A similar confrontation between mother and daughter plays out in the final chapter, but it takes place before Maxine left the house. That drama ends in harsh words and a break between the mother and daughter; although told out of order, this scene is the reconciliation of the earlier break.

This forming of a community with her mother is similar to moments of sudden understanding of a vision for the heroes in earlier freedom stories. When Maxine makes the decision to speak the words to reject her mother’s ghosts, she experiences a sense of well-being and freedom. Similar events occur in the journeys of Huck Finn, Thea Kronborg, and Janie Crawford. When Huck makes his decision not to turn Jim in as a runaway slave it is necessary to reject his upbringing, and his inheritance of the white

slave holder culture, that is, the rules and ethics he had learned up to that moment. He feels a peace when he finally makes the decision. The moment when the daughter must explain to her mother why she must reject the “ghosts” of her childhood is a moment of turning away from all that she has learned and inherited from her culture.

Thea Kronborg must leave behind her sheltered life in Moonstone within her family and small town heritage to venture on her journey to Europe for voice training. In that freedom story, a renewed childhood connection also sets the scene for her decision. Her journey continued only after she recreated the community with Dr. Archie from her childhood; this renewed friendship brings back the “ghosts” of her childhood, and in a nightmare that sickens her, she knows she must risk all and venture onward. In each of these moments, the hero has had to form a significant community with another and has had to make a decision to leave behind the past. In this case, the mother and daughter form a community even as the daughter must reject the mother’s world.

Janie Crawford’s story is different in two ways. First, whereas Maxine returns and makes peace with her mother, Janie chooses to discard the people of her childhood, her grandmother and mother, when she chooses to travel to the ‘horizon.’ Her struggle, however, is also to reject the lessons of her childhood encapsulated in her grandmother’s viewpoint on the fate of all black women. Janie must risk it all and form a community with her third husband to move forward in her journey. Second, Janie returns to form a community, not from her childhood, but from her adult life, with her best friend, Pheoby. She claims her freedom story through words expressed to her friend.

Maxine and her mother create a community and she gains release from the power of the mother’s world, but the daughter remains aware that her mother will always live in a

special mix of fantasy and reality: “She sends me on my way, working always and now old, dreaming the dreams about shrinking babies and the sky covered with airplanes and a Chinatown bigger than the ones here” (Kingston 109). Changed by her freedom journey, the daughter cannot return home, and the gift of this release from her mother sends her back to the journey to become a writer. Of course, the structure and substance of *The Woman Warrior* deny the assertion the daughter makes in this chapter that she wants to rid her life of ghosts and fantasy. Clearly, Kingston’s journey to become a writer included the need to find a harmony between logic and the otherworldly.

The next section “At the Western Palace” focuses on the reunion of sisters, the mother, Brave Orchid, with her sister, Moon Orchid. Like bookends to Maxine’s childhood, this aunt’s story, although different from the tragedy of the suicide of the no-name aunt, again presents a portrait of the powerless and victimized female. Veronica Wang compares the two aunts to the strong figures of the woman warrior and the mother: “Unlike either Fa Mu Lan or Brave Orchid, both of Maxine's aunts were silent, shadowy figures, manipulated and victimized by immutable traditions and incomprehensible changes. They were the sub-women whose fates were dictated by forces beyond their control. They were married to family-arranged husbands, who were strangers to them and left them in virtual widowhood immediately after their wedding ceremonies to seek their fortunes in America, the Gold Mountain” (Wang 25). They serve as the reversal of the powerful women of the three other books, yet their stories encapsulate the possible fate of women, much like the mule story and Nanny’s story serve as warnings to Janie Crawford in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

When Moon Orchid arrives from China, the sisters' greatest difficulty when meeting is the inability to recognize that they have both aged; they remember each other as women of their twenties, not their sixties. This becomes only the first example of their struggles with reality. Their first project is to "do something" about Moon Orchid's husband who has been sending her money from America for thirty years. "But she had never told him that she wanted to come to the United States. She waited for him to suggest it, but he never did" (Kingston 124).

The husband who emigrated years before has remarried--in their cultural view he has taken a second wife—and does not know she has come to the U.S. Brave Orchid admonishes her to take her rightful place: "He's living in Los Angeles with his second wife, and they have three children. Claim your rights. These are *your* children. He's got two sons. *You* have two sons. You take them away from her. You become their mother" (Kingston 125). Her sister is not convinced that this is a good plan; she prefers to continue taking money he sends to her. We learn later that he has supported her with servants and paid for their daughter's college education, but he never told Moon Orchid about his second wife or divorced her. Half the summer the sister is able to resist the need to confront her husband, but Brave Orchid finally insists.

Moon Orchid's journey to America and the husband represents a false escape in her journey; repeatedly it becomes clear that the trip to meet the long estranged husband does not reflect her wishes. At Brave Orchid's insistence, they travel to Los Angeles and find his medical office. There is a confrontation; he rejects her. Never able to speak during the meeting, Moon Orchid suffers a series of humiliations that will break whatever strength she had when she came from China. The husband motions to silence her when

the second wife is near, he tells her never to return, and he orders her to live with her sister or her daughter rather than with him.

Moon Orchid goes to live with her daughter, but she soon loses sanity. Brave Orchid again intervenes but is unable to heal her. Moon Orchid dies in an institution. Clearly the meeting of East and West can be destructive and crippling. Neither aunt provides a suitable strong female model; both their journeys end in lost life. Both fail to speak up for themselves; their husbands and their culture silence both. Although they are not her role models, they serve as symbols of the struggles she will face on her journey. Their failure to speak out and avoid dying as victims relates directly to the story Kingston tells of her silent and alienated childhood and adolescence.

The story of Moon Orchid and the story of Kingston's childhood both tell of journeys to be free from silencing and rejection. Kingston suffers from the restrictions of both cultures, the confusion of identity, and the power of two languages. Both chapters, "At the Western Palace" (Moon Orchid's story) and "A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe" (Kingston's school years), contain the misery and struggle of two women paralyzed by lack of voice. Linda Hunt analyzes the nature of the struggle for voice that lies understated in the text:

Maxine Hong Kingston's personal struggle is fought - and resolved at least partially - on the battlefield of language. The words used against her sting, and, unable to find the right words and the right voice to express her own point of view, and indeed, unsure of that point of view, she is rendered nearly voiceless for much of her youth. She speaks inaudibly or in a quack, and once physically assaults another Chinese girl whose silence reminds her of her own. The core of the problem is that

by being simultaneously insider (a person who identifies strongly with her cultural group) and outsider (deviant and rebel against that tradition), she cannot figure out from which perspective to speak. It is only through mastery of literary form and technique - through creating this autobiography out of family stories, Chinese myths, and her own memories -that she is able to articulate her own ambivalence and hereby find an authentic voice (Hunt 6).

The final section, "A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe," begins with the report by Kingston that the earlier story about Moon Orchid was her own fabrication of the story created from the few lines of her brother's story of his involvement in the confrontation between the sisters and Moon Orchid's husband. Kingston then clarifies further that she had heard the story second hand from her sister who had been told by the brother. Kingston admits that possibly "his version of the story may be better than mine because of its bareness, not twisted into designs. The hearer can carry it tucked away without it taking up much room" (Kingston 163). This statement speaks to the power of oral storytelling by mentioning 'the hearer' rather than the reader. She also measures her own intricate storytelling designs against others. The narrator admits that Moon Orchid's story was a mixture of fantasy and reality, the very thing she has disparaged her mother for throughout the book.

Along with this admission that the earlier section had been her fabrication formed from a few reported lines of the event, she creates an image of herself as something of a trickster in her weaving of tales. Connecting herself with a tale from old China, she recognizes her storytelling nature: "Long ago in China, knot-makers tied string into buttons and frogs, and rope into bell pulls. There was one knot so complicated that it

blinded the knot-maker. Finally an emperor outlawed this cruel knot, and the nobles could not order it anymore. If I had lived in China I would have been an outlaw knot-maker” (Kingston 163). Kingston has reached a balance of her two worlds within her writing and her imagination, allowing her to imagine herself as an “outlaw” spinner of tales within the Chinese tradition. Cheung points out the change in Kingston: “Having transformed the military warrior into a verbal fighter, she recognizes that she is a powerful spinner of yarns and not just a receptacle for her mother’s tales” (Cheung 171). At the end of this section she will collaborate in a tale her mother began and she finished.

Following the admission that the previous section had been her fiction, she will reveal that the final story is collaboration with the mother. Between these two stories she has created, one from a second hand story and the other from a legend, she tells her story of her development of voice from childhood to the present. Moon Orchid’s tragic story and Ts’ai Yen’s triumphant story form a frame around these nightmarish scenes from school--both American and Chinese—and in her life within the family.

She tells first of her mother’s claim that she had cut her tongue when she was a child: “Sometimes I felt very proud that my mother committed such a powerful act upon me. At other times I was terrified—the first thing my mother did when she saw me was to cut my tongue” (Kingston 164). Her mother tells her she cut it so she “would not be tongue-tied. Your tongue would be able to move in any language. You’ll be able to languages that are completely different from one another. You’ll be able to pronounce anything. Your frenum looked too tight to do those things, so I cut it” (Kingston 164). Kingston doubts the story and continually looks for proof by comparing the underside of her

tongue to other children's, but nevertheless the possibility that this happened stays in her memory and her personal story.

Kingston continues this section by reporting a mixture of memories about her school years. She tells of being silent her first years at school when she had to first speak English" (Kingston 165). In fact, she admits that she "enjoyed the silence" (Kingston 166). She continues: "It was when I found out I had to talk that school became a misery. I did not speak and felt bad each time that I did not speak" (Kingston 166). Her peers have similar issues: "The other Chinese girls did not talk either, so I knew the silence had to do with being a Chinese girl" (Kingston 166). The patchwork of impressions related to silence, language, and tongues—both her tongue that might have been cut by her mother and the two languages she suffers with in the American and the Chinese schools—leads to other school memories, nightmarish in their snippets of rejection and failure.

She writes of being an outcast (she believes) in her own family, referring often to the notion that girls are not valued and that she is the odd one in her family. Her mother tells her that she "turned out so unusual" (Kingston 203). She answers her mother with the assertion that when she goes to college things will be different for her: ". . . it won't matter if I'm not charming. And it doesn't matter if a person is ugly; she can still do school work" (Kingston 203). She learns from her mother that she has called her ugly only because "That's what we're supposed to say. We like to say the opposite" (Kingston 203). Kingston has been preparing a list of things to complain about or confess to her mother if she ever gains the voice to speak. So, when the mother makes this admission, it causes the daughter pain: "It seemed to hurt her to tell me that—another guilt for my list to tell my mother, I thought. And suddenly I got very confused and

lonely because I was at that moment telling her my list, and in the telling, it grew” (Kingston 203-4). The argument ends with her mother angrily telling her to leave: “Get out. I knew you were going to turn out bad” (Kingston 204).

She leaves and accepts the change but remembers: “Be careful what you say. It comes true” (Kingston 204). This change brings a different world, escaping the Chinese emigrant life and finding her own life difficult: “I had to leave home in order to see the world logically, logic the new way of seeing. I learned to think that mysteries are for explanation. I enjoy the simplicity. Concrete pours out of my mouth to cover the forests with freeways and sidewalks. Give me plastics, periodical tables, t.v. dinners with vegetables no more complex than peas mixed with diced carrots. Shine floodlights into dark corners: no ghosts” (Kingston 204). She knows what her inheritance will be: “. . . a green address book full of names. I’ll send the relatives money, and they’ll write me stories about their hunger” (Kingston 206). The daughter escapes her mother’s house and some of the emigrant community and succeeds in her journey to become a writer, but she will always retain one link to the old China: the relatives who will continue this extended community into the future. Thus, Kingston finishes the book with this break with the mother before going to college, out of order chronologically and contrasting with her eventual story of reconciliation told at the center of the memoir.

Even though Kingston claims here to choose logic and reality over her mother’s world, King-Kok Cheung points out that becoming a writer will become the act of balancing her world and her mother’s world: “As a child, Maxine resents her mother’s conflation of fact and fancy, insufficiently aware how the elegant and the valiant Brave Orchid is inspiring her as a writer, she herself resorts to this conflation as a narrative

technique. She puts Chinese notions in American idioms, but she derives both the raw material and the strategy for her art from the matrilineal tradition of oral storytelling” (Cheung 167). This chapter tells the part of her life story which leads to breaking with her mother in adolescence. This break was necessary to allow her to make that escape to the journey she must take to leave her home, go to college, and eventually create a writer’s life. As in each of the earlier freedom stories, the hero must make that break with the family or community to be free to begin the quest. Yet, this break to begin her journey is juxtaposed with the final freedom story that significantly combines both the mother’s and daughter’s powers to talk-story.

The title of this final chapter, “A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe,” appears to have no relation to the childhood story but becomes connected in the final three pages of the chapter. Kingston begins: “Here is a story my mother told me, not when I was young, but recently, when I told her I also talk story. The beginning is hers, the ending mine” (Kingston 106). A community with her mother has been restored; she has been successful in her quest to become a writer, and this story provides proof of those successes. It is clear that time has shifted, and two stories will be told: one purportedly factual recalled by her mother, another the legend recalled of a Chinese woman living as a captive with barbarians. Where her mother’s storytelling leaves off and Kingston’s begins is not entirely clear, yet it would appear to be the point when Kingston speculates on the opera the family had seen in old China when they were threatened by robbers.

Kingston remarks: “I like to think that at some of those performances, they heard the songs of Ts’ai Yen, a poetess born in A.D. 175 When she was twenty years old, she was captured by a chieftain during a raid by the Southern Hsiung-nu” (Kingston 207-8).

Ts'ai Yen's story as a "captive soldier" with the barbarians tells of her bravery in fierce battle. "During her twelve-year stay with the barbarians, she had two children. Her children did not speak Chinese. She spoke it to them when their father was out of the tent, but they imitated her with senseless singsong words and laughed" (Kingston 208). Here, hints of Kingston's empathetic understanding of her mother's struggles coming to America may be suggested. The daughter might have understood something of her mother's life as an emigrant--living amongst the "barbarians" in America and hearing her children laugh at her language and customs. There is much of Kingston's life also in this miniature freedom story.

The captive creates a song that tells her story before captivity: "Ts'ai Yen sang about China and her family there. Her words seemed to be Chinese, but the barbarians understood their sadness and anger. Sometimes they thought they could catch barbarian phrases about forever wandering. Her children did not laugh, but eventually sang along when she left her tent to sit by the winter campfires, ringed by barbarians" (Kingston 209). A picture emerges of the "forever wandering" of a nonnative speaker, moving from one language experience to another, and of a Chinese-American, moving always between two perspectives of history and the present, of fantasy and reality, of the supernatural and logic. Kingston's life and "song" also echo in this story.

Each of the freedom stories ends in a movement toward fantasy. Huck Finn plans to go west for adventure with no concrete destination or plan clearly in his future, just a fantasy of freedom in a new wilderness. Thea Kronborg's story ends with her complete envelopment in the life of her opera characters, an artist's reality mingling with fiction. Janie Crawford ends her story in fantasy and memory, recalling the love she and Tea

Cake shared. Kingston ends with the mingling of her mother's story of emigration and her story of creating her song that "translated well," both stories miniaturized into a freedom story legend.

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Chapter 6

The Value of Freedom Questioned: *Leave It To Me*

Bharati Mukherjee's 1997 novel, *Leave It To Me*, takes a different approach to the freedom story; in fact, the hero's story and the author's tone create what might be called an anti-freedom story. Although the frame of the freedom story is evident throughout the plot and characterization of the hero, the approach raises the question of the value of freedom and the place of that value in American life and literature.

Mukherjee approaches the idea of freedom uniquely as Jennifer Drake suggests in "Looting American Culture: Bharati Mukherjee's Immigrant Narratives": "Her writing feeds off the freedom that 'America' allows her to imagine and the different perceptions of reality that 'India' allows her to imagine" (Drake 68). Drake further ties Mukherjee's writing to the "appropriation of powerful American myths and transnational dreams," a connection pertinent to this novel and its links to the earlier freedom stories (Drake 62). Mukherjee's 'perceptions of reality' and the 'transnational dreams' come to a disastrous end to the hero's quest in this freedom story.

In this vein of Mukherjee's work speaking to American myth, then, not surprisingly, one reviewer sees a tie between this hero and Huck Finn. Ellen Friedman in *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* asserts a strong connection: "A female, post-Freudian, new-millennium Huckleberry Finn, Devi Dee is one of a small but growing list of female protagonists who navigate through their plots mostly alone and under their own steam

and emerge at the end triumphant to some degree, without parents or men deciding their fates. Add to that the multiracial cast of characters and you have a novel of new realism, post feminist and post canonical American narratology” (Friedman 232). Many of the elements mentioned by Friedman extend back to depictions of Thea Kronborg and Janie Crawford. Like Debby DiMartino (Devi Dee) in *Leave It To Me*, Thea and Janie’s characters created and completed their own journeys “triumphant to some degree.” In this sense, Mukherjee’s character’s roots and the elements of the freedom story in this novel extend back to early century works. Those female heroes in 1915 and 1937 share the questing nature of the hero, but the approach to the notion of freedom and the result of this quest are dissimilar.

Several factors connect this character to earlier freedom story heroes. Debby DiMartino is an outsider and misfit, she yearns to leave home in search of a place to realize her true identity, her name has been changed by others, she experiences several false escapes, and she eventually attempts to form community on her journey. This hero exhibits a few twists in these genre expectations, however. She will change her own name at times, she expresses a conscious understanding of the meaning of the quest, and her need for community becomes a need for revenge. Debby evolves from a victim to the avenger during her journey, often with resulting violence.

Mary Mackey in a 1997 review in *The San Francisco Chronicle* points to recurring themes in Mukherjee’s work: “Immigration and loss of identity are provocative and abiding themes in the fiction of Bharati Mukherjee.” Loss of identity occurs in several freedom stories. Further Mackey points out that: “In *Leave It to Me*, Mukherjee takes the themes she has previously explored a step further. Destroying the concept of ethnicity

altogether, she creates a complex new, transnational definition of self” (“Lying as Hard as She Can” RV-1). The transracial definition of self in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and the transethnic definition of self in *The Woman Warrior* set precedent for this approach in the freedom story.

The author’s use of contemporary slang emphasizes Debby’s nature as a skeptical and cynical hero. Bharati Mukherjee’s experimentation with language harks back to Mark Twain and Zora Neale Hurston’s uses of dialect that expanded the expectations for language use at the time of publication of those works.

The novel, *Leave It To Me* (1997), incorporates many of the elements seen in the freedom stories studied. Debby DiMartino tells her own story, as did Huck Finn, Janie Crawford, and Maxine Hong Kingston. Her journey will lead her from Schenectady, New York to San Francisco, California; from a traditional Italian-American middle class family to a Bay Area group of counterculture characters, one who might be her biological mother. She does not fit well into her adopted family or the traditionally American life of her hometown. She does not recognize the American dream as her siblings and peers represent it. On her journey, she experiments with other communities through successive liaisons, but never finds one to fit her: chameleon-like, she becomes whatever the person she encounters desires. Debby represents something of a trickster figure, both as unreliable narrator and style and name changing hero. An echo of Huck Finn’s name and story creation at each visit to the shore underpins this hero’s progress on the journey.

The idea of remaking identity relates to the author as well according to Victoria Carchidi in “Orbiting”. The author was born into “the most elite caste level of Indian society; she was a Bengali Brahmin.” After studying at the University of Iowa Writing

Workshop, “instead of accepting the Indian nuclear physicist her family was arranging for her,” she marries a Canadian, Clark Blaise. Carchidi points out this role of outsider Mukherjee accepts: “Marriage outside her culture took Mukherjee beyond the safe enclave of certainty in which she had been raised, offered new possibilities for her to explore” (Carchidi 92). After returning to India for one year, she returns to the West, because “She had cast her lot with the West and needed to remake her identity in a way that no longer clung to an outmoded vision from her past” (Cardichi 93). This choice matches the choice her hero Debby will make to turn from the middle class life of her childhood and follow a new vision.

Debby’s emotional and intellectual attitudes separate her from the world of her family. Schenectady will not contain this hero in similar ways to Chinatown for Maxine, Eatonville for Janie, Moonstone for Thea, and St. Petersburg for Huck. Debby notices that rather than being logical, she finds her mind and experience frequently caught up in the fantastic, recalling exotic details of a life she was too young to remember. She obsesses over the fact that her biological parents abandoned her, and she returns to a continuous reflection over possible meanings of mysterious and illusive memories she believes were from her infant life in a foreign country. She sees her adopted sister mature and begin to create an adult life, but Debby sees that future as unfulfilling.

By thirteen, she has been arrested for shoplifting and begins her first sexual affair with the graduate student in social work for whom she completes community service to have her record erased. This first lover becomes the first in a series of men who exert influence over her search for identity. With each episode, she learns something about survival; each connection ends in increasing violence. With the first affair, she discovers

her sexual powers, which she finds useful in manipulating relationships with other men as she continues on this journey. This affair begins with Debby as a thirteen year old delinquent used sexually by an older male with power over her; she points out that he has her criminal file and the power to have the record erased. Debby evolves from his victim into a victor as she discovers the power to manipulate him until he becomes the victim. He quits graduate school and leaves diminished; she becomes resilient and knowledgeable about human needs and how she might use them for survival.

As in other freedom stories, her father and father figures are not positive influences in her life. Her adopted father appears distant; her biological father, revealed late in the story, proves to be sadistic and murderous. Mukherjee complicates the father-daughter motif further, however, by including a traditional Freudian Electra complex into the scheme, complete with sexual overtones and her eventual complicity in the biological father's murder of the biological mother. Compounding this thread, Debby will kill her father to complete the legend-like strain of the story.

Like the hero/narrator in *The Woman Warrior*, Debby self consciously describes her angst at not fitting in, her emotional pain over her original abandonment, and her need to discover that part of her identity and background stemming from her exotic beginnings. She tells her story chronologically, unlike Maxine Hong Kingston's hero, but the telling is circular in the same way that Janie and Huck tell their stories after the journey ends. The triumph of surviving to be able to write the story corresponds to the knowledge the reader infers that Kingston completed her journey to become a writer. Simply the fact that Debby tells her story after the journey, answers the critical question remaining at the end—whether or not she would live through the bloody mayhem.

Bharati Mukherjee writes at the edge of sincerity with a dark humor to her manipulation of the reader. One of the differences between this freedom story and the others is this author's creation of a less naïve and less honest narrator and hero or anti-hero. Especially unique to Debby is her growing vindictiveness, a quality missing from all the other characterizations. Another difference lies in the pervasive and graphic depiction of violence. This character questions the American approach to freedom through these violent acts, especially that lifestyle of the counterculture that emerged at the time of the Vietnam War.

Certainly, in Huck Finn's travels to the shore and in most of the narrative related to slavery, violence and human cruelty are powerful elements in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Violence between genders and races arise infrequently but profoundly in Janie Crawford's story, too, as well as narrative depictions of destruction from the hurricane in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. The level and graphic quality of the violence in *Leave It To Me* reaches yet another level. The type and amount of violence ties to the author's approach to the notion of freedom and the hero's attitude toward the value of it. Whereas the other freedom stories openly value the pursuit of a release from any restrictions imposed by civilization, this text questions the individual's freedom. This hero/narrator returns throughout the story to the claim of victimization in her abandonment by her parents—she links this abandonment to the narcissistic exercise of personal freedom characterized by her mother's freedom story.

Another indication of the inherent disdain in the novel for American attachment to personal freedom resonates from the description of former hippies Debby encounters as she searches for her mother. Using her skills to insinuate herself into their close knit

group, she describes them as shallow and unethical examples of that era who have adjusted to their middle age by making money while retaining vestiges of their youth.

Adding to the distrust of the American counterculture of the sixties, Debby alternates her own lament of abandonment with speculation on her “biomother’s” hippie life spent traveling and experimenting with exotic lands and people as well as sexuality, drugs, and eventually, criminal activities. As the novel progresses, she discovers clues about her birth mother’s freedom story in India as well as her lifestyle in America. The details become more sinister, drawing a portrait of a selfish and amoral person.

The stages of Debby’s freedom journey lead her through these steps of discovery, but unlike the other freedom stories in which the hero moves toward wholeness and an idyllic moment of freedom, these clues only lead Debby toward disaster and brokenness. For the narrator, the consequence of her mother’s embedded freedom story is the child abandoned and discarded. In this novel, the hero only discovers more loss when she gains her identity. Her freedom story becomes a mission to find the mother, learn the story of her abandonment, and, it is suggested, find some form of justice for that original act. She becomes an absurd and amoral avenger of those who were a part of her mother’s youthful lifestyle. The novel ends with identifying the mother who denies once more their connection.

Despite the sharp differences in tone from earlier freedom stories, there is a strong link with *The Woman Warrior* in Kingston and Mukherjee’s mixture of realism and the supernatural. Although Kingston’s use of Fa Mu Lan is embedded deeply in the work, Mukherjee relies on the Devi warrior as a back-story. Jennifer Drake points to this mixing of diverse elements in Mukherjee’s body of work: “Mukherjee’s stories, then,

represent the density of contemporary American experience. Her writing constructs interactive models—historical information bytes as scaffolding, a flexible and epic Hindu imagination as connective tissue” (Drake 70). One critical difference lies in the two heroes and this mixture; Maxine eventually takes on a balance of American reality and Chinese imagination; Debby seems only to have been acted upon by forces of nature or destiny.

In this second of the three contemporary works, this Asian American writer, born in India and now writing in English, writes a freedom story of a hero who needs to discover her exotic beginning rather than her future. She lives her life believing she inherited her nature from these unknown parents and needing to understand that inheritance. Debby focuses on disjointed pieces from mysterious and incomplete memories, small clues from her adoption story, the knowledge that she looks and acts differently than her adoptive family, and her sense that she does not fit well within her home or community. She is another misfit in this set of novels’ heroes: different from her sibling, different from her peers in Schenectady, and different from her conventional upbringing. In the tradition of each of these freedom stories, she will be shown to be isolated and separate from her family and community, providing her with the need and the reason to leave on a journey to find her birth parent and her story. Most importantly, this outsider status allows her the freedom to reject expectations for her life in the mold of her sister and peers—to leave for a life in New York city and pursue a career before marrying and living a similar lifestyle to her adoptive family.

Debby’s freedom story begins with a mysterious question at the beginning of the story: “What have I done but what my mothers did? The one who gave me birth, and the

one I am just beginning to claim. Like them, I took a god of a special time and place as my guide” (Mukherjee 9). This curious statement will only become partly clear at the end of the narrative. The full measure of what her birth mother did only becomes known in the ending when her complicity in murders and illegal passport forgeries surfaces in Debby’s research. Whether the reference to “the one I am just beginning to claim” points to her adoptive mother or even a supernatural earth mother cannot be determined. At the last moment before her death, her biological mother denies that she gave birth to any child and that the nuns were mistaken when they named her as the mother. When Debby was discovered by the nun in India, she is barely alive and clinging to a dead woman. She discovers late in the revelations at the end that her father killed the other woman and tried to strangle his daughter. Even the private detective who investigates her past can only give her a fifty/fifty probability of which woman was her mother. Perhaps she refers to this dead woman as a possible mother. Many questions raised by this beginning statement are not perfectly resolved at the end. Unlike a mystery story with finished story lines, this novel avoids answering all questions. At the outset of this story, and without the whole of the text, this slippery statement sets the tone for the novel: as the reader believes the narrator may be providing clues to her story, the facts may bring the reader to a false conclusion. This is not the only instance when narrative clues lead to the wrong inference.

This beginning narrative provides that initial beginning for these freedom stories: the hero’s outsider status and condition stemming from the circumstances of her birth are hauntingly established: “I have no clear memory of my birthplace, only of the whiteness of its sun, the harshness of its hills, the raspy moan of its desert winds, the desperate

suddenness of it's twilight: these I see like the patterns of veins on the inside of my eyelids" (Mukherjee 9). These moments of recall will be the keys that drive her quest. Within her story, told after she knows the truth, Debby will recall and understand more of these memories.

The narrator, the adopted daughter of a conventional Italian family and the biological child of an American woman and an unknown exotic father, tells her own story, not to a friend but directly to the reader. She begins with the unknowns of her parentage and with the haunting impressions she cannot explain from her earliest life. These confusing memory impressions of infancy overtake her daily life and define her journey. In the same way that Janie Crawford's identity was skewed by the realization that she was not white like all the other children, Debby pictures herself as an exotic misfit in Schenectady.

Also, in the tradition in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, this narrator withholds important elements of her story. Her image of abandonment appears repeatedly with new significant details at each telling: "I tell myself I must have been left unattended in the sun. Maybe the sand-yellow sun was low in the morning sky and whichever Gray Sister was charged with caring for me had been detained in the fields as the sun mounted. I don't want to believe it was an overcrowded orphanage's scheme to rid itself of a bastard half-American. One murder attempt is enough" (Mukherjee 9). With understated playfulness, the narrator lets the reader know there has been one murder; the victim's identity and the reason she herself was left to die will not be revealed until the final chapters. This provides one more signal that Debby tells the story after the fact because as a child she has no understanding of the other murder. Debby as narrator suggests that

she carries the reader through the same process she followed of trying to imagine possible explanations for the odd pieces of memory.

Early on, she understands several facts about her biological parents: they disappeared early from her life, leaving her, she believes, in an orphanage. Debby's abandonment by both parents before she is old enough to remember them parallels Janie Crawford's concern that she would not know them if she met them. Debby will not recognize either parent at first sight.

Other memories remind her of another life: "Some days while shoveling snow off the stoop in Schenectady, I have smelled heady hibiscus-scented breezes; I have felt tropical heat and humidity" (Mukherjee 9-10). Always she notices the differences between the mysteries of her early life and the reality of her present life with her adoptive parents.

Like Huck and Thea she is uncomfortable in the home environment. Three seemingly wholesome environments, Huck's life with the Widow Douglas, Thea's large pastor's family, and Debby's traditional adopted family leave these heroes frustrated and poised to leave for their journeys.

In one early statement the narrator deliberately misleads the reader when she opens her narrative: "in the cabin of this houseboat off Sausalito . . . I sit with the head of a lover on my lap, the ferrous taste of fear invades me as though my whole body were tongue" (Mukherjee 10). This scene actually is a grisly snapshot of the end of her journey with only the suggestion of terror she will experience in Sausalito. The reality of this scene, its bizarre violence and circumstances, she leaves unsaid. Even the words chosen are twisted into different meanings by the story of the ending. The description of the "head of a lover" misleads possible interpretations. The reader could not realize the scene

actually refers to the decapitated head of her lover killed by the biological father who arrives for revenge against her possible birthmother at the end of her journey.

For Debby as with other freedom story heroes, even the simplest details, her name and origins leave her a misfit. “For all official purpose . . . I am, or was, Debby DiMartino, a fun-loving twenty-three year old American girl. I was adopted into a decent Italian-American family in the Hudson Valley” (Mukherjee 10). She describes this normalcy as the “upside of adoption,” but, “The downside is knowing that the other two I owe my short life to were lousy people who’d considered me lousier still and who’d left me to be sniffed at by wild dogs, like a carcass in the morning shade” (Mukherjee 10). The word *carcass* refers to something she did not know at the time; her father believed he had successfully strangled her. She describes herself as “recyclable trash” (Mukherjee 10). Further she asserts, “Debby DiMartino is a lie. Whoever my parents intended for me to be never existed” (Mukherjee 10). Finding out her true identity and destiny becomes the reason for her quest: “That unclaimable part of myself is what intrigues me, the part that came to life in a desert village and had the name Baby Clear Water Iris-Daughter until it was christened in a Catholic orphanage. That’s the part I want to remember” (Mukherjee 10).

In the tradition of Janie Crawford, Debby suffers from a sense of confusion even about her name. Janie had been named by so many people that she was simply called Alphabet; Debby DiMartino was Baby Clearwater Iris-Daughter on her birth certificate, Faustine—named after a hurricane by the Nuns—in her adoption papers, and renamed by her adoptive mother after a favorite actress, Debbie Reynolds. This process continues when she is renamed Tiger by her second lover, Frankie Fong. Then, Debby renames herself

Devi from a personalized license plate when she arrives in California, and she is renamed Goddess by Gabe, one of the people she meets on the streets in California.

The interest in naming has been an embedded motif in several of the freedom stories. In the template story, Huck takes on several identities and names in his trips to shore and finally takes on the identity of Tom Sawyer at the Phelps plantation. Like Debby who takes her own name as Devi, he initiates the name and identity shifts. Janie Crawford's naming relates to the racial situation she is born into and the loss of parents early in her life. In *The Woman Warrior* naming takes on great significance as well. Maxine's name is never spoken in the novel; her mother only once calls her by a pet name. Within the Chinese culture, names take on great significance: the name of her shamed aunt is never to be mentioned; she is referred to as No Name Woman. The Chinese emigrants hide their true names. Part of Maxine's quest to become a writer becomes the need to acknowledge the aunt by telling her story and thus naming her.

Debby recognizes differences from her adopted family; she keeps a secret inner life unknown to her family, "the part that sings to moons and dances with stars" (Mukherjee 10). Like Janie she has an inside and an outside self. This character rejects her self—the self that is Debby DiMartino because she has "no weight, no substance. I had to toss her out" echoing her own thoughts about her origins: ". . . just a garbage sack thrown out on the hippie trail" (Mukherjee 10-11). Janie's mixed parentage is echoed in Debby's biological parents who are of different ethnic and national heritage: Clear Water Iris is American and white, and the unnamed father is Asian National according to the birth certificate. Janie knows her father was white and had raped her mother; Debby suspects some sort of salacious start. Whereas Janie decides she has no interest in finding her

birth parents, finding her parents or at least her mother consumes Debby and becomes her freedom quest.

Debby's journey moves through several affairs. Like Janie's marriages that serve as false attempts at community, Debby will form serial sexual relationships in which she learns something significant to propel her to the next stage in her journey. The relationships become increasingly unconventional and involve more and more violent consequences. This first relationship is with a graduate student who manages her parole and uses the power over her to develop a sexual relationship. Each man after this one also use some kind of coercion to promote a relationship. She feels she gains critical knowledge from this twenty-two year old: "But he left me with the most important prediction of my life, something that got me through high school and college, and even helps today." He tells her she will be "tall and beautiful" and "rich and powerful." She adds that Wyatt thought "he had everything to do with it" (Mukherjee 14). He insisted that the nuns saved her because she was special in some way, an idea that will guide her actions in the future. Janie Crawford grew more assertive with each marriage; Debby grows more manipulative and increasingly violent with each liaison.

The first lover helps her embrace her differences from her family and community: "After Wyatt left, I convinced myself that I was lucky to be an orphan. From the families I'd been given, I'd scavenge the traits that I needed and dump the rest" (Mukherjee 14). She sums up her differences: "I was a tall girl in a small school, a beautiful girl in a plain family, an exotic girl in a very American town" (Mukherjee 16). Her voice doesn't even match those around her—she "had this throaty whisper of a voice, couldn't raise it above a satiny purr, in a family of choir singers and a town of chirpy sopranos" (Mukherjee 16).

Scar tissue from the attempt by her father to strangle her causes this unusual seductive voice, and even though the unique voice appears often in the narrative, this background knowledge remains withheld from the reader until the end.

Debby asserts more directly than the earlier heroes her plan to discover her identity in her quest: “But I wasn’t tall, beautiful, or exotic enough to trust any of it, and so I made up my mind to find out if I was someone special or just another misfit” (Mukherjee 16). This is a universal statement fitting each freedom story hero.

Debby obsesses over the mystery of her beginning and blames her behavior on this strange uncertainty of not knowing: “No mother’s name, no father’s name . . . when you have nightmares and fantasies instead of dates and statistics? And in place of memory, impressions of white hot sky and burnt-black leaves” (Mukherjee 16). She sums up her emotional place in life: “Nothing to keep you on the straight and narrow except star bursts of longing” (Mukherjee 16). She measures her nature throughout the story, finding within herself what she imagines to be traits of her unknown parents.

As she begins to become aware of her inner thoughts and feelings through her writing in a high school English class, she begins to separate herself from the persona of Debby. “I felt more deeply than Debby’d ever dared let herself feel. Words ribboned out of me. And when the assignment was done, I felt cheated of places I couldn’t draw and of parents I didn’t miss” (Mukherjee 17). She separates herself from the adopted family at this time.

Debby is aware her journey will draw her away from home and to a different life than those around her: “Back then, in Schenectady, I waited for the call. Not to be a model or a poet, which was to be not extraordinary enough. The call would be something more

special, to satisfy the monstrous cravings of other Debby's hiding inside" (Mukherjee 18). Also, "I knew by then that there was a life beyond the state lines waiting for me to slip into" (Mukherjee 18). She believes it to be simple: "All I'd have to do was be beautiful, be available, and my other life, my *real* life would find me" (Mukherjee 18). The narrator also makes a distinction in these lines between the knowledge she had before the journey compared to the knowledge she possesses as a storyteller.

Debby's second relationship that will become a false attempt at community becomes an encounter with forty-five year old Frankie Fong, an international Asian businessman. The relationship is sexually centered, and from this lover she becomes cynically educated about the world and people. Her idea of self changes dramatically: "Before Frankie insinuated himself into my life, I'd convinced myself that I was just another restless upstate daughter looking to make it medium-big and marry medium-nice in Manhattan" (Mukherjee 31). He changes her self-described "DiMartino Republican viewpoint" to a new way of looking at the world: "For Frankie, the New World was as green and crisp as a freshly counterfeited hundred-dollar bill. In the After Frankie months I became a news Junkie, a fact hound, I started thinking like Frankie, a cornered rat with options. And suddenly life became interesting. Suddenly I was sniffing out possibilities where the world saw only problems" (Mukherjee 32). She has also begun to own her personal history, both her exotic birth and her adopted status, so that when Frankie believes he discovers her birthplace and heritage, she defends her individuality through her special situation: "I'm adopted" (Mukherjee 33). Delivered as a denial that her eyes and her walk mark her as Burmese, she is strident: "My voice sounded firmer, bold, the second time. Not *I was adopted*, but *I am adopted*, meaning I want you to know that we've both

invented ourselves, you couldn't have found another woman as much like you as I am if you'd taken out personals" (Mukherjee 33-4).

After this beginning, she speaks of herself differently--but not without substance or identity as she had before: "The not-quite-American playboy had plans on a grand scale for the not-quite --Asian novice playgirl" (Mukherjee 34). He decides to use her as part of his business scheme "by catering to American wants with Asian needs" (Mukherjee 340). She gains a new name from him of Tiger (Mukherjee 35).

During this period of her life, she thinks back to her adopted mother and what she learned from her. First she notes, "An orphan doesn't know how to ask, afraid of answers, and hopes instead for revelation. Ignorance isn't bliss, but it keeps risky knowledge at bay" (Mukherjee 41). She tells her birth story once more, with more clarity:

I never badgered Mama to tell me all she knew about my toddler days. Mama must have liked it that way, too—she kept my origins simple: hippie backpacker from Fresno and Eurasian lover boy, both into smoking, dealing and stealing. She left my bio data minimal: some sort of police trouble my hippie birth mother had got herself into meant that the Gray Nuns in Devigaon Village had had to take me in; one of the nuns had renamed me Faustine after a typhoon, but Mama'd changed it officially to Debby after Debbie Reynolds, her all-time favorite (Mukherjee 41).

This history contains more specific data than earlier ones: this is the first mention of the place names Fresno and Davigonon Village, of the unnamed criminal issue, of the nun who named her Faustine after a typhoon, and of her adopted mother's decision to name

her after her favorite actress. As Debby's life enlarges, her story also fleshes out. Debby as narrator manages the release of information and details to parallel what she wants known at what time or event in her story.

For Debby, a meeting with Fong's mother holds significance: she imagines the son telling his mother that Debby is "the most important person" in his life, and she adds, she was "demanding acknowledgement, not a wedding ring." She admits "thinking tonight's the big night, tonight Prince Flash will fit the glass slipper on the foundling's foot" She even renames herself 'Debby Fong'" (Mukherjee 41-2). While in this social meeting, her name will change once more when a woman in the group decides to call her Miss Di, shortened because names "are so difficult," and then names another of Frankie's girlfriends, Cynthia (Mukherjee 44).

Ovidia, a woman who had arrived with the mother and immediately captivated Frankie's interest, continues to add discomfort for Debby: "“Anyway, if you're like Cynthia that Wonderful girl Frankie's got in KL, you probably hate surprises”" (Mukherjee 44). Still naïve and inexperienced enough to believe the relationship was exclusive and might have led to a marriage commitment, and after Frankie continued to ignore her, Debby, shocked and disappointed, runs out of the restaurant. Although this appears to be simply a mild retreat from the situation, the reader was told at the beginning of the chapter that she would commit violent revenge through arson.

Before that vindictive act, Debby attempts to find a path to continue her journey, resolving to refocus her journey to whatever destiny has been lost by her parent's abandonment. She realizes she must break with this course of her journey: "I had to nuke Frankie from my memory. No such person as Frankie, never had been a Frankie, no

supercool, superrich Asian lover who opened up a whole continent for me. I'd made him up out of needs I didn't know I had" (Mukherjee 45). Next, she takes a series of steps to break her current ties and begin her trip across the country.

She recalls lessons from her early connection with Wyatt. He had told her she was special because she had made it out of the orphanage. He ties this to his work at animal shelters, stressing that dogs could never look sick or unfriendly so as to encourage adoption and avoid death. He assured her that she would be beautiful and successful in his predictions of her future : "One day I'd be tall, pretty, a mover and shaker as long as I knew enough to lie low on bad days and scratch my fleas in private, right? Tomorrow I'll wake up with a cold nose and bright eyes and the first rich couple with a big yard that comes in will take me home" (Mukherjee 45). He would say that she was saved because of something special about her just as dogs were not euthanized because something about them made someone notice them and adopt them. She imagines she will create her own fame and fortune to make her special enough to be noticed, but in the meantime she will cover her exposed vulnerability with the graduate student's simplistic philosophy. She turns to her earlier lover's lesson: "Wyatt gave me a base to build from." She begins to place her own spin on his ideas, though, and asserts a notion of the world that would have been unconventional in her Italian American adopted family as well: "He didn't realize that a few of us are given chance after chance because we have life after life to get it right" (Mukharjee 45). She will move through multiple attempts to find her identity and history, to locate her birth parents, and to find a life unlike the one she was raised to live; in a way she will experience reincarnation multiple times as she reinvents herself for each situation.

As she regrets the relationship just ended, she also decides that Wyatt was wrong in thinking “cuteness” would save you: “You get put down when you finally run out of wrath and a canny sense of timing” (Mukherjee 45). She places herself inside her metaphor that night, as she goes to an animal shelter right before closing time. She stands in front of the cages, looking at a mixed breed dog and thinking about adopting it, and muses: “Poor mutt. It was bred like me, with crossed signals and conflicting impulses” (Mukherjee 47). She returns to her apartment to find that Frankie has sent flowers, gifts, and a note telling her that she can live in the apartment free until the end of the month (Mukherjee 48). Her response to his dismissal of her will be criminal and violent, and as with many of the events in the novel, the full extent of the damage she causes will not be told immediately by the narrator.

Before exacting vengeance on Fong, Debby calls her mother to try to find out more about her adoption. Humiliated and disappointed by the affair, she turns back to the original journey to find her birth parents, even though her adopted mother reacts with a feeling of betrayal when Debby reveals her desire to search for the birth mother. The adopted mother gives her a few more pieces to the puzzle when she mentions a lawsuit: “Some of the documents were sealed. I’m pretty sure that’s what our lawyer and the orphanage’s lawyer said. Because of the lawsuit” (Mukherjee 50).

The lawsuit, the mother divulges, was brought by the Indian government because of unidentified criminal charges involving one or both of her biological parents (Mukherjee 50-51). The mother continues to fuel Debby’s curiosity: “Our lawyer said the one thing we had in our favor was that the woman was an American citizen. That made you a citizen, too. The woman told the nuns she’d sign the adoption papers if they got us to pay

her airfare back to the States” (Mukherjee 51). Finding out that although her adopted parents never met her birth mother they had bought an airline ticket from Delhi to San Francisco provides Debby with her geographical goal for the journey. Her mother pleads her case for leaving the past behind: “We didn’t want to see her. We wanted to give you a clean start, that’s why we changed the name the nuns gave. . .It sounded so foreign Why’re you doing this now, Debby? You didn’t show the least curiosity before, you never asked questions. . .” (Mukherjee 51). Here there are echoes of other mother-daughter discussions of leaving behind home and family in pursuit of something unknown. Even in Huck Finn’s conversation with Pap, Huck’s attempts at education and religion are considered as betrayals to his family, especially his dead mother who could not read. While Thea Kronborg’s mother supports and encourages the necessity to journey to fulfill her artistic vision, Janie Crawford must defy her grandmother’s legacy of security and break her family bonds when she leaves her first husband for the promise of a second husband. In *The Woman Warrior* Maxine must break with the mother by rejecting her ethnicity and the ‘ghosts’ of her childhood for a time. For these women heroes in their freedom stories, the mother-daughter connection must be reconciled or broken before the journey.

Debby’s obsessive search for identity is often expressed by the choosing of another persona or name. In this case, the sense of being a shelter mutt becomes attached to another image of a pseudo mythic figure of a doll: she now compares herself to “Mariposa Mystic, a wooden doll bought on sale at a Taxco Boutique . . .a butterfly-woman with horns and wings in dramatic reds, blues, and greens, with big nipples breasts and larva legs and feet . . .a bug evolving into deity, a deity dissolving into bug. I see

myself in the mariposa doll. Just as I had in the freakish dog in the pound” (Mukherjee 52). Within her interior thinking, Debby changes shape consistently through the story, adopting her own antecedents of goddesses or nonhuman symbols. One reviewer, Manju Jaidka, points out that Mukherjee uses name changing in other works and “seems fascinated with the changing identities of an individual” describing this as a “name-changing game” (Jaidka 203).

When she decides to go to San Francisco to work with an agency called Finders/Keepers even over her adopted mother’s concerns, she sees herself as making the right move in her journey: “I followed my file; I fulfilled my fate” (Mukherjee 52). In the same way that Huck’s raft, Thea’s cave, Janie’s “ships on the horizon” are concrete connections with freedom in their stories, this file, the court papers, the adoption papers, and later trial transcripts become freedom artifacts in *Leave It To Me*.

Debby begins this chapter that ends in a break with Fong by explaining her coming revenge. “And when the good feelings ran out, I’d have left him so he wouldn’t have to leave me. I am not a jealous person. Whatever I did to Frankie or to others, jealousy was never my motive” (Mukherjee 36). She immediately adds to this twist in the story: “What I did was torch Frankie’s precious home in Saratoga Springs. Flippant Frankie was right: there are only two categories of people, those with *wants*, and those with *needs*” (Mukherjee 36). Debby for the first time openly and accurately explains a future event in the narrative.

Two chapters following this statement, she exacts the promised revenge on Frankie. After burning the house, she stays to watch the fire. She believes for herself she has accomplished a feat: “The costs I extracted—loss of past and loss of pride—were

unreimbursable and permanent” (Mukherjee 53). Not knowing the full extent of her violent act at this point in the story, Debby as narrator also keeps that information until later in the text. Much later she learns that Frankie is sent to prison for the murder of the woman who dies in the fire; her identity is not revealed but there is a suggestion that this was the woman at the restaurant who Frankie would not turn away from to even acknowledge Debby. When she learns this part of the story much later, rather than remorse she experiences a sense of justice in his imprisonment and the rival’s death. This will also parallel her mother’s story—as she said initially: “What have I done but what my mothers did?” Her biological mother had turned her father over to the authorities and testified against him so that he had spent years in prison. Debby’s violence throughout the story grows in complexity. In addition to this tie with her mother, the act of sending the lover to prison, Debby’s violence continues to be tied to that sense of justice. In her inner judgment, she takes on an avenging warrior role, only partially reminiscent of the woman warrior tale in Kingston’s novel.

Beginning the road trip to California; she “ate the zones a day at a time, Chicago to Cheyenne to Salt Lake and Reno” (Mukherjee 57). As she moves through time zones gaining hours, in her quest to leave her adopted mother behind and find her birth mother, she imagines herself as an explorer of the American wilderness: “Like Columbus, I was on the Pacific glide path, looking for the westward passage. Of course, Columbus didn’t recognize the reality of what he found” (Mukherjee 57).” This will be true for Debby as she discovers clue after clue about her mother’s former lifestyle, but she does not recognize the meaning of what she finds. She notes that she “was driving through places that were only rumors, states no DiMartino had even been in or talked about” (Mukherjee

57). She experiences first things: “first antelope . . .first Indian . . .First real mountains, with August snow” (Mukherjee 58). And while becoming prepared for California, she begins a litany of herself: “You are a twenty-three-year-old SWF. I tested myself. You are attractive and you are street-smart in an Schenectady/Albany sort of way. You have a sense of humor, which gets you dates and jobs. You also have your pride, which, when it gets out of hand, burns down an ex-boyfriend’s house. Given such assets of your looks and character and the liability of your situation, do you: A. Hide out on a Nevada ranch and save your neck until Flash calls off his goon squad? B. Become a Mormon and save your soul? C. Enlist in the Peace Corps and save the world? D. Confront your deadbeat mom?” (Mukherjee58-9). So she makes her choice to continue to California, combining a name for both her identities: Debby Clearwater-Daughter” (Mukherjee 59).

She professes a new philosophy upon entering California: “. . .I owed it to myself to grab as many nice ones [days] as I could. Go for bliss. Dump pain, pity and rage on somebody else. Pursue happiness: that’s the American way” (Mukherjee 61). The idea to “dump pain, pity and rage on somebody else” has already materialized in her revenge on Fong. This hero breaks the mold of all the other innocent characters proceeding in the novels in this study. From Huck’s boyish innocence to Thea’s small town naiveté, Janie’s powerless quiet through two marriages, and to Maxine’s silent resistance, none of the previous heroes met danger, disempowerment, or betrayal by welcoming violence. Huck cowers in the corner rather than fight back against his threatening father, Thea maintains her friendship with Fred Ottenberg after he lured her to Mexico on a false offer of marriage, Janie holds her pain inside despite public humiliation from Jody Starks, and

when Maxine must leave her home and culture behind, she leaves and starts a new life without making an immediate break with her mother.

Debby learns the lesson of revenge and survival in the stages of her journey. Intellectually and emotionally this character only spins further and further out of control, her anger and misery growing as she journeys. Freedom, its value and its definition, are all called into question by Mukherjee's freedom story. Her destination, an urban alternative culture in San Francisco, could hardly be fashioned as a wilderness paradise. In her journey, she careens toward a family connection, yet all of the other heroes escaped further away from their earliest friends and family. Rather than searching for community, Debby's motivation moves from a need for the acknowledgement of her parentage to a need to wreak havoc and a perverted form of justice on this "bioparent".

The idea of California exerts a powerful sense of possibility early on for Debby. As though discovering a new world, she declares: "Debby DiMartino died and Devi Dee birthed herself on the Donner Pass . . ." (Mukherjee 62). After renaming herself, she asserts a newfound path for her thoughts. When stopped at the Fruit Inspection Barrier, she muses: "I'm a disgrace to California, I deserve to be turned away: That was my last true Debby thought, all wrapped up in ash, sack cloth and guilt" (Mukherjee 62).

As this new persona emerges, she transfigures her identity: "Devi arm-wrestled Debby. I was quicker, stronger as Devi; my intuitions were sharper, my impulsiveness rowdier. As Devi I came into possession of my mystery genes" (Mukherjee 64). She welcomes this journey, distinct as it is from the life of her adoptive family. "In my family, ambitious women my age went down to Manhattan to get a life" (Mukherjee 64). But she knew she "didn't fit into Hudson Valley any more comfortably than I did into the

Asia of hippie mothers and Catholic missionaries” (Mukherjee 65). The name, which came from a personalized license plate of a car ahead of her at the Fruit Inspection station, comes to her as randomly as this new list of qualities she chooses for her personality. Debby/Devi represents a different sort of freedom hero than her antecedents as she glides into this new world and identity with little contemplation or effort :

“Reborn, admitted, launched into clean, conquerable gravity-free space. Even the air felt young, innocent, healthy” (Mukherjee 63).

The act of renaming herself Devi ties to the story in the novel’s prologue. In a tie with the mythical tale framed in Kingston’s work, the prologue to *Leave It To Me* presents a legend of an avenging warrior—this time a supernatural figure, “Devi, the eight-armed, flame-bright, lion-riding dispenser of Divine Justice.” This supernatural woman warrior is described as a character in a children’s story in “Devigaon, a village a full day’s bus ride into desert country west of Delhi” (Mukherjee 5-6). The separate narrator of this prologue makes no explanation of the legends ties to the novel that next begins in Debby’s narrative voice, but several references will appear later, including this name that Debby takes from a license plate and the name of the town she discovers as her birthplace. The character does not mention a knowledge of the myth and its story.

One reviewer questions the connection between the myth and the characters. Manju Jaidka notes that Mukherjee uses the myth from Hindu mythology “as a framework for her novel, a myth altered and adapted to match the Beat generations lifestyles” (Jaidka 203). For this reviewer, the use of the myth fails and “somewhere down the line, Bharati Mukherjee’s art falters.” Jaidka allows that “The fault lies not with the style which remains more or less consistent in its swift, slangy, upbeat pace, nor with her perceptions

of the so called hyphenated peoples of America which remains accurate for the most part, even if they are sometimes cynical.” The ultimate problem for this reviewer, however, lies in the mixing of myth and story: “The flaw in the book is that the underlying myth, whether Electra or Kali—is too weighty for the characters of the story” (Jaidka 203-204).

Jaidka goes on to question the mixture: “The escapist hippie generation, the Flower children and the fruit of their amorous adventures, encumbrances dropped and abandoned at will: on such a sensual, hedonistic lifestyle how does one impose the Goddess Kali, her strength and moral uprightness?” (Jaidka 204). It is clear that for this reviewer, a professor in an Indian university, the myth’s use proves offensive.

A few connections that only become significant once the hero takes on this name are woven into the story. In the prologue, it is pointed out that the village is named after “the serene slaughterer of a demon king.” Also, the legend states that the demon slays most of her men, and that “just as he is about to declare himself destroyer of gods and goddesses, Devi will muster the full powers of vengeance” (Mukherjee 5-6). Debby/Devi’s ultimate act in the novel will be to kill the “demon” father who has killed all of those she has connected with in California, including her possible mother, her last lover, and other men in her life. The final line of the legend foreshadows much of the violence to follow: “And Devi? The Earth Mother and Warrior Goddess wipes demon blood off weapons and puts them away for the next time they are needed” (Mukherjee 6). It is noted that the children listening to the story already know the ending; Debby tells her story already knowing the results of her avenging journey.

Once in San Francisco, she ends up living in her car for a time, looking at this city as her territory: “When you inherit nothing, you are entitled to everything: that’s the Devi

Dee philosophy” (Mukherjee 67). She becomes comfortable in the street culture: “I felt free; I was free. It just happened overnight; one day afraid and on the outside, the next day I was a kind of outlaw, on the side of other outlaws” (Mukherjee 69). She feels successful in finding a sort of paradise, in this case the street culture. Debby/Devi steps through her adopted family’s cultural barrier to be an “outlaw.” And she has found community outside of her original environment as each hero does in the freedom story. Debby has moved a long way from the middle class life in Schenectady. She enters a community with street people: Stoop Man, Deivet Man, Tortilla Tim, and Gabe. She is homeless but belongs, eating in soup kitchens and sharing knowledge about methods of survival. Her life is primitive when compared with her earlier middle class world, complete with new codes and values. This modernized wilderness serves her similarly to the raft on the Mississippi for Huck, the cliff dwellings in Panther Canyon for Thea, and the workers’ community in the Everglades for Janie.

Debby/Devi changes communities and philosophies as easily as she encounters different stages in this California journey. In her role as street person, she finds herself in the middle of the filming of a movie; the crew wants her to move her car—in this case her home. After refusing to move, she meets the producer of the shoot, Ham Cohen, who through a series of coincidences becomes her connection to the former hippies group she had hoped to discover in Haight Ashbury. He becomes her next lover, finds her a job, suggests a private investigator, and unknowingly introduces her to Jess DuPree, who turns out to be the woman who signed her adoption papers and, therefore, might be her birth mother. The connection with Cohen first comes about because he mentions that he was the producer of Frankie Fong’s movies. Debby herself is stunned by the chance

meeting and remarks on her good luck after noting Ham's excitement at her knowledge of Fong's movie: "I knew from the sudden beatific smile on the man's baggy eyed face that my life had turned an unexpected corner. Welcome to the Magic Kingdom" (Mukherjee 78-9). What seems like a stroke of luck to help her survive on the streets becomes the first piece of a puzzle that will result in finding the facts of her story and ultimately the deaths of Cohen and both possible biological parents.

Again coincidentally, when in casual conversation with Cohen, she initially learns that Frankie Fong is in prison for arson because someone died in the fire (Mukherjee 84). Then, Debby/Devi's initial intersection with the life of Jess Dupree happens in a phone conversation when Cohen tries to set Debby/Devi up for a job with Jess. Jess questions whether Devi is an Indian name, noting the connection with the name of an Indian village or mountain (Mukherjee 83). Eventually Devi will be told by her private investigator that the information he found indicates that there is a fifty percent chance that Jess is her mother. At the end of the story when Debby's father reveals himself to her, he never says directly that she is the mother but does provide Debby with multiple passports that Jess had forged for herself in Europe and Asia. Her father broke out of prison and came to the U.S. to exact revenge on Jess because she had testified against him, resulting in a lifelong prison term. All of these clues point to Jess as her mother. In the last moments in the story, when confronted by Debby, Jess denies that she is the mother and asserts that the nuns at the orphanage were mistaken. Immediately after this exchange, the father kills Jess and thus ends any chance of resolving Debby's maternal quest.

Cohen finds her a job as a waitress making it possible for Debby to move out of her car and into a rooming house "filled with misfits and characters." She transforms herself to

fit into each of their lives, “. . . I passed the collection bowl for Divine Intergalactica, xeroxed horoscopes and happiness charts for my astrologer neighbor, taught ‘Puff the Magic Dragon’ to the small Somali boys and even let myself be waylaid on the stoop by Loco Larry, who picked up transmissions from morals squads and undercover agents” (Mukherjee 97-98). She has changed her community so completely from the middle class DiMartino world that she “could give guided tours of San Francisco’s homeless and high rollers” (Mukherjee 98). Evolving into whatever role will help her survive, she continues to learn from those around her.

Her new philosophy emerges: “What counted was attitude. *Faithandhope*. I made that my daily mantra. Trust coincidence, aim for revenge. *Faithandhope*” (Mukherjee 98). Clearly rage and the desire for revenge have not disappeared from her new agenda. The resentment and anger associated with that abandonment by her birth mother still controls her life and quest.

When she first meets the private investigator, she recounts her early memories, adding a new dimension to her story. She recalls someone trying to strangle her when she was very young: “I described the smell of lye in an outhouse, the furry touch of spiders crawling on my legs, the pooling of sap-white blood of roaches I swatted dead. I tasted stony grit in orphanage gruel. I felt panic as fingers closed around my throat. I hadn’t remembered any of it, not until that moment” (Mukherjee 103).

Fred Pointer, the investigator who will also become her friend, quickly comes up with a possible connection in a Bombay story of a “sex-guru serial killer and his harem of white hippies,” a story Debby/Devi feels uncomfortable hearing about (Mukherjee 105). Pointer finds out the fate of Debby’s father: “Your father is one of the most notorious

serial murderers in modern history. He's rotting in an Indian jail even as we speak. One of his early victims was his baby daughter. In other words you. . . You died, Devi, and you turned into a ghost. . ." (Mukherjee 121). Devi's memory of someone attempting to strangle her is explained by a report of a witness to her apparent murder. The source saw two women and a baby with the man who was Debby's father. This witness then states that the man killed the baby and one of the women and that the witness went immediately and reported the crime to the nuns, the Gray Sisters (Mukherjee 120). Debby makes the assumption that her mother is the woman who survived.

In a leap of coincidence equal to Huck Finn being mistaken for Tom Sawyer upon his arrival at the Phelps farm, at this moment when Pointer passes this information to Debby, her father, having broken out of the Indian jail, is in the restaurant. This unlikely twist results eventually in Fred's death and in the father finding Debby and forcing her to lead him to Jess who he has come to murder. Later the father will reveal that he was the man she noticed in the restaurant. In the original scene Debby unknowingly described him: "There was only one other patron, a slick fifty-something Eurasian man in leather pants and Elvis hair on a stool at the counter. A khaki duffel bag and cheap vinyl carry-on were on the floor by his booted foot" (Mukherjee 104). This vinyl bag contains the forged passports of Jess DuPree; he will give them to Debby when he finally reveals himself.

Debby/Devi begins working for Jess Dupree, starts a sexual relationship with Ham Cohen, continues being around the life of Loco Larry in her rooming house, and connects with Fred Painter as her private detective. People begin to die all around Debby; Pointer is killed in an unexplained accident. On the day of his wake at Cohen's houseboat (he is

coincidentally an original member of the group of hippies from Ham and Jess' past), Debby finds herself overcome by jealousy as she watches Ham and Jess in a sexual act.

After leaving the wake, she finds Loco Larry at her rooming house who wants to "garden." Loco Larry is a mental and emotional casualty of the Vietnam War, and his plan to garden involves burying ammunition and weapons in a nearby rural area in preparation for the nearing apocalypse. They drive to a rural home of one of the people Debby knows who was at the wake for Fred Painter. Surprisingly however, the homeowner and a friend return early from the wake. Larry snaps and kills the two women. Devi then kills Larry when he attempts to molest the corpse. She calmly returns his truck and other belongings to his apartment, ending part two of the novel in bizarre coincidence and mayhem. This is a disturbing preview for Debby becoming the avenging warrior of the prologue's legend as she coldly covers her involvement in these murders.

Debby/Devi after the death of the two women in the group, publicly grieves their deaths, but admits: "In private, I celebrated. The dead women were the same age as Jess. Two stand-ins for Mother down. I was closing in. Courtesy of a madman, I felt closer than I had to my bio-parents" (Mukherjee 172). Larry's madness stems from his war experiences in Vietnam, Ham and Jess and their friends were connected by their antiwar experiences about Vietnam, and in the final moments her biological father tells of his connection to the Vietnam War as a pimp. The underlying background of the war surfaces regularly throughout the novel, weaving in amongst the many acts of violence. The war ties directly into the alternative lifestyle her biological mother adopts; Debby judges that the biological mother spurned not only social authority but all responsibility as well.

As the novel races to the end, the community Devi/Debby joined in her journey to escape her Schenectady childhood begins to dissolve completely into violence and destruction. Compared to the ending of Huck's absurd "freeing" of Jim and Huck's decision to "light out for the territory," Devi's community will not be absolved by humor or simple revelation of 'bioparents' and their stories. Ultimately, her biological father, Romeo Hawk (who has also undergone several name transfigurations) forces Debby to drive him to Jess at gunpoint.

Even as Huck lived at the farm without revealing his true identity, Devi/Debby enters this group without revealing her identity or her quest. When Debby reveals herself to her biological mother, Jess refuses to acknowledge Debby as her daughter, denying that she has even borne a child. Earlier Debby had found a snapshot of Jess and a newborn in Jess' desk (Mukherjee 184).

Debby, in addition to concealing her identity and real quest, continues a sexual relationship with Cohen who renews his relationship with Jess as well, and in a nod to the Freudian Electra complex, Devi wishes that Ham had been her father. This will not be the last incidence of a father-daughter sexual connection.

When she finally meets her father, he has masqueraded as a writer and contacted her as a "media escort," her job as an assistant at Jess' agency. Dressed as a woman, the father, who has killed the real author, presents himself as this writer when Debby arrives at the airport. When they reach the hotel and begin the interview with a reporter, he continues the ruse. Abruptly, he becomes angry with the reporter, poisons him, and insures his death by stepping into his neck with a high heel. He strips in front of her to reveal his male body, and she finds herself excited but appalled by the sight. Still

exposing himself, he reveals he is her father and gives her the passports Jess used across Europe and Asia. He brings out a gun to insist that she drive him to Jess (Mukherjee 112-115). She remarks about his significance to her: “I didn’t drive Romeo Hawk to Jess and Ham’s floating love nest because of the 9mm he pointed at my head. I drove him because he was the scatterer of seeds from which I’d sprouted.” Even more specifically she declares his meaning to her: “I drove him because he was my poem of night, light and leaves” (Mukherjee 216).

As the violence and body count continues to mount in the ending, the sense of realism and traditional storytelling pushes further from the center of the novel. Mary Mackey points out the shift to nonrealistic narrative: “With each horrible revelation, the novel becomes more surreal. Amazing coincidences take place that would appear as a *deus ex machina* in a conventional story. But here, in the dreamlike, fairy-tale world Mukherjee has created, they seem the logical working out of Devi's karma.” At the end of the review, Mackey returns to searching for a genre to explain the experimental nature of the novel:

It takes a very skillful author to end a novel bloodily without lapsing into melodrama. If Mukherjee had written *Leave It to Me* with no mythological underpinnings, she might well have crossed over the line. But by the time her characters begin to turn on each other, Mukherjee has narrated the myth of the Indian goddess Devi, who ‘wipes demon blood off weapons and puts them away for the next time they are needed.’ In numerous, subtle ways, she has evoked the Royal House of Thebes, that doomed Greek family whose cursed relationships are coupled with a cosmic lust for vengeance (Mackey RV-1).

Mackey clearly approves of the end result: “Seeding bits of disaster here and weaving in threads of fatality there, she brings the pieces of myth and modern story together, each enriching and deepening the other. As she leads us through a process of decoding, the novel becomes a meditation on the Indian concept of karma and the Greek idea of destiny” (Mackey RV-1).

In contrast, another reviewer, Manju Jaidka, flatly rejects the association of this character with the goddess: “. . .how does one reconcile this divine image with the protagonist’s total lack of spiritual depth, her very pragmatic/materialistic approach to life and her many liaisons with the men who come her way.” Jaidka denies the use of myth as the key to the stories success: “No, the mythical frame chosen for the story does not fit the bill” (Jaidka 204). In both reviewers’ cases, the perceived genre of the work promotes its success or failure. Two factors, the presence of the myth of Devi placed in the prologue and Debby’s failure to profess knowledge of it, serve to lessen the effectiveness of the connection between story character and mythic character. In contrast, the integration of the myth of the woman warrior into Maxine’s life and into the core of *The Woman Warrior* reinforces the relationship between Maxine’s growth and the tale. Maxine recalls the story told and retold to her in childhood, and she remembers the song she and her mother sang when she was a child; the connection between Maxine and Fa Mu Lan is psychologically and intellectually intertwined. In this case, Debby professes herself an avenger but does not profess the mythic Devi or her warrior qualities as her own. She relates no conscious interior evidence of awareness of the myth in her first person narration.

The final moments of violent resolution follow quickly when they arrive at Cohen's boat. Her father kidnaps her mother in front of her and takes her away to probable rape, torture, and certain death. Devi waits for Cohen to return to the boat. When he returns they engage in sex before the father returns, and importantly, Devi fails to tell Ham that her father forced her there at gunpoint and had abducted Jess (Mukherjee 230). In fact, Debby has not revealed her identity or quest to anyone except the private detective, Fred Pointer. In a parallel to the ending of *Huckle Finn*, the identities and the purpose for Huck at the Phelps plantation only unravels at the last moment; and, in that case, all is forgiven as only boyish pranks. In this novel, Debby's revelations come too late and result in death rather than amusement.

Romeo returns saying that Jess is in the car but "she isn't doing a good job of the breathing thing" (Mukherjee 233). At this point Cohen finally realizes a danger and confronts him. Hawk kills Ham and decapitates him. Devi, in her role as avenging goddess, and with the help of natural forces—an earthquake that rocks the boat so violently that the father stumbles--uses the weapon used to kill Ham to kill the 'demon' father. She describes the event in movie terms: "*Violent propensities*. The sea has them, the Earth rocks with them. I claim my inheritance, kneeling Bio-Dad so hard as he tips tilts his head back to draw from the tiny bottle that it tumbles him. TAPE ROLLING. The cleaver freezes to my arm. It soars and plunges, soars and plunges. 'Monster' I scream. I keep screaming as I cradle Ham's tormented face to my bosom. I am screaming as I dial 911" (Mukherjee 235). The story has come full circle with this present tense picture of her on the houseboat with the head of her lover, calling for help. This grisly scene of daughter killing father and avenging her mother's and her lover's

death (and her original abandonment) ends with an earthquake. The narrator muses about the final events: “Destiny works itself out in bizarre loops. I made the 911 call. Domestic dispute, I told the dispatcher. Let them find out how bloody. I heard the urgent police sirens, waited a long while for the waist chains, handcuffs, leg shackles. And just when I prayed for my misery to be over, the waves rocked wild and heaved *Last Chance* free of its moorings” (Mukherjee 239).

The power of this natural force, unlike the hurricane in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* that led to the loss of Tea Cake, saves Debby from her father’s wrath and then prosecution for his murder. She lives to write her story. The bloody sketch of her floating away cradling her lover’s head in her lap forms a tie to the image of Janie wrapping Tea Cake’s memory around her with a net.

Again, the novel moves from realistic to mystical: “The houseboat skimmed a molten gold sea carrying its cargo of dead and living towards a horizon on flames. I heard mermaids sing and police sirens screech, but not for me, not that night the Big One hit, with fires rimming the Bay like some nighttime eruption, with the night sky pink, reflecting off the fog, the sparks flying down like fiery rain, sky hissing into sea” (Mukherjee 240). Twisted and unforgiving, this ending leaves no possibility of traditional resolution with mother, father, or pseudo-father. Adrift with two bodies, her journey ends in destruction, yet she did succeed in slaying the evil inherent in her father. The end suggests no possibility of ‘lighting out for the territory’, unless her escape from the shore may be considered a version of that idea of escape.

Like the other freedom story heroes, she can neither return to her earlier life in Schenectady as an adopted daughter in the DiMartino family or to her California

community of hippies or street people. The chance of being acknowledged by her mother died with Jess, and Debby has killed the father, demonstrating her own “violent propensities” true to her inheritance. She has reached the limits of her historical territory, and her future remains clouded like those heroes before her. Unlike earlier protagonists, no peace can grow from this scene and no adventure can be imagined. She has gained no life to hold in memory and use as sanctuary for her aloneness. The one soul alive on that boat is carried away to no recognizable future with no resolution of family or love and certainly no community. This freedom story ends in disaster; the value of freedom dissolves into a cinematic closing scene of destruction and violence. The author provides an antidotal answer to the glorification of freedom as a release from all authority.

Murkurhee’s story pushes each of the elements of the earlier freedom stories to the limits. Abusive or violent fathers pale in comparison to Romeo Hawk. Janie’s missing mother, whose life was said to be lost in promiscuity after her rape, was dismissed and rejected by Janie without the pain of confronting her to ask why she abandoned her daughter. Debby/Devi confronts her mother and receives further rejection through denial. She ends the story without memories of love or compassion to bring her solace.

This story reinforces its anti-freedom bent with Debby’s harsh judgment of those who represent the counterculture idea of freedom. Portrayed as rejecting ethical or social responsibility, their destiny becomes violence and destruction. The story begs the question: Is it possible to live an ideal freedom in the modern, cynical, nonillusory world?

Unlike the embedded legend in *The Woman Warrior*, Debby/Devi does not find an inspiring role model in the story of the avenging warrior, Devi. In fact, Debby/Devi only

hears of passing reference to the name of the goddess but at no point is it clear that she knows the story the reader is told in the prologue. She forms no real connection between her life and the ancient avenging goddess in the way that Maxine will strive to become powerful in the tradition of Fa Mu Lan. In this world the ancient myth exerts less influence than random coincidence and human nature. Mystery, the supernatural, and natural disasters are not the true forces in this world. Reality triumphs and is unmistakably vicious and ugly; human nature fares no better in the vision of the novel. This modern territory lies barren of ghosts or folklore. The novel stands clearly within the tradition of the freedom story, yet it stands in opposition to the others in tone and use of the freedom trope. Particularly the ending leaves no room for sentiment or innocence. Unlike earlier heroes who continued in their lives, although diminished by the loss of the freedom community, *Leave It To Me* ends without attempting to suggest promise for its hero.

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Chapter 7

Huck Finn Transfigured: Mirror Images in *The Secret Life of Bees*

The Secret Life of Bees returns to the early form of the freedom story considered in this study by giving a sincere echo of the foundation story in a mirror image of the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. The optimistic and idealistic ending of this novel stands in direct opposition to the cynical and apocalyptic ending of *Leave It To Me*. Although Debby DiMartino and Lily Owens share a common goal in their freedom journey—to learn their mothers’ stories--the attitude towards human nature and the value placed on freedom are different in the two novels. The ending of *The Secret Life of Bees* and its naïve narrator move it near to a saccharine or sentimental charge. One review of the book expresses a specific concern about genre expectations, admonishing, “unless a book is meant for the very young, we resist comfort that comes too easily” (Roselen Brown, *The Women’s Review of Books* 11). Conflicts are resolved eventually in this novel, but sometimes there is a serious cost. Sue Monk Kidd’s novel considers serious elements, specifically, Lily’s sadistic father, her mother’s violent death, and the violence in the early Civil Rights Movement. These elements serve to retain a realistic and sharp edged quality to the novel despite the insistence on resolutions.

Sue Monk Kidd’s personal experience may have influenced her use of the racial elements in the story. Kidd, who published this first novel at age forty, grew up in a time and place similar to that of her hero, Lily Owens--a small southern town in the Civil Rights era. Although Kidd does not acknowledge any influence on her writing from *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* or Mark Twain on her personal website, she does point

to the era and setting of her youth. She remarks that one reason for writing this novel was to “give witness” to her memories of the racial tension and violence of that period. Kidd said she “felt a need, and beyond that a kind of responsibility, to offer up my images in hope of a wider redemption (“Refections”). Like her hero Lily, Kidd’s personal journey includes a desire to become a writer; also, like Lily, Kidd is influenced by her early memories of violence.

Lily’s journey contains many of the elements of the freedom story. As narrator she outlines all the ways she is an outsider in her home and community: she may be responsible for her mother’s death, her father treats her coldly and sadistically, the people of the town treat her differently, girls at school ostracize her, and the one person who loves her unconditionally is the housekeeper and her caretaker, Rosaleen.

Several events must occur to free Lily from her father’s control. She will have a fellow traveler in Rosaleen who must escape from the wrath of several angry, racist men who want to harm her. Like Huck before her, Lily must escape violence from her father and has no mother to protect her. Like Huck she will travel on a freedom journey with an older African American companion. Gender and time have been changed; the dangers of slavery for a runaway slave become the terrors of the battles over Civil Rights in 1964 in South Carolina.

There are other freedom stories embedded in Lily’s as in the other novels. Rosaleen’s flight from violence and jail parallels Lily’s journey; to learn the truth about her mother’s flight from T. Ray years ago will be the focus of Lily’s quest. Roselen Brown in a review of the novel, “Honey Child,” notes that both women have a quest: “. . .this is how two women, a female Huck and Jim, make a break for freedom and dignity. Like

bees that seem to fly randomly, they will turn out to know exactly what they need and what will feed them” (“Honey Child,” *The Women’s Review of Books* 11).

Lily’s quest hinges on a similar unanswerable question to Debby DiMartino’s; both seek the reason for their mothers’ abandonment. Beneath this question, Lily carries that impossible question about whether or not she accidentally shot her mother. Neither will have these essential questions answered adequately; Lily will choose a new life over her old one in the most unequivocally happy ending of these freedom stories. As Debby’s journey began at puberty, Lily’s begins in a similar time at the age of fourteen.

The details of her mother’s death are sketchy but replayed often in Lily’s mind, much like the mysterious snippets of memory Debby DiMartino recalls throughout her early life. After stating that her mother died when she was four, the mystery and tragedy of the event are accentuated by the comments people offer her: “Just put it out of your head Lily. It was an accident. You didn’t mean to do it” (Kidd 3). We also learn her dream is to die and be with her mother so that the mother could tell her she was not to blame “for the first ten thousand years,” and she proclaims that then the “next ten thousand years she would fix my hair” (Kidd 3). This dream also involved the chance to tell her mother about her father’s cruelty. Lily imagines it “would take four or five centuries” to explain to her mother “the special misery of living with T. Ray” (Kidd 3). This is a special psychological first attempt at escape for Lily, a strategy she returns to often as she lives in a small isolated world on the peach farm with her father.

T. Ray becomes someone to avoid and fear rather than a source of any comfort. To show his personality, Lily notes that “Mostly I stayed out of his way, “ and “his only kindness was for Snout, his bird dog, who slept in his bed and got her stomach scratched

anytime she rolled onto her wiry back” (Kidd 3). In contrast, the father’s cruelty to Lily is punctuated with emotional and physical punishment. As Brown points out, “He mocks her, he beats her; his generally cruel behavior accounts for her envy of the freedom of honey bees” (“Honey Child” 11). Much like earlier freedom heroes, Lily tries to make peace over time with T. Ray; in this novel she finds comfort and love after leaving her father’s house, gains courage, and reaches a moment of courage when she can face his cruelty and triumph over him.

Clearly, as with all of the other characters, Lily is a misfit within her community especially because the town had been told she had accidentally shot her mother. She has no friends or social life with her peers. She has only one advocate and protector in Rosaleen, who was brought in from working in the fields to keep house after her mother’s death. Lily believes that she has been Rosaleen’s “pet guinea pig ” for the last ten years (Kidd 2). Lily knows that Rosaleen loves her because she protected Lily from T. Ray’s anger and violence at times. Lily does admit that Rosaleen cares about her: “I was the only one who knew that despite her sharp ways, her heart was more tender than a flower skin and she loved me beyond reason” (Kidd 11). When Rosaleen stands up to T. Ray about an Easter chick Rosaleen had given Lily that T. Ray wants to discard, Lily thinks, “She loves me, and it was the first time such a far-fetched idea had occurred to me” (Kidd 12).

Lily considers ways she could be Rosaleen’s daughter: if Rosaleen were white, she could marry T. Ray, if Lily could be a “Negro orphan she found in a corn field and adopted,” or if they could live in “a foreign country like New York, where she could adopt me and we could stay our natural color” (Kidd 12).

The pieces of memory from the day her mother died present her with clues to the events of that day. It was clear her mother was leaving because she was packing a suitcase, she was in a hurry because she was not folding the clothes, and Lily remembers sounds that spoke volumes; while sitting in the closet Lily heard “the swish of clothes, wire clinking together. ‘Hurry,’ she said” (Kidd 6). This last word follows the shaking of the floor signaling T. Ray coming upstairs. At four Lily remembers only details of violence: “I don’t remember what they said, only the fury of their words, how the air turned raw and full of welts. Later it would remind me of birds trapped inside a closed room, flinging themselves against the windows and the walls, against each other” (Kidd 7). From a young child’s partial understanding, these experiences take on the power of a code Lily strives to break to discover the truth of the events.

Lily remembers her mother picking her up out of the closet to protect her or to take her with her when she leaves T. Ray, but Lily will never know what she planned: “Dragged out, I didn’t know at first whose hands pulled me, then found myself in my mother’s arms, breathing her smell. She smoothed my hair, ‘Don’t worry,’ but even as she said it I was peeled away by T. Ray” (Kidd 7). This will be the last comfort she receives from her mother. One part of her childhood search will be to find the smell she associates with her mother, visiting stores just to smell the fragrances there. She recognizes the smell on one of her elementary teachers who tells her it is only Pond’s Cold Cream. When she finds her mother’s white gloves, she will go so far as to stuff them and hold them all night as though her mother were holding her hand. For a young girl, these sensual artifacts provide her with psychological escape from the loneliness of

her life and the pain of remembering loss and abandonment. These will be the initial stages of her journey.

Each time she sorts through these memories, she recalls the father tearing her out of her mother's arms, putting her outside the room, shoving her against the wall, and her mother coming to help her. Each following scene plays through her mind with less clarity: she remembers her mother running toward him and trying to protect her from him, yelling: "Leave. Her. Alone" (Kidd 7). Lily remembers that she "huddled on the floor beside the door and watched through air that seemed all scratched up. I saw him take her by the shoulders and shake her, her head bouncing back and forth. I saw the whiteness of his lips" (Kidd 7). This last detail, the 'whiteness of his lip', she will watch for throughout her childhood in order to try and avoid punishment from her father.

Her memories become even more difficult to recall: "And then—though everything starts to blur now in my mind—she lunged away from him into the closet, away from his grabbing hands, scrambling for something high on a shelf." The moment that changes everything for her she recalls with little clarity: "When I saw the gun in her hand, I ran toward her, clumsy and falling, wanting to save her, to save us all." Lily describes the moment as "Time folded in on itself then. What is left lies in clear yet disjointed pieces in my head. The gun shining like a toy in her hand, how he snatched it away and waved it around. The gun on the floor. Bending to pick it up. The noise that exploded around me" (Kidd 7-8). Even with these details rehearsed many times, it is not clear whether Lily, the father, or the mother 'bends over' for the gun. Later she will say she remembers picking up the gun but does not remember the noise of it going off until later. She does

know that she feels responsible for her mother's death: "This is what I know about myself. She was all I wanted. And I took her away" (Kidd 8).

When she is going to be entering school, her father comes to her and is shocked to hear her say she remembers that day. He tells her the story, differently from her version, and implicates her as the one with the gun when it fires. T. Ray insists on her actions: "We were arguing like you said. We didn't see you at first. Then we turned around and you were standing there holding the gun. You'd picked it up off the floor. Then it just went off." These different details suggest some possibility that Lily may not have been responsible; his next statements further this speculation: "The police asked lots of questions, but it was just one of those terrible things. You didn't mean to do it But if anyone wants to know, that's what happened" (Kidd 19). His surprise at her memory of the day and his need to implicate her raise some questions about the truth. Lily will never be able to find the truth; she asks him once more at the end of the novel, and he answers by saying he knows she wants him to say she did not do it but he refuses to continue.

Not only does Lily live in fear and isolation at home, she lacks any community outside of her home. About her place in the teenage community, she notes "There was nothing I hated worse than clumps of whispering girls who got quiet when I passed" (Kidd 9). She adds, "I felt half the time I was impersonating a girl instead of really being one" (Kidd 9). She even "got barred" from charm school at the Women's Club because she didn't have a "mother, a grandmother, or even a measly aunt to present me with a white rose at the closing ceremony" (Kidd 9). The incident recalls Huck's predicament when the gang of boys insisted he would need a family member to sacrifice in order to belong to their

group. In both cases, isolation from the community, family, and teenage peers creates the worst type of estrangement for a young person.

Early in her life, Lily finds a place to escape, “a special place out there in the long tunnel of trees no one knew about, not even Rosaleen” (Kidd 14). It has been her place she explains, “before I could tie my shoelaces” (Kidd14). She needs this hiding spot: “At first it was just a spot to hide from T. Ray and his meanness or from the memory of that afternoon when the gun went off . . .” (Kidd 14). As she gets older, she “would slip out there, sometimes after T. Ray had gone to bed, just to lie under the trees and be peaceful (Kidd 14).” She buries the first artifacts she finds of her mother there and declares this spot “was my plot of earth, my cubbyhole” (Kidd 14). This is the first physical attempt at escape, the only road available to a small child, to find a small “paradise” to feel protected and safe. She buries the mementos because she “hated to think what he’d do to me if he found them hidden among my stuff” (Kidd 14). One particularly intriguing object is a picture of a black Madonna with the town of Tiburon, S.C. written on the back. Lily promised herself that when she was “grown up enough,” she would find this place. “I wanted to go everyplace she had ever been” (Kidd 15). Lily’s road to freedom has a specific goal: to retrace her mother’s steps and in some way recapture the mother she cannot recall.

Huck’s lonesomeness and Janie’s loneliness connect closely to Lily’s melancholy and suffering in her difficult home and community life. Lily will be motivated in similar ways to the earlier heroes to form community.

Several incidents occur to facilitate the coming break with her home. In each freedom story, there must be a break with a significant connection in the hero’s life

before he or she will be able to begin the journey. With Huck, his fear of his father's violence while drunk forces his decision to leave and stage his own death. For Thea Kronborg, the death of Ray Kennedy closes the possibility of staying in Moonstone and marrying Ray, and his bequest to her provides the financial support she needs to leave for musical training in Chicago. Janie Crawford disagrees with Nanny over the marriage she has been forced into, and after Nanny's death, she is able to leave her first husband behind when she feels he threatens her life. Maxine Hong Kingston chooses to leave home for college to reach her vision to be a writer; she must break with her mother's influence, leaving after a quarrel. Debby DiMartino breaks with her adoptive family after breaking with her lover, Frankie Fong. When she burns down her ex-boyfriend's home, Debby has more reason to flee and follow the clues that might bring her to her biological mother.

For Lily, the first positive incentive to consider leaving comes from her teacher, Mrs. Henry, who tells her she has "fine intelligence" and "could be a professor or a writer" (Kidd 16). She takes this idea to heart and nurtures the idea of going to college and being a writer for a time. T. Ray objected to her reading and mocked her studiousness. School, reading, and the dream of earning a scholarship are the only factors to help her cope with her isolation and loss.

She and T. Ray come to a break one night when he realizes she is not in her room at night; she has gone to her "paradise" in the orchard and fallen asleep. T. Ray imagines she has left out with a boy. He finds her in the secluded spot and feels convinced she has met someone there. He gives her his sadistic punishment, the Martha Whites. He forces her to sit on her bare knees on the kitchen floor on grits, "a particularly Southern form of

legal brutality” according to Brown (“Honey Child” 11). The image of the torture is complete with T. Ray cleaning his nails with a knife, watching over her as she moves from one knee to the other to try and minimize the pain, “but the pain cut deep” into her skin and produces red welts the next day (Kidd 24). Rosaleen stares at her swollen and bruised knees the next morning and says: “Look at you, child. Look what he’s done to you” (Kidd 25). This expression of compassion causes Lily to realize the measure of his mistreatment: “My knees had been tortured like this enough times in my life that I’d stopped thinking of it as out of the ordinary; it was just something you had to put up with from time to time, like the common cold. But suddenly the look on Rosaleen’s face cut through all that” (Kidd 25). T. Ray comes in immediately following this realization and derisively demands that she go to work at the peach stand even though it is her birthday. The series of events open her to an important knowledge about T. Ray: “This will sound crazy, but up until then I thought T. Ray probably loved me some” (Kidd 25). Lily has reached the point when she will be able to break with T. Ray.

For the first time she considers leaving home, when she sees his face, “despising and full of anger” as he shouts: “As long as you live under my roof, you’ll do what I say!” (Kidd 26). Her first thought of freedom remains unspoken: “*Then I’ll find another roof*” (Kidd 26).

Two more critical turning points facilitate the break for her: after she and Rosaleen encounter trouble in town and are jailed, T. Ray takes Lily from jail but leaves Rosaleen behind in a possibly deadly situation. When he takes her home and promises to return and punish her, she stands up to him for the first time: “You don’t scare me.” She notices that a “brazen feeling had broken loose in me, a daring something that had that had been

locked up in my chest” (Kidd 38). He tries to strike her, and although he swings and misses, he succeeds in hitting her emotionally by insisting her mother hadn’t loved her, that she had run away and left her behind, and that she was coming back only to get her things when she died: T. Ray delivers the final blow: “You can hate me all you want, but she’s the one who left you” (Kidd 39). She thinks about her mother leaving her: “This would sink me forever” (Kidd 40). She finally breaks down in sobs: “. . .but I couldn’t stop shaking, couldn’t stop crying, and it frightened me, as though I’d been struck by a car I hadn’t seen coming and was lying on the side of the road, trying to understand what had happened” (Kidd 40). This misery moves her toward gaining the courage to escape.

Finally she finds a saving idea, that T. Ray had told her this to punish her, recounting some of the sadistic punishments he had devised for her, like telling her that her pet rabbit had died when it had not (Kidd 41). Physical punishment was expected, but the emotional punishment proves more than she can withstand.

Despite the misery of her existence, Lily more often than not is portrayed in a positive light, often surrounded by the beauty or abundance of nature. As the title and quotes beginning each chapter suggest, her character often is intertwined with bees. The quotes at the beginning of each chapter describe scientific facts about the bees; late in the novel Lily learns both realistic and mystical facts about beekeeping. The presence of bees continuously arises throughout Lily’s life. She wakes up at the beginning to a swarm of bees in her room, and she feels that they have been sent to her “like the angel appearing to the Virgin Mary, setting events in motion I could never have guessed.” She shrinks from the comparison but insists: “I know it is presumptuous to compare my small life to hers, but I have reason to believe she wouldn’t mind; I will get to that” (Kidd 2). This

direct address by the narrator to the reader signals that her story is being told after the journey is over. As with Janie in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Maxine in *The Woman Warrior*, and Debby in *Leave It To Me*, Lily in *The Secret Life of Bees* refers to the end of her journey as she begins the telling; the telling becomes again the successful end of the quest.

Bees and the Virgin Mary will be motifs in her journey, both in mystical and concrete ways. Lily will become a beekeeper and live with a group of women who center their worship on a statue of a Black Madonna in their living room. She comes to believe that this Mary will keep her safe. When she reaches the moment when she must break from T. Ray and start her journey, Lily thinks then she has had a religious moment and hears a voice “that seems other than yourself” saying “Lily Melissa Owens, your jar is open” (Kidd 41). Earlier Lily had captured some of the bees that had come into her bedroom in an attempt to prove to T. Ray that the swarm existed. When she decided to release them, she watched them hesitate at the opening instead of leaving. This voice motivates her to decide her course: “In a matter of seconds I knew exactly what I had to do—leave. I had to get away from T. Ray who was probably on his way back this minute to do Lord-knows-what-to-me. Not to mention I had to get Rosaleen out of jail” (Kidd 41). This urgency to avoid her father recalls the fear Huck had of his father’s return to the cabin. Significantly for Lily, this is her birthday, and like Huck who experienced rebirth when he escaped the ‘womb’ of the cabin to begin a new life, so Lily will find a new life by escaping T. Ray.

She barely escapes the house and hides beneath the foundation of the house before T. Ray reaches the porch. The hound dog scents her and begins barking, but T. Ray has

found her note and becomes so enraged he yells at the dog to shut up and speeds away in his truck.

She begins her freedom journey after watching the truck tear away. She finds herself “walking along the weedy strip beside the highway for the second time that day. I was thinking how much older fourteen had made me. In the space of a few hours I’d become forty years old” (Kidd 43). She decides to somehow get Rosaleen out of jail and go to Tiburon, South Carolina as a connection with her mother (Kidd 43). Rosaleen has been sent to the hospital after suffering a “fall” at the jail. Lily “frees” Rosaleen from the hospital, and together they begin their Huck and Jim escape from the certain vengeance of the racist men Rosaleen had insulted. They hitchhike to three miles outside Tiburon after taking an untraveled way out of town. Dropped off on the road, the magnitude of their actions frightens and saddens Lily, but she recognizes the birth she is experiencing: “But still, I felt painfully alive, like every cell in my body had a little flame inside it, burning so brightly it hurt” (Kidd 50-51). Each of the heroes in these freedom stories reports feeling exhilaration and a heightened sense of living when first experiencing a moment of freedom in their quest.

Reminiscent of the scene between Jim and Huck when he angrily criticizes Huck for playing a trick on him about the night in the fog, Rosaleen snaps at Lily “Oh. . .I get it. You ran off ‘cause of what your daddy said about your mother. It didn’t have nothing to do with me in jail. And here you got me worrying myself sick about you running away and getting in trouble over, me, and you wouldn’ve run off anyway” (Kidd 53). Rosaleen becomes angrier, recalling the hospital escape: “and I’m supposed to follow you like a pet dog. You act like you’re my keeper. Like I’m some dumb nigger you gonna save”

(Kidd 53). Lily strikes out symbolically on her own after the argument by going to sleep on the other side of the creek. When she wakes from a nightmare, she fears that Rosaleen has left her behind. Lily finds her bathing downstream, joins her, and they remake their little community, apologizing and sitting together naked in the water and the moonlight (Kidd 55). For Lily it becomes a connection with her lost mother and a connection with her adopted mother in Rosaleen. Before stripping off her clothes and entering the stream with Rosaleen, she knows she “wanted something” (Kidd 53).

Lily recalls reading and enjoying Thoreau’s *Walden Pond* and then having had fantasies of “going to a private garden where T. Ray would never find me” (Kidd 57). Waking beside the creek and seeing the abundant surrounding space of vegetation, “a bed of kudzu vines”, she thinks about that secret garden where she tells herself: “Day one of my new life . . . That’s what this is” (Kidd 57). This is a little Eden-like setting for their initial community of freedom. The nod to Thoreau stands out in this tradition of freedom stories in the sense that his life on Walden Pond represents that American ideal of an individual freedom journey. Lily has faltered in joining in community with Rosaleen, still imagining herself on an individual quest. Her journey, like the characters in the earlier novels, will find freedom through community not individual isolation.

They begin their slow walk together to Tiburon—and to some connection with Lily’s mother’s past. A pastoral scene surrounds them as they travel from the time when “asphalt ran out, turned to gravel” (Kidd 59). Unlike Huck’s dangers on shore and Debby’s violent encounters, this journey is free of incident or danger. Almost all of the violence and difficulty takes place in memory or the past.

Lily believes they will rent a room when they reach town; Rosaleen reminds her that no place will rent a room to an African American. Lily in her innocence, wonders why the new Civil Rights Act won't help change things; Rosaleen explains, "you gonna have to drag people kicking and screaming to do it" (Kidd 60).

This dose of reality worries Lily who dreamed that they "would stumble upon a window somewhere and climb through it into a brand-new life. Rosaleen, on the other hand, was out here biding time till we got caught. Counting it as summer vacation from jail" (Kidd 60). The treatment of Rosaleen in the novel raises similar questions to those of Jim's depiction in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Lily insists that Rosaleen in this case is only along for the journey and simply enjoying her freedom from jail, a disingenuous estimation considering that Rosaleen's had been beaten her badly enough to cause a concussion. Also, Rosaleen's depiction has several characteristics suggesting a slovenly and less than bright individual in descriptions of her size and slow movements. Her history, her surname, and her thoughts about the journey rarely reach the narrative. When they arrive at their haven, Lily worries that Rosaleen does not act correctly in front of their hosts. Rosaleen does occasionally defend herself, particularly in this case when she complains that Lily directs her as though she cannot make her own decisions.

Another element echoes the many stories Huck tells to cover up his identity while traveling on the river when he had to stop on the shore. On their journey, Lily finds herself often making up stories and names to keep them safe from detection. When Lily goes in a restaurant to buy lunch and tells a story of visiting her grandmother, she offers a name and then agrees with the shopkeeper's offer of a local name, seeming quite Huck Finn-like. She steals snuff for Rosaleen, but plans to send money later to make things

right. In another echo of Huck's manipulation of stories and names, Lily fails to remember the name she had given August Boatwright later in the story.

While waiting for lunch in the store, she suddenly notices the picture of the black Madonna that matches the one in her mother's belongings. The picture on the label is for Black Madonna Honey. She finds fascination in the coincidence: "I realized it for the first time in my life: there is nothing but mystery in the world, how it hides behind the fabric or our poor, browbeat days, shining brightly, and we don't even know it" (Kidd 63). This will turn the quest toward the beekeeper's home nearby. This place will allow Lily to become part of a community within a sort of paradise. Lily and Rosaleen have solidified their community through this journey. The women of this house and their friends will become a positive and nurturing community for both Lily and Rosaleen.

When they reach the Black Madonna Honey house, they stare for a time at the beekeeper, an African American woman adept at handling her bees: Lily describes her as the "Mistress of Bees, the portal into my mother's life" (Kidd 68). This woman, August Boatwright, will move Lily through her stages of journey toward healing and wholeness. In the review "Honey Child," Brown points out the less than realistic world that Lily and Rosaleen are entering: "In the Boatwright sisters, for whom the black Madonna is queen, Kidd has created a wonderful fantasy, a sort of beloved community, part Oz, part ashram, part center for racial reconciliation" (Honey Child" 11).

The color of the home overwhelms the senses because it was "so pink it remained a scorched shock on the back of my eyelids after I looked away" (Kidd 67). Lily soaks in the sensual world surrounding them; she notices the sound of June bugs and "music notes floated from inside sounding like a violin, only a lot sadder" (Kidd 68). The house and

acres surrounding are primitive and lush. Lily has an immediate physical reaction to the house as soon as she enters: “. . . I felt a trembling along my skin, a traveling current that moved up my spine, down my arms, pulsing out from my fingertips. I was practically radiating. The body knows things a long time before the mind catches up to them. I was wondering what my body knew that I didn’t” (Kidd 68). Once more the story allows some mystical elements to intrude upon the realistic details. This trait continues with the statue of the Black Madonna.

Lily has another distinct physical and emotional reaction to a wooden statue in the corner of the front room in this house; a statue of a woman that might have been on the front of a ship: “Her right arm was raised, as if she was pointing the way, except her fingers were closed in a fist. It gave her a serious look, like she could straighten you out if necessary” (Kidd 70). “She had a faded red heart painted on her breast and a yellow crescent moon painted where her body would have blended into the ship’s wood” (Kidd 70). Lily reacts personally to the wooden figure: “Standing there, I loved myself and I hated myself. That is what the black Mary did to me, made me feel my glory and my shame at the same time” (Kidd 71). The sisters call this icon “our Lady of Chains,” but Lily remarks on the puzzling choice of a name “for no reason that I could see” (Kidd 90). When faced with the women of the house, Lily who “could have won a fibbing contest hands down,” instead relates the “pathetic truth” (Kidd 72). Soon Lily regains her lying abilities, concocting a farfetched story that the Boatwright sisters immediately see through.

Abundant nature is tied up with all of Lily’s impressions of this new life. Lily stands near the door and feels the rain on her face but she “refused to wipe away the wetness. It

made the world seem so alive . . .” (Kidd 75). Also, the natural world of the bees and the complex life of the hive that the beekeepers must respect to keep the hives healthy and producing will provide ample life wisdom for August Boatwright to impart to Lily as they work together. All three sisters contribute to Lily’s nurturing and healing. As Roselen Brown points out in her review, this home, the sisters, and the wonderful coincidence that brings the travelers to this place are creations suited perfectly for the needs of Lily and Rosaleen: “Suffice it to say, when Lily and Rosaleen follow their yellow brick road to the idiosyncratic compound of three black women bee-keepers, May, June, and August, they come upon a trio that embodies every form of maternal nurturance and emotional education Lily needs, and a comfortable nest for Rosaleen as well” (“Honey Child” 11). As the Oz reference and other fairy tale references used by this reviewer suggest, the perfect fit of time, place, and people give the story a bent toward fantasy despite the serious underlying themes of racism and human cruelty.

When Lily wakes and looks out over the land, her thoughts dwell on the potential for sanctuary here: “A girl could get lost on twenty-eight acres in a little town like this. She could open a trap door and disappear” (Kidd 79). She feels some safety here although she feels fear whenever she hears a car or truck drive up to the house, thinking that T. Ray might have found this haven.

Lily discovers another spiritual icon on the land, a low wall with notes stuffed in crevices—one note reads: “Birmingham, Sept. 15, four little angels dead” (Kidd 80). Later she learns that the wall, created by the emotionally disturbed sister May, represents a crude wailing wall. She walks farther into the woods toward the sound of water where she walks in the stream and experiences another fulfillment of freedom: “. . .I wanted it to

always be like this. . .no T. Ray, no Mr. Gaston, nobody wanting to beat Roaleen senseless. Just the rain-cleaned woods and the rising light” (Kidd 81). Lily has found that place each of the heroes searches for in the freedom story; this paradise harks back to the Mississippi River, Panther Canyon, and the Everglades of the first three novels in the study.

Lily’s sense of sanctuary at August Boatwright’s is “. . .a consolation, a pure relief. The world will give you that once in a while, a brief time out, the boxing bell rings and you go to your corner, where somebody dabs mercy on your beat-up life” (Kidd 82). At this moment, Lily consciously notes the quality of peace each of those early characters found: “a brief time out,” addressing that transient nature of this element in the freedom story. This time and place of respite that the “world will give you once in a while,” describes well the special natural moments of grace and peacefulness for Huck on the river, for Thea as she insinuates herself into the Ancient People’s history and experiences an epiphany of her artistic vision, and for Janie as she finds solace in the memories of Tea Cake and wraps “the horizon” around her. Lily succeeds in expressing this phenomenon in her naïve manner.

We have a key to what Lily desires when she says that May taught her a song and that “singing made me feel like a regular person again” (Kidd 83). The stages of her freedom journey become the nurturing she receives while in this community, her personal road to becoming a “regular” person.

June tells Lily that she could ask Mary for help if she needed it, and then she relates a story of a nun who ran away from the convent, but returned years later to find that Mary had taken her place so that she could freely return (Kidd 91). Lily sees things differently

than what she imagines August wants to suggest through this story; instead of hoping that Mary might somehow help her return to T. Ray, she asks Mary “to see to it that I never went back. I asked her to draw a curtain around the pink house so no one would ever find us. . . it seemed to be working. . . .Mary had made us a curtain of protection” (Kidd 92). Lily has some hope in the supernatural but carefully retains her solid connection with the real world.

The wooden Mary’s story as told by August describes it as a symbol of freedom that had been sent to comfort the slave who had prayed for help: “Our Lady filled their heart with fearlessness and whispered to them plans of escape” (Kidd 108-9). She is a symbol of escape to freedom: “The people called her our “Lady of Chains. They called her that not because she wore chains. . . [but] because she broke them” (Kidd 110). August who always does the storytelling in ceremonies related to this wooden Mary acknowledges to Lily that it really was simply part of a ship that had washed up on shore, but because the slaves had been promised relief, this object provided needed hope.

Lily experiences a state of unusual peace while tending to August’s bees; they cover her and she feels fear rising in her when “suddenly, like somebody had snapped off the panic switch, I felt myself go limp. . . My mind became unnaturally calm as if part of me had lifted right up out of my body and was sitting on a tree limb watching the spectacle from a safe distance. The other part of me danced with the bees. I wasn’t moving a lick, but in my mind I was spinning through the air with them. I had joined the bee conga line. . . I sort of forgot where I was” (Kidd 150). She lifted her arms and felt like she was “in a dreamy place I’d never been before. My neck rolled back and my mouth opened. I was floating somewhere, somewhere that didn’t rub too close against life. . . I felt dropped

into a field of enchanted clover that made me immune to everything” (Kidd 150). This “immunity wore off .” She began to ache in “the motherless place,” and she relives the shooting scene. Yet she feels safe with the bees around her—she imagines the bees caring for and caressing her because she is “weary and lost,” then she thinks of herself as the “stamen in the middle of a twirling flower” (Kidd 151). Lily experiences another mystical experience grounded in a real world event. In a parallel with *Leave It To Me*, like Lily, Debby recalls the details of the attempted murder by her father when she experiences a temporarily serene moment in her journey.

Following the bee experience, Lily finally touches the wooden Mary’s red heart and tells it: “I live in a hive of darkness and you are my mother” (Kidd 164). Next, her mother’s earlier life here is confirmed by May who responds to Lily’s question to acknowledge she remembers Deborah Fontonel. “She stayed out there in the honey house. She was the sweetest thing” (Kidd 173). It is then confirmed that Lily’s journey has found the correct destination.

Into this idyllic world, potential racial violence intrudes when a young African American man, Zachary Taylor, who works closely with August and the Boatwright sisters, was arrested and disappeared without anyone knowing what had happened to him while in custody. Lily had formed a romantic connection with him, and they had gone to the movie theater together where he was arrested. This romance appears an easy and comfortable pairing, more 2002 than 1964 as Roselen Brown suggests in her critique of Zach: “And there is a boy, Zach, black and beautiful, who (rather too un-self consciously for Georgia in 1964) dares without notable angst, to love Lily. The arrest and short disappearance of Zach seems low key until May finds out the truth. Fear of what might

have happened to him drives May to suicide, which she accomplishes by rolling a large stone on her chest to keep her submerged in the shallow stream. She represents a Christ figure in her intense empathy for other's suffering—she is the daughter Mary should have had, a common jest among the sisters. Lily draws on the Christ connection when she imagines that “She will get up now. Angel will roll away the stone, and May will come up for air, and we will go back to the house and get her dry” (Kidd 192). May had built the Wailing Wall from stones with her own hand, and now she becomes a part of that wall. May has long been unable to separate other people's suffering and grief from her own, and she becomes the last message stuffed in the rock wall.

Consistent with the novel's insistence on at least partially happy endings, Zach is released unharmed from jail but feels guilt that his imprisonment caused May's suicide (Kidd 263-264). Zach has two reactions to the arrest and imprisonment. First, he tells Lily that it made him so angry that he wants to kill something, but he also feels changed for the future: “Nobody will believe how hard I'm gonna study this year. That jail cell is gonna make me earn grades higher than I ever got. And when this year is over, nothing can keep me from leaving here and going to college” (Kidd 230-231). Also, Zach tells Lily that he cares for her and will return someday so that they can be together. In the world of this novel, this mixture of reality, for example, the arrest and imprisonment, often is undercut by a heartwarming moment, in this case, Zach's commitment to succeed in life and return for Lily. In terms of Lily's freedom story, whether realistically probable or not, this statement of caring represents another step in her process of healing, a key component of her journey.

The manner in which all becomes reconciled, sometimes too easily and too sweetly, raises some critical attention in the review “Honey Child.” Even after a tragedy like May’s suicide, the tone recovers this insistence on solving the problem, so the scene between Zach and Lily planning for the future moves from despair to hope. As noted earlier, Roselen Brown expresses several concerns about the resolution of conflict in the novel and ties this concern to genre expectations: “But all is well in the end, every uncertainty settled as surely as if this were a detective story.” Not satisfied with this genre, Brown continues to find something more fitting: “But this is. . . a novel in which everything meshes smoothly. Though it is never frivolous there is in it the sweetness and trust that things will work out in the end that one tends to see in comedy, not tragedy; or perhaps, more appropriately in the comfort of fairy tales that put their characters through harsh trials so that, every demon slain, they can triumph reassuringly over danger. At tale’s end, the princess-scully maid, the cast-out wanderer through the dark wood, will be saved, even cherished” (“Honey Child 11). In the tradition of the freedom stories, excluding *Leave It To Me*, conflict resolution occurs eventually, yet *The Secret Life of Bees* attempts to resolve all issues with less concern for entirely realistic possibilities.

Further use of the rebirth motif follows May’s death. June tells Lily that draping “the hives was supposed to keep the bees from leaving . You see, the last thing they wanted was their bees swarming off when a death took place. Having bees around was supposed to ensure that the dead person would live again” (Kidd 205). Always grounded in reality, June makes it clear to Lily that the ritual is actually for the living. When Lily asks if the black cloth on the hives will help May “get into heaven,” June answers that the ritual is to remind people that “life gives way into death, and then death turns around and gives way

into life” (Kidd 206). Hearing that beehive shaped tombs represented life after death, Lily wishes that she could “lie down in one and be reborn” (Kidd 207). In their vigil with May’s body in the front room, The Daughters of Mary pass around ‘manna’ to eat and explain that “. . .they wouldn’t dream of sitting with the dead without eating seeds. Seeds kept the living from despair. . . “ (Kidd 207). When they bury May, each threw handfuls of the manna into the grave (Kidd 213). The spiritual context of this life provides another important part to Lily’s process of healing and reaching wholeness. At this point in the novel, Lily recalls the memory of her mother’s death less often.

In May’s suicide note, she reminds her sisters that even though it is her time to die, it is their “time to live. Don’t mess it up” (Kidd 210). August tells June that she believes May meant, “when it’s time to die, go ahead and die, and when it’s time to live, live. Don’t sort-of-maybe live, but live like you’re going all out, like you’re not afraid” (Kidd 211). August speaks here to the nature of quests and the need for these heroes to live “all out” without limitation. The freedom story hero comes to realize his or her potential whether for Huck to follow his own beliefs, for Thea to sing, or for Janie to find an equal love relationship and to discover her voice. For the contemporary writers, Maxine must realize her potential to become a writer, Debby must discover the full scope of her birth story and avenge her abandonment, and Lily must find peace within herself to extinguish the pain of her mother’s violent death and her victimization.

An example of Lily becoming more psychologically aware of her past victimization occurs in a conversation with Zach during this time. She tells of a time when she was bullied by a group of boys. She was swimming in a nearby pond as a young girl when a group of boys who were fishing began to harass her with a stringer of fish. She tells her

story to Zach: “They held me down on the bank and hooked it [the stringer] around my neck, making it too small to pull over my head.” She shouts for them to release her and remove the stringer, but in turn they laugh. Some of the fish are dead, others are still flapping against her chest; she makes an effort to do something for these creatures by wading out into the pond so that they could survive. She loses courage: “I was too afraid to go any further. I think that was the worst part. I could’ve helped them, but I didn’t” (Kidd 229). This complex set of emotions and reactions are central to her journey. She experiences victimization through the cruelty of the stronger and more powerful males, her neighbors and peers. She experiences powerlessness when they hold her down and humiliate her by overpowering her and draping the stringer around her neck. She feels compassion for the creatures trying to survive, but she fails in her attempt to save them. Here are several reminders of the primary victimization when she witnessed her mother physically restrained and shaken by her father, the attempt she made to save her, and her possible responsibility for her mother’s death. Her quest necessarily must heal this broken and vulnerable state.

Lily has come to recognize where cruelty originates in human beings when she connects this early incident with the dangerous imprisonment of Zach. She remarks on his statement about his anger after the arrest: “Those boys who made me wear the fish—they were angry like that, too. Angry at the world, and it made them mean. You have to promise me, Zach, you won’t be like them” (Kidd 230). She also recognizes her own brokenness. After she feels Zach’s love in their first kiss, she notices she loses herself in the moment only partially: “. . .even with all of that, I could feel the fish dying against my heart” (Kidd 231). After he promises to return in the future to make a life with her,

she feels more courage, still tied to her fish story. She describes her change as “Wading up to my neck” (Kidd 231). This interlude prepares her for the next stage in her journey to confront the truth about her mother’s freedom story.

Lily finally decides to talk to August about her mother, so she waits nervously in August’s room thinking “about prison movies in which they’re about to electrocute some prisoner—wrongly convicted, of course—the camera going back and forth between the poor man sweating in his cell block and the clock creeping toward twelve” (Kidd 234). When Lily shows August the photograph of her mother, August replies: You are the spitting image of her” (Kidd 235). Asked why she did not reveal her connection with Lily’s mother, August explains her caution: “I didn’t want to risk you running away again. I wanted you to have a chance to get yourself on solid ground, get your heart bolstered up first. There’s a fullness of time for things, Lily. You have to know when to prod and when to be quiet, when to let things take their course. That’s what I’m trying to do” (Kidd 236). This is one of the lessons Lily will need to complete her freedom journey when T. Ray arrives at the house; she survives because she learns to “let things take their course” rather than run away again. Learning when to escape or refrain from escaping will become Lily’s test.

Central to this scene is a face and mirror motif that occurs throughout the novel. Faces, photographs, and mirrors are of significance in this novel, as suggested by Judith Hebb in “Religious Imagery in *The Secret Life of Bees* and *The Mermaid Chair*.” At this moment, August provides the assurance that Lily resembles her mother, something Lily cannot recall clearly enough from the one tragic memory she owns. Hebb points out that Lily will come to understand that looking at August creates a maternal tie: “Through

August, Lily sees a face her mother saw and faces a truth about her mother, the final portion of which T. Ray must deliver.” Hebb views this novel as both a “religious quest and struggle toward self-actualization” and suggests that “Kidd provides mirrors” to move Lily through these stages on her journey (Hebb, Paper delivered in Atlanta, GA, 2006). Lily’s teenage concerns about appearance connect with the mirror element: Lily notes that no one had ever complimented her on her looks except one woman at church who was “legally blind” (Kidd 8). Lily mentions her constant search for knowledge of her appearance: “I watched my reflection not only in the mirror, but in store windows and across the television when it wasn’t on, trying to get a fix on my looks” (Kidd 8-9). Although a part of adolescence, this insistence on seeing mirror images is an ongoing attempt to recognize herself and her missing mother, and speaks to her loneliness as well. Lily often draws a story from a photograph of her mother. Early in her life when she finds a picture of her mother, she writes dialogue and conflict into it: “Her expression said, ‘Don’t you dare take this picture,’ but she wanted it taken, you could see that. You could not believe the stories I saw in that picture, how she was waiting at the car fender for love to come to her, and not too patiently.” Next she lays it next to her own eighth-grade picture and feels that her mother’s beauty gave her “genuine hope” for her future (Kidd 13). Also when Lily peers into her memory to see her mother during the fight with T. Ray, she “watched through air that seemed all scratched up,” an image suggesting a scratched mirror’s surface (Kidd 7). In Lily’s isolation, her own reflected image and her mother’s photograph gave her human consolation. Each of these attempts to peer into a reflected face or the face of a photograph represents Lily’s attempts to find community, the key element in the success of each of these freedom stories.

In this scene with August, Lily confesses all of the information she has withheld about being jailed with Rosaleen, then running away from home, and afterwards breaking Rosaleen out of the hospital. In the tradition of Huck profusely apologizing for “stealing” a slave, Lily believes all of these acts to be criminal even though to others the acts are moral. Lily relates her inner sense of corruption: “It was scary, my secrets spilled out across the room, like a garbage truck had backed up and dumped its sorry contents across the floor for her to sort through” (Kidd 240). She voices this guilt: “I don’t mean to be a bad person. . . I can’t seem to help it. . . I do all the wrong things. I tell lies, all the time. Not to you. Well, I have—but for good reasons. And I hate people. Not just T. Ray but lots of people” (Kidd 241). Lily expresses her fear of rejection when August learns the truth about her life: “. . . I spilled out my guts and then hoped I wasn’t tossed out to sea to wait for my punishment” (Kidd 241). Finally, Lily moves to the next stage of her journey by telling August that she accidentally shot her mother, and afterwards an inner voice tells her “the one secret thing at the heart of it all. . . *You are unlovable*” (Kidd 242). She finds comfort rather than condemnation from August.

The connection between August and Lily’s mother provides information that proves more difficult for Lily to accept. August had been close to Lily’s mother when she worked for her family. Deborah had retained their connection over the years, including when she ran away from T. Ray. Many of the facts of Deborah’s freedom story devastate Lily. First she learns that Deborah married T. Ray because she was already pregnant with Lily, which causes Lily to think: “*My mother’s life was too heavy for me*” and “*I was an unwanted baby*” (Kidd 249). She grieves that her mother “got stuck with T. Ray” because of the pregnancy. Some consolation comes when August tells her that her

mother had told August that her baby was “so pretty it hurt her eyes to look at” her (Kidd 249). Finally however, the information Lily has been seeking, once revealed, proves devastating: her mother had left without her when she first escaped T. Ray and was sheltered at August’s house. Lily experiences something of an emotional breakdown, only once lifted by the picture August finds of mother and daughter in an obviously joyous moment. Again, Lily finds comfort in a photograph, this time merging her own and her mother’s images together.

Within this grief, Lily realizes she has lost the story she had imagined for her mother; she feels as though she has lost everything including “. . .all those stories about her I’d lived off of like they were food and water and air.” Lily now sees herself as “the girl she’d left behind” (Kidd 260). After much reflection and seclusion, she begins to reenter normal life when she realizes she had been nurturing her identity as a victim: “In a weird way I must have loved my little collection of hurts and wounds. They provided me with some real nice sympathy, with the feeling I was exceptional. I was the girl abandoned by her mother. I was the girl who kneeled on grits. What a special case I was” (Kidd 278). Soon she will slowly start to reach out to others.

One of August’s final lessons to Lily prepares her for the last trial of her journey. August advises Lily that she must find strength within herself, and she needs to “find a mother inside” herself. She explains that the idea of the statue of Our Lady of Chains, the black Madonna, is not within the statue. “You don’t have to put your hand on Mary’s heart to get strength and consolation and rescue, and all the other things we need to get through life. . .You can place it right here on your own heart” (Kidd 288).

August's role of mentor and guide for Lily provides the community in which Lily finally realizes her quest.

In the final episode of the novel, the worst happens when T. Ray finds Lily, but in the world of this novel, the difficulty must be resolved. In "Honey Child" the reviewer struggles throughout with the tendency toward a happy resolution in the novel. Brown's final critique of this issue, approaches dismay at the unrealistic solutions: "For all the volatility of its subjects—violent death, child abuse both physical and emotional, suicide, racism and injustice—I had a hard time believing that anything truly terrible would be allowed to happen in these pages." Brown further notes that "There are no rough edges, no threat of unresolvable pain, though many atrocious things happen, or threaten to happen, along the way." Although Brown concedes that there are adult insights within the novel, the fairy tale concern persists: ". . .Kidd scatters a good deal of wisdom like Hansel and Gretel's redemptive bread crumbs en route to the consoling denouement." Brown wants the genre to be more worthy than fairy tales, however, so she suggests that ". . .the world Kidd has imagined has the force of homespun myth" ("Honey Child" 11). In these terms, the genre of myth suggests an adult and lasting type of literature over the child oriented fairy tale. This plot's insistence on soothing every pain for the characters sets it apart from the other freedom stories, each of which ends without resolving every difficulty. Although the closing scene of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* brings resolution for the characters, there is a sense of unrealistic playfulness infused into the scene. Kidd's story retains its high seriousness.

As in each freedom story, the time of community will be short lived. In this case, the haven becomes threatened when T. Ray suddenly finds the house. In the resulting

confrontation T. Ray strikes Lily and threatens her with a knife; she realizes he becomes so enraged that for a moment he imagines her to be the mother, calling her Deborah. Lily uses all the self-control and courage she has learned from observing August to convince him to not harm her further (Kidd 294-295). When he continues to try and force her to leave with him, August, Rosaleen, and their friends appear at the doorway and eventually T. Ray leaves when Lily refuses to obey him. August offers diplomatically and strategically to give Lily a home, a peace making act that Judith Hebb points as the significant opposition of T. Ray and August: “If T. Ray typifies patriarchal punishment to maintain its vertical hierarchy then August represents the subversion of that order and a return to nature, human nature most notably” (Hebb). Easing T. Ray out of the house and out of Lily’s life demands great skill, particularly in this Southern racial setting.

Lily continues to act with courage when she asks him before he leaves to tell her if it was true that she had shot her mother; he refuses to change the story. He leaves telling her “Good riddance” as his final blow (Kidd 298).

Removing T. Ray from this world, restores the house to a feminine sanctuary. Catherine B. Emanuel connects this world to the world of a beehive, with the existence throughout the novel of “sound and activities of a natural matriarchal society, that of bees” (The Archetypal Mother: The Black Madonna in Sue Monk Kidd’s *The Secret Life of Bees*). This household Kidd created she describes in an interview as “like a hive of women who were trying to make something good out of their loss and sorrow, out of the struggles with Civil Rights, out of the pain that they live with. It’s like you take these holes life gives you and you make honey.” Kidd in the same interview describes Lily as someone “whose loss had left this terrible hole in her” (“All abuzz about the Black

Madonna, an interview with Sue Monk Kidd). In this scene T. Ray appears foreign and awkward, reduced to using physical violence to try to find a power in this female haven. The limited role of male bees in a hive lies beneath Kidd's neatly worked out images.

In the tradition of the freedom story, the hero's journey and community would dissolve and he or she would move to a diminished life. Lily's story breaks with that ending, as she continues her healing journey as a part of the household. She becomes the keeper of the wailing wall and returns to school, renewing her dream to become a writer. The ending of this freedom story suggests an unequivocal approach to the value of freedom within community, directly contrasting with the ending of *Leave It To Me*. Lily decides that her journey has brought her to the community of 'mothers' she has needed all along. Standing alone in the tradition, this novel ends with community intact and paradise preserved.

Gone is the river from the freedom stories after *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, but the spirit of the novel continues. Each hero takes a different path, yet each leaves the safety and expectations of home to risk the unknown. Whether the hero rides a raft down the Mississippi, drives across America, or travels emotionally and intellectually from her mother's past to her own future, each hero carries some faith in the possibility of creating a new destiny. Beginning with Huck Finn, the hero wants to think and act according to personal experience and conscience rather than to follow the lead of his family, peers, or culture. Huck wants to leave behind the biases of St. Petersburg and his father; Lily Owens wants to leave behind her father's punishment and the memory of her mother's abandonment and death. Thea Kronborg wants to become an artist despite the

pull of family and small town life in Moonstone; Maxine Hong Kingston wants to become an artist despite the pull of two cultures and languages. Janie Crawford wants to live unrestrained by assumptions about race and gender; Debby DiMartino, conversely, wants to find and follow her exotic nature. The frame for each story creates the freedom for the character to leave home, moves the hero through stages to discover the right path, and delivers him or her to a short-lived community that soon disappears. The nature of freedom, although celebrated in these stories, appears insubstantial and temporary. Even though the sex, race, and nationality of these authors and heroes have varied widely over the century, the search for exploring freedom remains strong.

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