


5-6-1998

Giving Her A Voice: The Representation of the Black Woman in Four Short Stories

Jennifer Sheeler
Longwood University

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.longwood.edu/etd>

 Part of the [African American Studies Commons](#), [Literature in English, North America Commons](#), and the [Other Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Sheeler, Jennifer, "Giving Her A Voice: The Representation of the Black Woman in Four Short Stories" (1998). *Theses, Dissertations & Honors Papers*. Paper 229.

Giving Her a Voice:
The Representation of the Black Woman in Four Short Stories

Jennifer Sheeler

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in English
at Longwood College, Farmville, Virginia, May, 1998.

LONGWOOD COLLEGE LIBRARY
FARMVILLE, VIRGINIA 22901

Giving Her a Voice:
The Representation of the Black Woman in Four Short Stories

By
Jennifer Sheeler

Martha E. Cook
(Director of Thesis)

Kathleen P. Lonago
(First Reader)

Michael Lund
(Second Reader)

May 6, 1998
Date

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Dr. Martha Cook for her patience in the face of my procrastination and for all of her invaluable help.

Thanks to Don for scouting out all of the pitfalls of thesis-writing and showing me the ropes, as well as for being there with me every step of the way.

Thanks to my parents for their unconditional love and support: to my mother, Bonnie Sheeler, for helping with editing and for always setting the best example, and to my father, Jay L. Sheeler, for treating me like an adult whether I want him to or not. I will always be my father's daughter, if nothing else.

I would also like to thank David for always pushing me to put my education above my social life and for reassuring me when I become anxious about my abilities.

Most importantly, I would like to thank all of those people mentioned here for believing in me even when I doubted myself. I accomplished this feat as much to keep from disappointing you guys as I did for myself.

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Chapter 1	6
Chapter 2	14
Chapter 3	28
Chapter 4	37
Conclusion	45
Works Cited	49

Introduction

In a speech she gave in 1933, Mary McLeod Bethune said:

To Frederick Douglass is credited the plea that, "the Negro be not judged by the heights to which he is risen, but by the depths from which he has climbed." Judged on that basis, the Negro woman embodies one of the modern miracles of the New World. (Rpt. in Lerner 579-80)

Black women have had to work very hard to pull themselves up the social ladder. Some people were given control of their lives automatically in American society; black women have had to empower themselves.

Although slavery was abolished in the United States in 1865, inequalities between blacks and whites were still an established part of the country's culture. It has been a long hard road for the civil rights movement to come as far as it has in lessening the economic and social distances between the two races. This division is most noticeable in the South where most blacks live and where the way of life the Confederates fought so hard for during the Civil War was based upon the economic foundation of slavery. In 1868, freedmen were granted full citizenship, but women, black and white, were not given the right to

vote until 1920. In 1940, sixty percent of black women in the labor force were still working as domestic help while only 4.3 percent held professional positions (Hine 1323). ✓ In a society where white men hold most of the power, black women are at the bottom of the social and economic ladder.

Literature reflects society, and the black female experience in the South is a part of American society which has not been overlooked by its literature. I will examine four short stories written by four very different authors, white and black, male and female, which all have black women as major characters and were all published between 1924 and 1942. All four of these black female characters are poor, either have or are pregnant with a child, are used and controlled by men, and have very little power in determining what happens in their lives.

Julia Mood Peterkin (1880-1961) published "Over the River" in 1924. Although she was a white woman who ran a Southern plantation and defended the Southern way of life, her novels and stories are almost exclusively about black characters who are not portrayed in the stereotypical manner which might be expected from such an author. Peterkin has not received much critical attention until very recently, perhaps because she was a Southern white woman who wrote about the black experience. "Over the River" is about a black woman who is poor, deaf, and pregnant. She walks to see the father of her unborn child,

who rejects her completely. When the baby is born, the woman allows it to starve to death, then buries it and begins her journey into the rest of her life.

"Long Black Song" was written by Richard Wright (1908-1960) and published in 1940 in a book of short stories entitled Uncle Tom's Children. Wright is perhaps best known for his novels Native Son (1940) and Black Boy (1945). Although he was a black man and originally from the South, Wright was criticized for having most of his close relationships with whites and living in the North while his fiction was about being black in the South. "Long Black Song" is about a black woman, Sarah, who has sex with a white salesman while her husband, Silas, is away. When her husband discovers what has happened, he threatens to whip her, so she takes her baby and hides in the nearby countryside. She awakes too late the next morning to stop the salesman from returning to her house and her husband kills him. When a mob of white men comes to the house, the woman watches as her husband allows himself to be burned to death for the sake of his pride.

Zora Neale Hurston (1891-1960) was an anthropologist who concentrated much of her energies on collecting folklore. She was also one of the central voices of the Harlem Renaissance and strove to capture life realistically in her fiction. Best known as a novelist for Their Eyes Were Watching God (1937), Hurston published "The Gilded Six-Bits" in 1933. This short story is about a poor, but

happily married couple, Missie May and Joe, who are smitten by a worldly black man who wears what appear to be gold coins for jewelry. Missie May sleeps with the stranger to get the gold coins, but Joe comes home early from work and catches them in the act. Missie May is very sorry, but they remain separated until she has a son who looks just like Joe; then they reconcile.

William Faulkner (1897-1962), as one of the most famous Southern writers, has received much critical attention, primarily for his novels. As a white male author, he has been both praised for his empathy towards blacks as represented in his black characters as well as accused of blatant racism against blacks. Likewise, he has been praised for having sympathetic female characters and then criticized that the same female characters are stereotypical. "Delta Autumn" was published in 1942 in Story magazine and revised to be included in Go Down, Moses, which was also published in 1942. The revised version is the one discussed in this paper. "Delta Autumn" is about an old white man, Isaac, who goes hunting with his much younger cousin, Roth, and some of Roth's friends. Roth leaves Isaac with an envelope of money to give to a woman who is coming to the hunting camp. Although Isaac determines right away that the woman's baby is Roth's child and that Roth is not going to take responsibility for either one of them, it takes Isaac longer to realize that the woman is also black and is distantly related to both him

and Roth. The woman does not want to accept the envelope of money, but Isaac forces it on her, along with a hunting horn which he values, and she leaves. Isaac is at first horrified at this mixing of the races and considers what will happen to his country in the future.

I have purposely placed these stories in order, not chronologically, but by the amount of power that the black woman in each story has, from the story where the woman has the least power to the story where the woman has the most power. How much power each woman has is determined by the point of view utilized by the author, how much voice the woman is given, and how much control each woman has over her life. The race and sex of the author does not directly correlate to the amount of power his/her black female character is given in the way one might expect. By examining the similarities these stories share, tempered by the differences of their authors, we can come to a closer understanding of the true black female experience.

Chapter 1

Julia Mood Peterkin's "Over the River" is about a woman who is totally isolated and alone. The reader is not told exactly how alone she is at first, but is slowly given more and more information about her. The story is told from a limited omniscient point of view. The woman is never given a name or a voice of any kind. Although she has very little power, she is a survivor.

The story opens with the following passage: "A lone black woman walked steadily along the railroad track keeping to the middle where the vines and weeds did not grow so profusely. Her slim bare feet stepped mechanically yet firmly, on the cross-ties" (99). From this first glimpse it is apparent that although the woman is alone, she has purpose. She walks "steadily" and steps "mechanically yet firmly." It is not until the second page that the reader discovers that "she was deaf" and then that she is so far along in her pregnancy that it is almost time for her to deliver. Lastly we are told that she has no family or friends either: "Suppose she did now turn and go back. There was nobody to go to. Nobody to care whether she lived or died" (100). Later still it is revealed that she does not even have any money: "Today, if she had even a few pieces of money, she could ride over the river on

a train. They crossed like this every day. But she did not have one piece left. Not one" (102). This woman is not only deaf, but has no family and is penniless as well. She is the epitome of isolation.

The woman has lost her job because she is pregnant. The reader is told that she has always supported herself until now: "All her life until this year she had worked in the fields" (102). This year she had gotten a job at the saw-mill helping the cook by washing dishes. There she had plenty to eat, and there she met the father of her baby. We are told that she is used to being without money, however: "She worked. Yes, she had always worked. but she got her pay in orders for things at the cross-roads store. Food. Clothes. Sometimes a bit of candy or cake or a ribbon. Never money" (102). She has never earned money to have control over, and it seems likely that because she cannot communicate well with the people around her she has probably been taken advantage of by her employers.

This deaf, poor, pregnant, penniless, friendless, unnamed black woman is on a journey to reach the father of her baby, and it is the hope that he will embrace her and the unborn child which keeps her going. The fact that she finds it necessary to encourage herself often along the way shows that she does not have as much confidence in the man's reaction as she tries to make herself believe. She looks to nature for encouragement: "A determined vine had climbed. Struggled up. When it reached the top of

the tree it bloomed! Yes, bloomed. She'd go on. She'd shed her fear. It was her only way to get to him" (100). Auspiciously, she is encouraging herself to cross the railroad trestle when she is obviously afraid of heights, but later she has to bolster her resolve again when she is not facing such an obvious obstacle. She tells herself:

How pleased he would be when he knew. He'd throw his head back and laugh in the happy way she loved. He'd come hurrying to meet her with his light straight stride! He's take her where she would be safe. He'd provide for her needs, hers and his child's--Yes--she was sure he would.

(101)

The woman's need to reassure herself is an indication of the actual doubts she has deep down about the man, which she refuses to admit even to herself.

Although she has never earned money by working, the man has given her some money, and she spent it so that she can feel that she has some control over what is happening to her: "She spent it for things she had to have. For charms. Two of them. Two that were good and strong" (103). She buys the charms because she believes they will help with the delivery and her baby's teething. The charms are her attempt to have power over the uncontrollable. It is obvious that she otherwise has very little power.

When the much-hoped-for meeting finally occurs, the woman is rejected. Peterkin writes: "He looked straight

into her eyes. And he turned away to the others" (106). But he goes a step beyond ignoring her: "The big, ugly man was laughing. Was making sport of her. And he--he was listening and laughing too--laughing at her--making sport of her--How could he--how could he?" (106). This passage echoes an earlier one which now arouses the reader's suspicions: "For his sake she was sorry to be deaf. But he had never seemed to mind. He laughed at the signs she made to him as if he liked them" (105). He had always been laughing at her and she had never realized it. As her dreams are shattered, her labor begins.

When the reader next sees the protagonist, it is the next morning and she is in the cottage of an old black woman with her newborn baby beside her. She is crushed by the fact that the baby's father has rejected them:

He--he----It was the loss of him that was eating into her very insides. Her lips began trying to cry out words. If she could only say words! They would help. Her throat almost burst with the effort to say them. Her breath choked back with sobs. (108)

How powerless the woman is, unable to even scream out her frustration. Until this point in Peterkin's story, the reader does not necessarily understand that the deaf woman cannot speak at all. The only power she does have is over the baby and her own actions, and she takes this power into consideration. The old woman keeps indicating that

she should feed the baby, but she holds back from doing so, thinking: "If she never did feed the little baby it would sleep on and on. It would never wake up. Without food it could not live--it would die!" (109). She convinces herself that death would be the best thing for the baby whose father wanted nothing to do with it or her. She wants to die as well: "Then she would die herself. She couldn't die now, but when the baby was dead she'd go somewhere in the woods, away off by herself. She'd stretch her length on the ground and die. Yes, she would make herself die" (109).

After the old woman leaves, she does allow the baby to starve to death and she buries it, but she does not lie down and die herself as she thought she would: "As the sun showed above the tree tops she closed the cabin door behind her and started on the path to the little clear spring that bubbled with good clean water. Thank God for water" (112). This woman just buried her baby, yet it sounds as though she is beginning an enjoyable trip. The story ends: "She knelt and drank thirstily, then took up her bundle and went on. It wasn't far to the railroad track. Soon she'd be back. Back, over the river" (112). These thoughts do not sound like those of a person who is planning on lying down and dying. In fact, it seems as though she has put the whole ordeal behind her and is trying to move on with her life.

One of the most interesting things about "Over the River" is that, although all of its characters are black and are represented as well-rounded people as opposed to stereotypes, the author is white. Peterkin has not received much critical attention until very recently. This fact is surprising considering the fact that she was the first Southern novelist to win a Pulitzer Prize, which she received for her novel Scarlet Sister Mary, published in 1932. It is almost amazing that as an active plantation mistress she portrays black characters so humanely. Her publishers of the time played up her role as a respectable white Southern lady although her writing was almost exclusively about black characters. In The Journal of Southern History in 1995, Elizabeth Robeson writes, ". . . her oblivion demonstrates not only how successfully her mythic persona has deflected probing questions but also the tenacity of the conventional wisdom that a white southerner cannot fathom the lives of African Americans" (763). Robeson also proclaims that Peterkin's novels "are primitive prototypes of the more aesthetic accomplishments of William Faulkner, Zora Neale Hurston, Flannery O'Conner, and Richard Wright" (770).

Peterkin was criticized during her time for having too much unpleasantness in her work, such as representing a mother who allows her newborn to starve to death. As Robeson points out, Peterkin's father and husband sterilized her without her permission after the birth of her first

child, and her frustration over that incident and a childhood spent motherless and alone with a domineering father is reflected in her often horrific writing. Robeson states, ". . . Peterkin's genius derives from her decision to tell her story from under the distracting cover of black skins" (770). Although Peterkin felt very close to the blacks she grew up with (one of whom acted as a surrogate mother for her), she also defended the Southern way of life, but her work often offered up very disturbing glimpses of life in the South. In her article, "'There's No Way To Tell You Who I Am': Julia Peterkin's Black Voices," Susan Millar Williams offers:

. . . Peterkin was sometimes criticized by friends and relatives for her refusal to write about life "Before the War" when the South was (presumably) a safe and charming place. And even she was sometimes reluctant to reveal the whole truth. In 1932 she called William Faulkner a "degenerate" and then went on to admit that she and most of her fellow Southerners were unable to capture the South in print because their pride caused them to suppress unpleasantness. (147-148)

Yet, Peterkin does not suppress unpleasantness in her writing, but seems more to dwell on it. By writing about blacks, she moves her writing away from herself, yet is still able to deal with the subject matter that is so close to her heart.

Perhaps her feelings of powerlessness in the shadow of her father and husband caused her more easily to represent a people who had even less power than she did. Regardless, Peterkin does capture the black experience in a humanizing way which most other white writers of her time were either unable or unwilling to do. Peterkin's characters, like the protagonist in "Over the River," are portrayed as real people, not stereotypes. That she has been all but dismissed because they are black and she is not is an ironic form of racism in itself.

Peterkin's protagonist in "Over the River" is almost completely powerless. She is given no voice in the narration or the action of the story and no name either. She is deaf, mute, black, and female. She tries to obtain power in the form of charms which prove useless. Although she has worked her whole life to support herself, she has never had control over money. She has been used by a man and allows her baby to die, yet the story ends with her looking toward the future hopefully. Although she seems powerless, she is a survivor above all else.

Chapter 2

Like "Over the River," Richard Wright's "Long Black Song" begins with a black woman's bare feet: "Over and over she crooned, and at each lull of her voice she rocked the wooden cradle with a bare black foot" (125). This woman is not on a journey, however, but is caring for her baby. She is married, but her husband has gone for a couple of days to buy supplies. Wright's style of narration, which maintains the same point of view but moves from sentence to sentence between third person and first person, is very interesting, as can be seen in the following passage:

She wiped sweat from her forehead with the bottom of her dress and looked out over the green fields rolling up the hillsides. She sighed, fighting a feeling of loneliness. Lawd, its sho hard t pass the days wid Silas gone. Been mos a week now since he took the wagon outta here. Hope ain nothin wrong. He mus be buyin a heapa stuff there in Colwatah t be stayin all this time. Yes; maybe Silas would remember and bring that five-yard piece of red calico she wanted. Oh, Lawd! Ah hope he don fergit it! (126-127)

The individual sentences themselves are either first person or third person but are interspersed within the paragraph. While "Over the River" is told throughout by a limited omniscient narrator from the protagonist's point of view, "Long Black Song" has the same kind of narrator but with the thoughts of the protagonist told in first person sentences interspersed all along. Unlike Peterkin's character, this woman is telling some of her own story. She has a very strong voice. Thus, she has more power than the woman in "Over the River."

The protagonist of "Long Black Song" is dependent on her husband to buy her the things she wants and needs. She misses her husband, Silas, and thinks fondly of him, but her heart belongs to her previous love, Tom, about whom she daydreams. Her memories of Tom remind her of how lonely she is:

She stepped out on the porch and leaned against the wall of the house. Sky sang a red song. Fields whispered a green prayer. And song and prayer were dying in silence and shadow. Never in all her life had she been so much alone as she was now. (128)

Her "long black song" blends in with the red songs and green prayers of the natural things around her. She reflects that her life was much happier before Tom went off to war: "His leaving had left an empty black hole in her heart, a black hole that Silas had come in and filled.

But not quite. Silas had not quite filled that hole" (129). Her life is defined almost exclusively by her relationships with men, with the possible exception of her definition of self in relationship to her child.

While the woman awaits her husband's return, a white man drives up in his car and tries to sell her a "graphophone" with a clock in it. She is enamored by the beautiful, if totally unnecessary, object: "The color in the wood glowed softly. It reminded her of the light she saw sometimes in the baby's eyes. Slowly she slid a finger over a beveled edge; she wanted to take the box into her arms and kiss it" (132). Joyce Ann Joyce writes, "By restricting the reader to [the woman]'s thoughts, Wright ensures that we understand the immediate origin of the highly erotic, excited feelings that overcome her just before the arrival of the salesman" (380). Her reflections on Tom have put her in a sensual mood. When looking upon the white man, however, the woman merely thinks, "Hes jus lika lil boy" (131). She describes him as a little boy many times, but she stops thinking of him as a little boy when he gets her out into the dark and touches her breasts. "Naw, Mistah!" she says (135). She tries to push him away and even runs away from him, although they end up in bed together anyway and she seems at least partly to want to be with him.

However, she still has almost no power over the situation. She calls the white man "Mister" and refuses

his advances over and over again only to be ignored, so no matter whether she wanted to have sex with him or not, she told the man clearly that she did not want to.

Nagueyalti Warren disagrees, stating that the woman in this story "is the paragon of amoral sensuality and mindless stupidity. She is not raped and is hardly seduced by the white salesman. Instead, she appears to lead the young man to her bed" (69). Sherley Anne Williams also does not read the scene between Wright's protagonist and the white salesman to be rape, but has a more understanding explanation as far as the woman's actions are concerned:

Implicit here is the idea that black women have been conditioned by the threat of physical force to an almost unconscious submissiveness in the presence of white men, and it is this threat that helps to make "seduction" rather than rape, possible between [Wright's protagonist] and the white man. (409)

Feeling unable to resist may not be the equivalent of rape, but it is obvious that Wright's protagonist seems to have as little control over what is happening to her with the white salesman as she does in other aspects of her life.

In the second part of the story, the woman is finally given a name, Sarah, and it is only given then because her husband comes home and uses it when speaking to her. But at least Sarah's name is revealed, unlike the name of the protagonist in "Over the River." The salesman never

needed a name for Sarah. He told her he would come back the next day to talk to her husband about buying one of the clocks. When Sarah's husband, Silas, returns home that night, he figures out that she has slept with the salesman and becomes very angry. He yells at her:

From sunup t sundown Ah works mah guts out t pay them white trash bastards whut Ah owe em, n then Ah comes n fins they been in mah house! Ah cant go into their houses, n yuh know Gawddam well Ah cant! They don have no mercy on no black folks; wes just like dirt under their feet! Fer ten years Ah slaves lika dog t git mah farm free, givin ever penny Ah kin t em, n then Ah comes n fins they been in mah house (143)

Silas feels that he is powerless in the white society he lives in, but Sarah has even less power as she is below him in the social structure. He threatens to horse whip Sarah, so she takes the baby and flees.

While waiting for morning to come, she hides in the underbrush and thinks about the race situation: "White men killed the black men and black men killed the white. White men killed the black men because they could, and the black men killed the white men to keep from being killed" (147). She means to wake up in time to stop the white man on the road before he can arrive at the house and Silas can confront him, but she wakes up too late and sees Silas kill the white man. Another white man is in

the car and he gets away. It is interesting that although Sarah has had basically no control over any of the events that have happened, she feels guilty for what Silas is doing to himself: "She should not have done what she had done last night. This was all her fault. Lawd, ef anything happens t im its mah blame . . ." (148-149).

In the fourth and final section of the story, Silas insists on waiting around for the mob of white men, which will undoubtedly come when news of the murder reaches others. Sarah tries to talk him into running with her, but he refuses. When the white men come, Sarah watches from afar as Silas shoots at them and then they light the house on fire:

Again she waited for Silas, waited to see him fight his way out, waited to hear his call. Then she breathed a long, slow breath, emptying her lungs. She knew now. Silas had killed as many as he could and had stayed on to burn, had stayed without a murmur. She filled her lungs with a quick gasp as the walls fell in; the house was hidden by eager plumes of red. She turned and ran with the baby in her arms, ran blindly across the fields, crying, "Naw, Gawd!" (156)

Once again, Sarah is helpless. Even if she was seduced rather than raped, she had very little control over what happened between her and the white salesman. Her thoughts and feelings had no impact on the decisions her husband

made. And now she is left to fend for herself and her baby without a husband in a racist, sexist society.

The violent and hopeless ending of "Long Black Song" comments on Wright's frustrations about being black in a very racist America. What Wright is saying about black women as represented by Sarah, however, is definitely open for debate. Williams writes:

. . . our final image of the black woman is that of a flighty wanton who has carelessly tossed away her own honor and that of her husband--perhaps without even realizing that there is such a thing as racial or sexual honor--whose grasp of her husband's heroism, even though she has seen it in action, is still and at best, minimal. The message of the story, simply put, is that the black man must combat racist oppression without and treachery from the black woman within. (410)

Yet, the heroism of Sarah's husband is questionable. He saves nothing but his own sense of honor and seems to have little or no thoughts about his wife or child. Sarah realizes that the violence between men solves nothing, but no one will listen to her because she is powerless in her society. Williams is writing about the message that she believes Wright intended to send people with his story. The actual meaning a reader derives from the story may be something totally different. For example, Joyce

asserts, "As evidenced by his characterizations of Silas and the salesman and by his placing the story inside Sarah's thoughts, Wright does not judge Sarah's actions. Instead he condemns Silas and the salesman" (385). This view is obviously very different from the one that Williams believes Wright was trying to get across.

Sarah is a very sympathetic character. She is almost helpless and her life is controlled by the decisions of others. However, I believe that Wright is not blaming any one person, but is instead attacking the social system which dictates the actions of all. The salesman probably felt he was being persuasive, as opposed to forceful, and did not expect his life to be in danger because of his actions. Silas let his arrogance and pride overcome his common sense and supported the social conventions himself by treating his wife as property instead of a person. Sarah could have fought harder against the salesman. She could have been more careful about waking up to warn the salesman. Perhaps she could have gone to get some help. All three characters acted the way they did because of the values they had been taught all of their life. I feel that Wright is attacking the social constructs which would allow such actions to occur, as opposed to attacking any one character or group of people.

In yet another interpretation of "Long Black Song," Yoshinobu Hakutani maintains that Sarah and Silas end up having some views in common:

The plot reveals that while Silas gains property in the fields, he loses his wife, what he considers his most important property, at home. Ironically, his wife's infidelity makes him see that what is most important in life is not money but love, a view both characters come to share. Even though Silas chooses to die in protest against racism, whether it is in social or sexual relationships, the stand against racism becomes a vision both share. (239)

While I do not believe that anybody in this story is making a stand for interracial relationships, it is true that both Silas and Sarah have been oppressed and believe that the implicit inequalities of the society that they are a part of, based on hatred and ignorance, are wrong. What is ironic is, that although Silas thinks of Sarah as his property, they are both rendered powerless and impotent in the end.

Although some critics think of Sarah as weak and irresponsible, others see her as a very positive character. Edward Margolies writes that "Sarah is Wright's most lyrical achievement . . ." and goes on to say:

It is Sarah . . . who is the most memorable portrayal in the story. The narrative unfolds from her point of view--and she becomes, at the end, a kind of deep mother earth character, registering her primal instincts and reactions

to the violence and senselessness she sees all about her. But for all that, she remains beautifully human--her speech patterns and thoughts responding to an inner rhythm, somehow out of touch with the foolish strivings of men, yet caught up in her own melancholy memories and desires. (81)

Calling Sarah a "deep earth mother character" is a strong choice of words, but her connection to the earth is undebatable, just as her husband is connected to the earth because he is a farmer. She is always aware of her natural surroundings, and her rhythmic speech patterns place her almost outside of the realm of what is happening in the world of men. The fact that she, who is helpless to change anything, recognizes the hopelessness of the violence between the races makes Sarah a very sympathetic character.

The switching back and forth of the sentences between the way Sarah feels about things and the way she would actually say something shows how much more she simply feels things than thinks about them. For example, this passage appears early in the story:

She saw green fields wrapped in the thickening gloam. It was as if they had left the earth, those fields, and were floating slowly skyward. The afterglow lingered, red, dying, somehow tenderly sad. And far away, in front of her,

earth and sky met in a soft swoon of shadow.

A cricket chirped, sharp and lonely; and it seemed she could hear it chirping long after it had stopped. Silas oughta c mon soon. Ahm tireda staying here by mahsef. (127)

Sarah only thinks the last two sentences of this paragraph; she feels the rest of it without thinking. Wright has painted the picture of a non-thinking woman, but it is not necessarily a totally negative one. Joyce declares:

Seeing her husband and the salesman as two toy soldiers playing games, Sarah is obviously wiser than either Silas or the white man, both of whom treated her as if she were a toy or object when in fact it is their own hatred of each other and their complicity in racist constructs that make them objects. (385)

Sarah is wiser than the men in that she realizes that the violence will solve nothing, but she comes up with no solutions either. She never thinks of herself as deserving more than what she has. She is grateful for the way Silas treats her in comparison to the other women she knows: "Silas was as good to her as any black man could be to a black woman. Most of the black women worked in the fields as croppers. But Silas had given her her own home, and that was more than many others had done for their women" (147).

Wright has been often accused of deriding the character of the black woman. Speaking of "Long Black Song," Margaret Walker writes:

Not only is this story a violent and tragic piece, . . . rooted in southern race hatred and sexual warfare, it foreshadows Wright's negative treatment of all women, and particularly black women. Nothing grieves and upsets him more than the black woman whose sexual partner is a white man--no matter how accidental or temporary the liaison. He vents his hatred on her, not on the white man. (117)

Although Sarah may be thoughtless, she is very insightful about the most simple things that her husband either does not see or simply ignores. She knows that the violence helps nothing and wishes, in an admittedly naive way, that everyone could just get along. Although she does lose her husband and home, Sarah is not the character who is burnt alive, and if hatred is being vented on her, she ends up relatively unscathed.

Zora Neale Hurston did a review of Uncle Tom's Children, which includes "Long Black Song," when it first was published in 1938. She wrote that some of Wright's writing was very powerful, but also that, "With his facility, one wonders what he would have done had he dealt with plots that touched the broader and more fundamental

phases of Negro life instead of confining himself to the "spectacular" (Rpt. in Gates and Appiah 3). Then, in conclusion Hurston wrote:

Since the author himself is a Negro, his dialect is a puzzling thing. One wonders how he arrived at it. Certainly he does not write by ear unless he is tone-deaf. But aside from the broken speech of his characters, the book contains some beautiful writing. One hopes that Mr. Wright will find in Negro life a vehicle for his talents.

(Gates and Appiah 4)

Hurston felt that Wright could be a good writer but that the plots of his stories were unrealistic, like a black man waiting for and then holding off a mob of white men only voluntarily to allow himself to burn up out of pride. She also thought that Wright's attempt to capture Black Vernacular English on paper leaves something to be desired.

Whether the dialect of "Long Black Song" is well written or not does not detract from the fact that Sarah is given her own voice. Not only can she speak and does, but the story includes her innermost thoughts, not in quotation marks, but as an integral part of the narration. The story is told totally from her point of view. By giving Sarah such a strong voice, Wright has effectively made the reader feel more sympathetic to her otherwise almost complete lack of power. Sarah has virtually no control in her daily life. Her husband has all of the financial

power and treats her as part of his property. The white salesman uses her lack of power to get what he wants from her and she has no control over what he does to her. She has no influence over her husband's suicidal last stand against racism. And she has no control over the violence the men around her commit, although she sees the futility of their actions. Like the protagonist in "Over the River," Sarah has control only over her own actions and her baby.

The difference between them in this aspect is that Sarah protects her baby's life while Peterkin's protagonist feels that her baby is better off dead.

Chapter 3

"The Gilded Six-Bits" was first published by Zora Neale Hurston in 1933. Unlike the two previous stories discussed, the narrative point of view in "The Gilded Six-Bits" switches back and forth from the main female character to the main male character, although it remains in the third person. There are also three short sections from three other points of view. The first "other" narrative section is the first three paragraphs of the story, which are from a totally omniscient narrator and give the setting: "It was a Negro yard around a Negro house in a Negro settlement . . ." (985). The other two will be discussed later in this chapter. Missie May is the black woman in this story; she has the power to make her own decisions about some things and although she makes mistakes, she also learns from them.

The couple in "The Gilded Six-Bits" have the closest thing to an equal relationship that we have seen so far. Although Joe has the job and Missie May keeps the house, as was the acceptable practice of the time, Joe gives his wife some of the money to have control over. They talk as equals, having actual two-sided conversations. She voices her own thoughts on matters even if they do not agree with those of her husband. The couple's first

discussion of Otis D. Slemmons tells volumes about the couple's relationship:

Joe reached over gently and toyed with Missie May's ear. "You jes' say dat cause you love me, but Ah know Ah can't hold no light to Otis D. Slemmons. Ah ain't never been nowhere and Ah ain't got nothin' but you."

Missie May got on his lap and kissed him and he kissed back in kind. Then he went on. "All de womens is crazy 'bout 'im everywhere he go."

"How you know dat, Joe?"

"He tole us so hisself."

"Dat don't make it so. His mouf is cut cross-ways, ain't it? Well, he kin lie jes' lak anybody else."

"Good Lawd, Missie! You womens sho is hard to sense into things. He's got a five-dollar gold piece for a stick-pin and he got a ten-dollar gold piece on his watch chain and his mouf is jes' crammed full of gold teethes. Sho wisht it wuz mine. And whut make it so cool, he got money 'cumulated. And womens give it all to 'im."

"Ah don't see whut de womens see on 'im. Ah wouldn't give 'im a wink if de sheriff wuz after 'im." (988-989)

Not only does this passage show the equality of the relationship that the couple have; it also introduces Otis D. Slemmons.

Notice that Joe is the one who expounds on the superiority of Slemmons, while Missie May is not so quick to be taken in by appearances and big talk. Gyl Jones writes:

At first, [Missie] May is not taken in by Otis or what he represents. Then there is a reversal. The next time we hear the couple talking together (after they have returned from seeing Otis at the local ice-cream parlor), Joe is expressing her earlier values and she is expressing his. We see then all the things she wants for him "because she loves him." Nevertheless, she wants them (148)

Missie May does not care about such things until Joe tells her how important they are to him by speaking of Slemmons so highly. Either her values have changed to be more like those of her husband, or she simply wants Joe to have what he has communicated to her would make him happy. Nancy Chinn and Elizabeth E. Dunn write:

Joe easily steers Missie May down a new path. Open to, though admittedly not completely taken in by Joe's suggestions, opinions, and desires (she still does not find Slemmons physically appealing), Missie May reconsiders her priorities.

Suddenly, money matters in a new way. Why let Joe slave away at the fertilizer plant for a few silver coins tossed at the door when gold is available? (789)

Missie May adopts the ideals set forth to her by her husband, someone she obviously respects and admires.

The reader is surprised along with Joe when he comes home early from work one night to discover Slemmons in bed with Missie May. When Joe lights the match and discovers the adulterous relationship, "The great belt on the wheel of Time slipped and eternity stood still" (991). Joe's understandable devastation is poignantly, if only briefly, related: "A howling wind raced across his heart, but underneath its fury he heard his wife sobbing and Slemmons pleading for his life" (991). It is here that the second "other" narrative point of view is found, that of Otis Slemmons: "Joe just stood. Slemmons looked at the window, but it was screened. Joe stood out like a rough-backed mountain between him and the door. Barring him from escape, from sunrise, from life" (991). Slemmons goes on to think about sneaking a punch, but is punched himself before he can even react. He is obviously no match for Joe, who hits him several more times before he can flee. Joe ends up with the ten-dollar gold piece still attached to part of the watch chain in his hand.

Missie May cries and says that she had been with Slemmons because he had promised to give her the gold money

that she had said earlier she wanted for Joe. They spend the rest of the night quiet and apart. In the morning, when Joe asks if she is going to make him breakfast, she thinks: "No need to die today. Joe needed her for a few more minutes anyhow" (993). Here is yet another black woman who is defined by her relationship to men.

Joe remains distant from Missie May until one night when "youth triumphed and Missie exulted" (994). She is excited until she finds the gold watch charm has been left under the pillow for her:

She was glad at first that Joe had left it there. Perhaps he was through with her punishment. They were man and wife again. Then another thought came clawing at her. He had come to buy from her as if she were any woman in the long house. Fifty cents for her love. As if to say that he could pay as well as Slemmons. (994)

She also discovers that the gold piece is really only a gilded half dollar. She feels that she has been prostituted twice now for something that was not even what it seemed. She starts to leave Joe, but decides that she will not be the one to give up on the marriage.

Missie May gives birth to a baby boy. Joe's mother says: "he sho is de spittin' image of yuh, son. Dat's yourn all right, if you never git another one, dat un is yourn" (995). Her declaration erases any possible doubt

as to the baby's paternity. Everything seems to go back to normal. Joe goes to the store to buy candy for Missie May as he used to and uses the gilded half dollar to buy it. This incident leads to the third "other" narrative section, a very short paragraph in which, after Joe leaves the store, the clerk says to another customer, "Wisht I could be like these darkies. Laughin' all the time. Nothin' worries 'em" (996).

This comment is, of course, very ironic since the reader knows that this man's life has been anything but worry-free lately. Chinn and Dunn state:

Joe reveals nothing of the complexity of his real life, his struggle with Missie May, or his own culpability in the incident with Slemmons. In doing so, he protects himself from any advice or judgment that the store clerk may have been inclined to offer and simply lets the clerk's stereotypical image stand. By connecting Joe to the long tradition of deception, Hurston gives his character new weight and worldliness and lends the story a political twist. (789-90)

What Joe admires so much about Slemmons is his apparent worldliness, which by the end of the story Joe has acquired for himself through hard experience. Missie May has also become more worldly through this experience. Evora W. Jones asserts: ". . . Missie May learns to differentiate between the valued and the valueless. This, for Missie

May, is a maturation process, a journey" (320). Although both Joe and Missie May have gained maturity, they have as a direct result also lost some of the fun innocence that was a big part of their relationship before Missie May's infidelity. But the reader feels at the end of the story that the couple will go back to their equal relationship. Missie May had control over her own actions; she misused that power, but also learned from her mistakes.

Being a black woman herself, Hurston would be expected to be the most sympathetic of these four authors to the plight of black women during her time, but, surprisingly, Hurston is perhaps the most neutral. Cheryl A. Wall states:

Hurston was not the first Afro-American woman to publish a novel, but she was the first to create language and imagery that reflected the reality of black women's lives. Ignoring the stereotypes, social and literary, that her predecessors spent their energies rejecting, Hurston rooted her art in the cultural traditions of the black rural South. (371)

In an interview with Nick Aaron Ford, Hurston said, "I think only in terms of individuals. I am interested in you now, not as a Negro man but as a man. I am not interested in the race problem, but I am interested in the problems of individuals, white ones and black ones" (8). "The Gilded Six-Bits" is about the problems of an individual couple, not about racial problems. Otis Slemmons

is not white. However, Hurston does touch on the race issue when she includes the comment of the white store clerk. This is a more subtle, yet much more poignant reminder of the ignorance that perpetuates racism than the violence between the men in Wright's "Long Black Song." While Hurston does not dwell on the race issue, she still realizes that it is an integral part of being black in the American South.

Missie May has an equal relationship with her husband although she is very dependent upon him for her happiness. Hurston gives her a point of view equal to that of her husband's in telling the story. She is given a voice in this story and is allowed to have opinions that differ from her husband's although she is strongly influenced by him. She has the freedom to make her own decisions and learn from her mistakes and her husband forgives her for those mistakes. Missie May believes that money is power because her husband teaches her that value when they first discuss Otis D. Slemmons. She tries to obtain that power for her husband and herself by sleeping with Slemmons and instead of getting the money, she learns some valuable lessons: the most important being that the love and trust she and Joe share gives her more power over her life than the money ever could have given her. The money is gilded; their relationship is real. The baby Missie May has helps to mend her broken marriage and is another sign of her growing maturity. She and Joe are moving into a more

responsible phase of their lives together by becoming a family, instead of just a couple. Missie May grows as a person because of her mistakes and becomes more mature. She is far from powerless, but does not go untouched by the ever-present racism and sexism in her life either.

Chapter 4

The point of view of William Faulkner's "Delta Autumn" is totally different from those in the other three stories discussed here. The limited omniscient point of view in this story is that of a white man, and the black woman on whom we will focus is not the protagonist, but a secondary character. She is a surprising character in many ways, but none more than the fact that she, as a black woman, is confident and powerful in her own right.

The narrative focus is on Isaac McCaslin, an old man who is going on a hunting trip with his younger cousin, Roth, and some of Roth's friends. The younger men are teasing Roth about something that Isaac is oblivious to, and the reader only discovers later the true meaning behind their jests. When Roth mentions some hesitation in coming, one of the other men says:

Oh, Roth's coming . . . If it was just a buck he was coming all this distance for, now. But he's got a doe in here. Of course a old man like Uncle Ike cant be interested in no doe, not one that walks on two legs--when she's standing up, that is. Pretty light-colored, too. The one he was after them nights last fall when he said he was coon-hunting, Uncle Ike.

The one I figured maybe he was still running when he was gone all that month last January. But of course a old man like Uncle Ike aint got no interest in nothing like that. (321)

The light-colored doe turns out to be a woman. Notice the references to "coon-hunting" and a "pretty light-colored doe." These references become obvious later when Isaac discovers that not only is there a woman, but she is black.

Isaac does not react to the references to Roth's woman. Then about two-thirds of the way through the story, Roth tries to give Isaac a thick envelope and tells him that a messenger is coming: "'Tell her No,' he said. 'Tell her.'" They stared at one another--the old face, wan, sleep-raddled above the tumbled bed, the dark and sullen younger one at once furious and cold" (339). Isaac realizes that Roth has been involved with a woman and is now paying her off rather than accepting responsibility for his actions. Isaac asks: "What did you promise her that you haven't the courage to face her and retract?" (339). Roth claims he has promised nothing and leaves the envelope with Isaac, who feels as though no time has passed when the woman arrives:

. . . then the woman entering, in a man's hat and a man's slicker and rubber boots, carrying the blanket-swaddled bundle on one arm and holding the edge of the unbuttoned raincoat over it with the other hand: and bringing something else,

something intangible, an effluvia which he knew he would recognize in a moment because Isham had already told him, warned him, by sending the young negro to the tent to announce the visitor instead of coming himself, the flap falling at last on the young negro and they were alone--the face indistinct and as yet only young and with dark eyes, queerly colorless

(340)

She is wearing the clothes of a man and what Isaac does not quite realize here that he realizes later is that this woman is black. The reason that Isham sent the younger man to introduce the visitor is to show that the woman is not an important visitor, as she would be if she were white. The woman admits to Isaac that the baby is Roth's. They talk about the relationship she and Roth have had.

This woman is not like the black women in the other stories. She seems much more confident and powerful even though she is left with a child whose father refuses to claim it because he is white and she is black. Her demeanor is not that of a woman who is dependent on a man for her survival:

She regarded him, almost peacefully, with that unwinking and heatless fixity--the dark wide bottomless eyes in the face's dead and toneless pallor which to the old man looked anything but dead, but young and incredibly and even

ineradicably alive--as though she were not only not looking at anything, she was not even speaking to anyone but herself. (343)

The way she speaks is not that of somebody oppressed and powerless either. Isaac remarks, "You sound like you have been to college even. You sound almost like a Northerner even, not like the draggle-tailed women of these Delta peckerwoods" (343). This woman's voice gives her power. And although part of that power comes from the fact that her voice fools people into believing she is white, she also does not hide behind that facade.

Isaac compares her to white women in this passage because he has not yet consciously realized that she is black, but when she mentions that her aunt "takes in washing," he does realize it and his demeanor towards her changes. He is horrified:

Now he understood what it was she had brought into the tent with her, what old Isham had already told him by sending the youth to bring her in to him--the pale lips, the skin pallid and dead-looking yet not ill, the dark and tragic and foreknowing eyes. Maybe in a thousand or two thousand years in America, he thought. But not now! Not now! He cried, not loud, in a voice of amazement, pity, and outrage: "You're a nigger!" (344)

She admits that she is black and also that she is distantly related to both Isaac and Roth. It is not the fact that she is black that disturbs Isaac the most, but the idea that his family's sins against the black race, about which he has long felt guilty, are continuing. She tries to refuse the money in the envelope, but Isaac insists that she take it. She "thrust the money into the slicker's side pocket as if it were a rag, a soiled handkerchief" (346). By giving the money such little value, she turns a situation from one that should be humbling into one which gives her power.

Isaac also gives her one of his only possessions, a hunting horn given to him by a departed friend of the family whom Isaac deeply respected. About the horn, Warren Beck writes:

Had Isaac had a son, no doubt this heirloom would have come to him; now Roth's son . . . is to have it, and Isaac's proffering it is a gesture of affiliation. In what woods this child in his youth may sound this old hunting horn and to what end is not to be conjectured; yet as with many objects made symbolic by association, its very inutility enhances its significance, while in this instance certainly it serves the giver more than the receiver. (495-96)

That Isaac feels less guilty for his family's crimes by giving such a gift to the child may be one reason for the

offering. Another reason may also be that Isaac is giving his blessing to what he sees is the future: a mixing of the races (although he also has trouble dealing with the fact that he can see it happening in front of him). This child is not only his distant relative, but the end result of a racially diverse society.

Isaac also seems to respect this woman. Although she is being rejected by her baby's father whom she obviously has feelings for, she accepts the situation and seems strong enough to get through it on her own. She does not want the money, but immediately accepts the horn as a gift for her child. She does mention the fact that she has already been providing for herself: ". . . I got a job, teaching school here . . ." (343). She already knows she can provide for herself and her baby. She did not come to Roth because she wants to catch a husband or for financial support, but because she loves Roth and wants to be with him.

Isaac tells the woman to go back North and find a man of her own race to marry: "Then you will forget all this, forget it ever happened, that he ever existed . . ." (346). The woman's reply is like a slap in the face: "Old man, . . . have you lived so long and forgotten so much that you dont remember anything you ever knew or felt or even heard about love?" (346). After this comment the woman leaves. Isaac is a white man, the most powerful person in the social structure, and yet this black woman

who is supposed to be the least powerful verbally attacks him. She is given a strong voice and she uses it.

The similarities between Faulkner and his character Isaac go beyond the fact that they are both white men. Faulkner dedicated Go Down, Moses to the black woman who was like a mother to him. Michael Grimwood asserts:

. . . [Faulkner] had first conceived of the book as a repudiation of plantation preconceptions and black stereotypes, which he himself had exploited. Just as the only McCaslin legacy Ike accepts is the execution of his grandfather's bequest to his black heirs, so Faulkner's dedication of Go Down, Moses "To Mammy Caroline Barr" resembles a bequest also. The book is one payment of his hereditary debt to the Negro race. On the other hand, Faulkner portrayed Ike's repudiation and self-dispossession just at a time when he was fighting desperately to retain his own ersatz plantation. He wrote the very stories that undermine the plantation stereotype in order to earn enough money to retain his paternal relationship to the blacks at Greenfield Farm. (284-85)

So like Julia Mood Peterkin, Faulkner used literature to fight against the very lifestyle he lived. Faulkner also paradoxically wrote to maintain that same lifestyle. To live in the South in the period between the World Wars

meant to be a part of the racist society. If Faulkner and Peterkin had not lived in the South, however, they could not have captured the black experience as well as they did.

It is most interesting that Faulkner is a white man and out of the four authors examined here the farthest from personally understanding what it is like to be a black woman, yet his black female character is the most self-reliant and respectable character of all. She is thoughtful and carries herself well. We do not see her baby or the way the woman interacts with it, but we know that she will not allow it to die and its existence will neither keep her from Roth nor bind him to her. The baby is her child, and she will love and care for it no matter what happens between her and Roth. She also tests the stereotypes by looking and sounding white and by wearing men's clothing. She shows in more ways than one that she is not defined by what other people think she should be. She has the nerve, as a black woman in the South to stand up to a white man. Although this woman does not tell her own story and the reader never knows what she is thinking, it is obvious from Faulkner's description of her and the fact that she is not afraid to voice her opinion that she does have power that the other women did not. Perhaps it is because the reader does not know what she is thinking that she remains such a strong individual in our minds. She is a separate entity, someone for us to respect.

Conclusion

The black women in Julia Mood Peterkin's "Over the River," Richard Wright's "Long Black Song," Zora Neale Hurston's "The Gilded Six-Bits," and William Faulkner's "Delta Autumn" are similar in many respects that must reflect the position black women held in the South during the period between World War I and World War II. They are defined by their primary roles, which are as a mother and/or a wife. They generally have very little power over what happens to them or how they are treated. They are protective mothers (even Peterkin's protagonist feels she is protecting her baby by allowing it to die). Even with as little power as each of them possesses, however, they are survivors, strong and determined when they have to be.

The gender and race of each author does not correspond to the amount of power each one gives to his/her black female character the way the reader might expect. Hurston is a black female, yet her story is the most racially and sexually neutral. She gives both her male and female protagonists equal attention and does not dwell on the race issue, though she includes a subtly racist comment near the end. Wright, as a black man, does dwell on the race issue. The whole message his story sends is political

and focuses totally on the inequalities between blacks and whites. Wright is not particularly sympathetic toward his black female protagonist; he is not particularly sympathetic to any of his characters in this work. The white female author, Peterkin, does not dwell on race; and the sexism in her story is subtle. Yet she leaves her protagonist almost completely powerless when one would imagine she might like to bestow the power on her character that she found lacking in her own life. Perhaps she made herself feel more powerful by focusing on those even less powerful than herself. Faulkner, as the white male author, could be expected to be the least sympathetic, or the most likely to be unable to understand the position of black women in his society, yet it is his black female character who has the most power. Faulkner could be accused of underestimating the hardship of being a black woman. Perhaps his character is the most powerful because she is of mixed blood and looks white, so she is not a "real" black woman. Regardless, she does not hide the fact that she is black by society's definition and thinks of herself as a black woman, yet she is still the most powerful of the characters examined in this paper.

The point of view does not relate to the power of each character the way one would expect either. Putting the reader inside a character's mind should make the reader feel closer to the character, and it does. But in this case, it is the character whose mind we cannot see into

who commands our respect the most quickly. The black woman in "Delta Autumn" is not its protagonist like the women in the other three stories; she is a secondary character. Yet, in spite of or perhaps partly because of this distance between us and her, the reader cannot help but admire her courage and sense of self. She is not defined by men; she is not even defined by gender or race, but questions those labels by being herself and refusing to be a stereotype. She stands up for herself against a white man when the other three women do not stand up for themselves at all. The fact that this secondary character has the most power compared to three protagonists is very surprising.

The extent of the voice each character is given is related to the point of view, yet, once again, not in the direct way one might expect. Although the reader knows what the protagonist of "Over the River" is thinking, she has almost no voice at all. She literally cannot speak. While the black woman in "Delta Autumn" is distanced from the reader, she is able to voice her opinions strongly without the reader being told her every thought.

Both Peterkin's protagonist and Faulkner's character have more control over their lives than Wright's or Hurston's protagonists who are married. The woman in "Over the River" works in the fields or washing dishes although she is given no money to control, while the woman in "Delta Autumn" works as a teacher. Sarah and Missie May, as

married women, do not go out and work, but instead keep the house and children for their husbands who work on a farm and in a factory. Out of all of these men and women, only the woman in "Delta Autumn" has a job that is professional as opposed to manual, another reason for us to respect her above the others.

What we learn from these four stories collectively is that black women during the 1920's, '30's, and '40's were the members of American society, particularly in the South, with the least amount of power. They were generally defined by their husbands and children. They had little or no control over money. They were not expected to voice their opinions and were in general completely oppressed. Chronologically speaking, "Over the River" was published first in 1924 and "Delta Autumn" was appropriately published last in 1942, although not long after "Long Black Song" (1940). Perhaps Faulkner's story points in the direction that the equal rights movement was to go, giving black women more control over their lives and more power to voice their own opinions.

Works Cited

- Beck, Warren. Faulkner: Essays by Warren Beck. Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1976.
- Chinn, Nancy and Elizabeth E. Dunn. "'The Ring of Singing Metal on Wood': Zora Neale Hurston's Artistry in 'The Gilded Six-Bits.'" Mississippi Quarterly 49 (1996): 775-90.
- Faulkner, William. "Delta Autumn." Go Down, Moses. 1940. New York: Vintage-Random, 1990. 319-48.
- Ford, Nick Aaron. "A Study in Race Relations--A Meeting with Zora Neale Hurston." Zora Neale Hurston. Ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea, 1986. 7-10.
- Gates, Henry Louis, Jr. and K. A. Appiah, eds. Richard Wright: Critical Perspectives: Past and Present. New York: Amistad, 1993.
- Grimwood, Michael. Heart in Conflict: Faulkner's Struggles with Vocation. Athens: U of Georgia P, 1987.
- Hakutani, Yoshinobu. "Racial Oppression and Alienation in Richard Wright's 'Down by the Riverside' and 'Long Black Song.'" Mississippi Quarterly 46 (1993): 231-39.
- Hine, Darlene Clark, ed. Black Women in America: An Historical Encyclopedia. Brooklyn: Carlson, 1993.

- Hurston, Zora Neale. "The Gilded Six-Bits." 1933. Zora Neale Hurston: Novels and Stories. Ed. Cheryl A. Wall. New York: Library of America, 1995. 985-96.
- Jones, Evora W. "The Pastoral and Picaresque in Zora Neale Hurston's 'The Gilded Six-Bits.'" College Language Association Journal 35 (1992): 316-24.
- Jones, Gayl. "Breaking Out of the Conventions of Dialect." Zora Neale Hurston: Critical Perspectives Past and Present. Ed. Henry Lewis Gates, Jr. and K. A. Appiah. New York: Amistad, 1993. 141-53.
- Joyce, Joyce Ann. "Richard Wright's 'Long Black Song': A Moral Dilemma." Mississippi Quarterly 42 (1989): 379-85.
- Lerner, Gerda, ed. Black Women in White America: A Documentary History. New York: Vintage, 1972.
- Margolies, Edward. "Wright's Craft: The Short Stories." Richard Wright: Critical Perspectives Past and Present. Ed. Henry Lewis Gates, Jr. and K. A. Appiah. New York: Amistad, 1993. 75-97.
- Peterkin, Julia Mood. "Over the River." 1924. Collected Short Stories of Julia Peterkin. Ed. Frank Durham. Columbia: U of South Carolina P, 1970. 99-112.
- Robeson, Elizabeth. "The Ambiguity of Julia Peterkin." The Journal of Southern History 61 (1995): 761-86.
- Walker, Margaret. Richard Wright, Daemonic Genius. New York: Warner, 1988.

- Wall, Cheryl A. "Zora Neale Hurston: Changing Her Own Words." American Novelists Revisited: Essays in Feminist Criticism. Ed. Fritz Fleischmann. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1982. 371-93.
- Warren, Nagueyalti. "Black Girls and Native Sons: Female Images in Selected Works by Richard Wright." Richard Wright: Myths and Realities. Ed. C. James Trotman. New York: Garland, 1988. 59-77.
- Williams, Sherley Anne. "Papa Dick and Sister-Woman: Reflections on Women in the Fiction of Richard Wright." American Novelists Revisited: Essays in Feminist Criticism. Ed. Fritz Fleischmann. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1982. 394-415.
- Williams, Susan Millar. "'There's No Way To Tell You Who I Am': Julia Peterkin's Black Voices." Publications of the Arkansas Philological Association 15 (1989): 144-53.
- Wright, Richard. "Long Black Song." Uncle Tom's Children. 1936. New York: HarperCollins, 1993. 125-56.