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Discovering African American Folklore in the Classroom

Lee Wright

In my Introduction to Literature class, I always include African American literature. How can I not? The works of contemporary African American writers enrich our understanding of the diverse cultures that are part of the American cultural fabric, just as their insights illustrate the beauty—and the anguish—of being black in America. Reading and discussing African American fiction with students is absolutely essential if our American youth are to face the moral and political issues of race, gender, and class head-on.

What I would like to do in this essay is to examine a few works of fiction by African American writers that incorporate African American folklore.

The first work, Toni Cade Bambara's short story "Blues Ain't No Mockin Bird," more than any story I know, begs the question: How does a reader identify a character's race in a story when the author does not explicitly denote race to the reader? In Bambara's story, social convention, in the absence of any overt statement identifying the race of the story's characters, is one way to distinguish the race of the characters. But the story reinforces that identity—and drives home its central theme—by making use of African American folklore. The question of a reader's recognition of fictive racial identity arises because too often readers, and especially student readers, assume that because a writer is African American

that his/her characters are too. Most of the time, this assumption is correct; after all, writers typically write about what they know. But not always.

In the absence of a clear statement about a character's race, the reader must rely on other information in the work to distinguish racial lines. That information could be a Jim Crow episode requiring that the reader recognize the subtle nuances of social and/or racial conventions. At other times, the use of folklore can reveal, and/or reinforce, racial identity.

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In my classroom discussion of African American literature, I make a point of asking students how they tell, or *know*, that the protagonists in the story are African American. In the absence of a blunt statement by the author, what clues do they look for? What specific cultural manifestations do students recognize as being distinctly African American (or racial)? Addressing this question with students makes them confront some of their own expectations and assumptions about African American literature.

Bambara, despite being a fine writer, is not a household name to most students. In my own classroom, it has been my hope that students will not recognize her as an African American writer. Even if students do know of Bambara, the essential question remains: What is it about "Blues Ain't No Mockin Bird" that identifies its main characters as African American? This story is an especially apt one for this exercise because Bambara never **explicitly** identifies any of the story's characters as black or white.

The story is a first-person narrative, told by a young, unnamed and naive girl who, while playing in her yard with her cousin Cathy, and two neighbor boys, Terry and Tyrone, notices two men from the county welfare department approaching with a camera to take movies of their property. Granny Cain, the family's matriarch, had been making Christmas rum cakes, but upon seeing the men approach, her demeanor, and humming voice, change. She is offended by the men's racist assumptions; in particular, the way they address her as "Aunty," and their uninvited intrusion onto her property. When the men are put off by Granny, they go away, but return when Granddaddy Cain emerges from the woods. He is carrying a half-dead chicken hawk over his shoulder, which he nails to a toolshed. When the chicken hawk's angry mate arrives, he knocks it out of the air with a hammer, killing it. He then turns his attention to the men from the county, removing the film from their camera. They go away and Granny starts humming again, "high, not low and grumbly" (40). The narrator knows she has witnessed something significant, but isn't sure exactly what.

In my classroom, I begin the discussion of this compelling story with the question: what race are the main characters, the Cains? (OR: Are the Cains poor white folk like the Snopes family in Faulkner's short story, "Barn Burning"?) When pressed to supply textual evidence, my students usually respond that one of the boys in the story is named Tyrone—presumably a common name used by African Americans. Expecting that response, I resurrect the once famous actor, Tyrone Power, as an example of someone who is white named "Tyrone." With that line of reasoning circumvented, most often, that is as far as the

discussion goes without significant prodding on my part.

This is not surprising, really. For one of the telling cultural—and racist—conventions used in the story by Bambara is to have the men from the welfare office refer to Granny Cain as "Aunty." Because most students north of the Mason-Dixon line have no experience with this convention, they don't recognize its social implications; they read right over it, failing to note the degree of privilege assumed by whites who address blacks with the familiar, yet demeaning, titles of "aunt" or "uncle." After some brief classroom discussion, however, students raised beyond the pale of such racist terminology are better able to understand the friction inherent in Granny's encounter with the men, and Granny's sudden emotional metamorphosis. They see the men's calling Granny Cain "Aunty," for what it is—racist. Now, they understand why Granny Cain is insulted by their unwelcome familiarity, and why she responds to them: "Your mama and I are not related" (37). Students now **know** that the Cains are African Americans—but now that knowledge is based on an understanding of southern social convention, and not merely on assumption.

What I find especially instructive about this story is that Bambara also employs African American folklore to further signify the racial identity of her main characters. Her use of folklore relates specifically to the characterization of Granddaddy Cain, and results in a portrayal which subtly compares him to the legendary folk hero, John Henry. The first and most obvious clue to this elevated status has to do with his hammer, which Granddaddy Cain uses to literally knock a hawk out of the sky.

To bring this detail into a stronger light, I ask my students the following questions: Have any of you ever knocked a bird out of the sky using a hammer? Ever considered it? Don't you think that it's unusual?

When a particular detail in a story is extraordinary (as this one is) and that detail and others like it are repeated more than once, I know and I want my students to know that the author is using those details to emphasize a point! Certainly, Bambara has her young narrator admire and dwell upon her Granddaddy's nobility—and

hammer—for a reason. Because Granddaddy Cain appears larger-than-life, I ask my students two questions: 1) Do you think Granddaddy Cain is being portrayed as, or is being compared to, a mythic or legendary hero?; 2) Who could that be?

Before we continue, let me provide some additional details used to describe Granddaddy Cain. When Granddaddy Cain confronts the two men from the county welfare department, the story's young narrator makes some judgments about her grandfather, while also relating some past memories:

They [the county men] didn't know what to do.... Granddaddy tall and silent and like a king.... Then Granddaddy holds his hand out—this huge hand I used to sit in when I was a baby and he'd carry me through the house to my mother like I was a gift on a tray. Like he used to on the trains.... Other men....said he had engines in his feet and motors in his hands and couldn't no train throw him off and couldn't nobody turn him round. They were big enough for motors, his hands were. (39; emphases added)

After focusing on the above passage, I press the discussion of this story by asking: Knowing Granddaddy Cain is black, what legendary hero from African American folklore is associated with a hammer and might be said to have had hands like motors?

At this point, someone is usually able to identify the folk hero John Henry. Having jumped that hurdle, I give my students a copy of a folk ballad about John Henry to compare to Bambara's poignant description of Granddaddy Cain. (A word of caution, though: Not all of the collected folk ballads entitled "John Henry" are the same.) Below, are three stanzas found in the version of "John Henry" which I distribute to my students to help them draw a satisfactory connection between John Henry and Granddaddy Cain:

1) *John Henry tol' his cap'n
Dat a man wuz a natural man,
An' befo' he'd let dat steam drill run him
down,*

*He'd fall dead wid a hammer in his han',
He'd fall dead wid a hammer in his han'.*

5) *John Henry went down de railroad
Wid a twelve-poun' hammer by his side,*

*He walked down de track but he didn' come
back,*

*'Cause he laid down his hammer an' he died,
'Cause he laid down his hammer an' he died.*

7) *John Henry had a little baby,
Hel' him in de palm of his han'.
De las' words I heard de pore boy say:
"Son, yo're gonna be a steel-drivin' man,
Son, yo're gonna be a steel-drivin' man!"
(25)*

By relating the fabled competition between John Henry and a steam-powered engine, and by looking at the details of these three stanzas and their explicit association of John Henry with a hammer, with the railroad, and with carrying a baby in his hand, students are able to see that the story's young narrator, whether consciously or not, has made an implicit comparison of her Granddaddy with John Henry. The detail about John Henry holding a baby in the palm of his hand, and the narrator's childhood memory of a similar episode, is especially germane. So, too, is the fact that the story ends with the narrator drawing the reader's attention to her grandfather's hammer several times.

The point of this exercise is simple: As a teacher, I want to challenge my students' assumptions about race in this story. I also want to challenge students to search for meanings that exceed the obvious, and to allow students to see how folklore can be, and is, used by African American writers to enhance their portrayal of characters. The story's young narrator may be naive, but an alert reader will note that Granddaddy Cain's strength and self-confidence are dramatized in a way to signify a comparison to John Henry, and further, to illustrate a cultural legacy which is viable and instructive. In short, the young narrator is proud of her grandfather and the way he handles the intrusive, and racist, white men who threaten her family's economic and personal well-being. In my classroom discussion, I try to lead students to the realization that the story's anonymous first person point-of-view resembles an oral tale and that this story is itself a variant of the John Henry legend, a kind of palimpsestic rewriting. Hopefully, students will recognize that the narrator's self-proclaimed novice is itself a storytelling device meant to invite

and challenge listeners (readers) to search for a deeper meaning to this tale than is obvious.

Focusing on the folklore underlying this story will illustrate to students how African American writers use folklore to substantiate and display the everyday usefulness of traditional knowledge and beliefs.

TRICKSTER TALES and the trickster tradition are also an instructive place to linger in the study of African American folklore. Any student of African American folklore needs to have at least a passing knowledge of the Brer Rabbit tales as preserved by Joel Chandler Harris in *Uncle Remus* (note the use of "uncle"). I want to look briefly at the Brer Rabbit tales and illustrate how they, like the John Henry legend, suggest and signify meaning and strategies for living in the works where they appear.

Of the thirty-four folk tales included in *Uncle Remus*, I typically focus on two of the tales, "How Mr. Rabbit Was Too Sharp For Mr. Fox," and "The Awful Fate of Mr. Wolf." The latter tale shows how Brer Rabbit outsmarts a physically superior foe, Mr. Wolf, and kills him. This tale illustrates clearly the dark side of the trickster tradition, the cruelty of Brer Rabbit, and provides counterbalance to the heroic posture often associated with Brer Rabbit. It is instructive for those reasons alone. It is the former tale, however, that most students have an acquaintance with: it is the story of how Brer Rabbit tricks Brer Fox into throwing Rabbit into the briar patch by claiming that that action would be the absolute worst, most cruel torture possible to inflict on Brer Rabbit—worse even than being barbecued, hung, or skinned. The ploy works and Brer Fox pitches Brer Rabbit into the briar patch—whereupon Brer Fox hears Brer Rabbit, unscathed and none the worse for wear, taunting him from a nearby hill top: "Bred en bawn in a brier-patch, Brer Fox" (64).

The trickster strategy employed in "How Mr. Rabbit Was Too Sharp For Mr. Fox" calls for Brer Rabbit to emphatically insist that the outcome most desired is the thing most hideous and least desired. Students mature enough to read Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, can be shown how Walker uses Brer Rabbit's trickster strategy when the women of that novel send Squeak (Mary

Agnes) to the sheriff's office to get Sofia out of prison. Their strategy: stress how the absolute worst punishment for Sofia would be for her to serve as the Mayor's wife's maid, and that, in fact, Sofia enjoys prison life. The women conspire that Squeak "reveal" to the sheriff the following:

Say you [Squeak] living with Sofia husband and her husband say Sofia not being punish enough. Say she laugh at the fool she make of the guards. Say she gitting along just fine where she at. Happy even, long as she don't have to be no white woman maid. (82)

When Squeak returns from her mission, she tells the gathering of men and women about her confrontation with the sheriff this way:

I say what yall told me to say. Bout Sofia not being punish enough. Say she happy in prison, strong girl like her. Her main worry is just the thought of ever being some white woman maid. That what start the fight, you know, I say. Mayor's wife ask Sofia to be her maid. Sofia say she never going to be no white woman's nothing, let alone maid.

That so? he [the sheriff] ast, all the time looking me over real good.

Yessir, I say. Say, prison suit her just fine. (83)

The ploy works and Sofia is released from prison and placed in the Mayor's household.

Later in the novel, a letter Celie receives from Nettie relates that when Olivia began to tell an "Uncle Remus" tale, she found that the Olinka tribesmen knew the original version (140). With this letter, Walker is clearly drawing the reader's attention to a tradition of folklore, particularly the trickster tales, which is long-lived, which survived the middle passage, and which she herself has made artistic use of—once overtly in the above mentioned letter, and once subtextually in the successful scheme to free Sofia from prison.

A variation on the trickster tradition, which has a less upbeat connotation, is the willful, consciously employed strategy of "Puttin' on the Massa" (putting on the master), a form of trickery which requires users to appear humble in the presence of whites, especially whites in positions of power. The emphasis here is on the *willful* use of this social and rhetorical strategy to deal with racism without being destroyed by it. This strategy requires play-acting; its users perform must

evaluate their situation (i.e., danger) quickly and adapt/role-play as a survival strategy (a mode of behavior flat out rejected by Sofia in *The Color Purple*, and which cost her her freedom).

Toni Morrison has her character Pilate use this strategy successfully in *Song of Solomon* when Pilate makes herself shrivel and shake uncharacteristically before a police sergeant to get Milkman and Guitar out of jail (206-07). The failure to recognize the unfortunate prudence of adopting this trickster strategy in the face of racism is dramatized again in another Alice Walker work, the short story, "The Revenge of Hannah Kemhuff." In that story, Hannah dresses too well, despite wearing hand-me-downs, when she goes to the welfare office to receive her family's allotment of food during the depression. Tragically, pride, and her ignorance about the necessity to wear rags when presenting herself to white social workers ("Puttin' on the Massa"), results in Hannah not receiving any food. As a result, Hannah's husband abandons her, her children die, and she is reduced to prostitution. Hannah's eventual peace of mind comes by turning to conjuring as a way to exact revenge for the injustice done her and her family years earlier.

Students will be disturbed about the need for anyone to "Put on the Massa," or to put on anyone as a matter of survival—and rightly so. Nonetheless, an examination of this strategy, whether employed successfully or not, will provide insight into folklore and one of its basic functions: how it serves to impart "understanding, values, attitudes, assumptions, feelings, and beliefs" (Brunvand 2). After all, folklore isn't just stories; it includes behaviors and ways of acting, including ways of dealing with racism.

Students who find they enjoy reading trickster tales and/or tales about conjuring should be made aware of Chesnutt's delightful novel, *The Conjure Woman*. That work, and Hurston's *Mules & Men*, which is a collection of folklore and conjuring practices, will go far to round out any student's nascent interest in African American folklore.

Students should also be aware that some of the philosophies espoused by folklore have been criticized as reactionary and anachronistic by some modern African American writers. For in-

stance, Alice Walker, while embracing many aspects of African American folklore and culture, also blasts away at folk practices which perpetuate sexism and patriarchy. Like everything else, students need to see folklore in all its shades; they will need to grapple with its social implications; they will need to recognize the good and the not-so-good they will uncover as their understanding of folklore develops and matures.

They also need to recognize, as they will from the classroom discussions described above, that African American folklore is alive and well, and that while it once was considered an emblem of backwardness and a source of shame, it is now proudly embraced, displayed, and honored by many contemporary African American writers.

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