The Influence of the Sentimental Novel and
the Attendant Cult of True Womanhood on
Four Novels by African American Women

Beverly B. Holmes
The members of the Committee approve the Dissertation of Beverly B. Holmes defended on October 22, 2008.

___________________________
John Fenstermaker  
Professor Directing Dissertation

___________________________
Lauren Weingarden  
Outside Committee Member

___________________________
Bruce Bickley  
Committee Member

___________________________
Maxine L. Montgomery  
Committee Member

The Office of Graduate Studies has verified and approved the above named committee members.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract iv  

INTRODUCTION 1  

1. *IOLA LEROY*: THE MASK OF SENTIMENTALISM 9  

2. *PLUM BUN: A NOVEL WITHOUT A MORAL*: REVISION OF THE FAIRY TALE 36  

3. *THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD*: HEROINE IN TRANSITION 60  

4. *LINDEN HILLS*: REVISION OF THE CAPTIVITY NARRATIVE 85  

CONCLUSION 108  

REFERENCES 113  

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH 121
ABSTRACT

Sentimental novels were the juggernaut of the publishing industry in America in the nineteenth century. Also known as novels of domesticity and, more recently, as women’s fiction, these novels were written largely by and for women. The story was one of survival, of girls cast out to make their way in the world. However, they were to hold fast to the dictates of Victorian decorum and embrace the four tenets of the so-called “Cult of True Womanhood”: piety, sexual purity, submission, and domesticity. This study examines how the sentimental novel influenced four later novels by African American women writers. With harsh punishments against literacy, it was primarily only until after emancipation that African American women began writing novels. This study, then, explores how the authors of four novels both appropriated and reconfigured the template of precursory novels written by white women.

Critics have more recently begun to re-evaluate the genre of the sentimental novel, a genre dismissed as unimportant for most of the twentieth century. What needs further study is the influence of these astoundingly popular texts on the novels of a previously repressed group of authors, black women. By examining this connection, this study contributes to an understanding of the intertextuality of women’s fiction, an intertextuality both deliberate and inadvertent as well as often consciously oppositional.
INTRODUCTION

The extent to which nineteenth-century sentimental novels captivated that first audience astounds today’s readers. Thought by many to be insipid tales of weak, weepy heroines, these novels, written by and for women, are being re-evaluated by a cadre of new scholars. My purpose here is two-fold: (1) to establish a broad-based and often revisionary reading of sentimental fiction; and (2) to connect this re-reading to four novels by African American women, novels which plot the trajectory of Black women’s space. In these four texts, the authors embraced, questioned, and reshaped images of nineteenth-century white womanhood and crafted a new emancipatory protocol.

In the 1800s, the expansion of leisure time for women—both to read and to write—and the burgeoning publishing industry (made possible by more efficient transportation and better printing presses) created a receptive market for women’s fiction. According to Nina Baym, *The Scarlet Letter* (pub. 1850) sold fewer than 10,000 copies in Hawthorne’s lifetime (Introduction ix). In contrast, Susan Warner’s *The Wide, Wide World* (also pub. 1850), considered to be the first bestseller in America, “sold more than 40,000 copies in less than a year and went through thirteen editions in two years; Putnam’s son, George Haven Putnam, claimed that sales eventually exceeded a million copies.” Thirty years after its appearance, it was still selling (Kelley 18). Maria Cummins’s *The Lamplighter* (pub. 1854) sold 4,000 copies in its first month alone and 60,000 before it had been out for a year! (Baym, Introduction ix). Again, according to Mary Kelley, “[b]y 1871 nearly three–fourths of all the novels published that year came from the pens of women” (26). Clearly, these literary domestics had a public, national impact. No wonder Hawthorne grumbled about a nation “wholly given over to a d----d mob of scribbling women,” fearing he should have “no chance of success while the public taste is occupied with their trash” (qtd. in Brown 179).

A seminal text in the analysis of these nineteenth-century novels is Nina Baym’s *Woman’s Fiction: A Guide to Novels By and About Women in America 1820-1870*. I

---

1 My subject here is the American sentimental novel. Sentimentality in nineteenth-century America has roots, of course, in eighteenth-century England and Europe.
won’t recapitulate her excellent study, but she posits that literary critics consciously promote as the best literature of an era its quirky and unread works rather than the works everyone was wild about at the time. Critics assume popularity and poor quality are synonymous. This is not to say that in studying these nineteenth-century novels (most which are largely unread today), I discovered a hidden classic like *Moby Dick* or *Walden*, but I did find works written in defiance of an established social and literary tradition for readers previously thought unimportant and only minor participants in public dialogue. Women in the nineteenth century read not just for information about the world but also for instruction about their lives, finding in imaginative literature, models for their own conduct. These novels were at their core about empowerment, and the lack of it, and survival.

A nineteenth-century rhetoric of “true womanhood” or the “cult of domesticity” prescribed an ideal for white Victorian women. The cult of true womanhood was a set of behaviors for middle-class white women of the nineteenth century. This vague descriptor was used in the popular magazines and advice books of the time; it became a favorite term, and authors assumed readers knew its definition. Barbara Welter in her foundational text *Dimity Convictions* describes four attributes of True Womanhood: piety, sexual purity, submission, and domesticity. According to Welter, the ideal woman was to be passive and retiring with her main focus the home and rearing of children. Women’s magazines subscribing to the True Womanhood ideal encouraged their readers to embrace the role God assigned them, a role of service and virtue. Education was encouraged, not for the sake of a salaried career or for her own enrichment, but so she could be a more satisfying conversational partner for her husband and could supervise the education of their children. Marriage and motherhood were the highlights of her life.

It would be a mistake, however, to believe only one monolithic prescription existed for women’s behavior. The cult of true womanhood was an ideal espoused by many, as evidenced by etiquette books, magazines, advice tracts, and novels of the period—but not by all. Instead, the tenor of directives was obviously a continuum. Still advocating a separate “women’s sphere,” a second popular ideal (largely between 1840-1880) was that of what author Frances B. Cogan terms Real Womanhood, an ideal which advocated “intelligence, physical fitness, health, self-sufficiency, economic self-reliance,
and careful marriage” (4). However, while real womanhood was more elastic in its set behaviors for women, the core principles were the same: men and women inhabit their separate spheres under God’s laws, and society is stratified with correct behavior “geared both to one’s social level and one’s divinely appointed sexual obligations” (Cogan 75). The issue is further blurred by the Southern ideal of the more passive, decorative “Southern belle” as compared to the more active and practical Northern lady.

A woman’s prime responsibility, whether of the true womanhood or the real womanhood camp, was to be a wife and mother. But by the end of the nineteenth century, a new role for women was emerging: that of the so-called “New Woman.” Breaking from both True Womanhood and Real Womanhood, the New Woman rejected separate spheres, insisted on her right to a career, irrespective of the needs of her family, and strove for independence in all areas. Ironically, the extreme stance of these New Women threatened members of both sexes and created a surge back to the True Womanhood ideals. Even in the late twentieth century, this view of a woman’s role found new life in the 1980s “Total Woman” program of Maribel Morgan and in the speeches of conservative political activist Phyllis Schlafly.

A confusing array of terms surfaces in a discussion of the sentimental novel. Largely viewed as a pejorative descriptor, “sentimental” connotes an unmerited emotional response. Thus, many critics now prefer the terms “women’s fiction” or “domestic novel.” The claim that these novels deal primarily with emotional experiences is misleading. Even a cursory reading of the most popular “sentimental” novels reveals the subject matter to be exploitation, powerlessness, coarseness, pettiness, illness, poverty, exhaustion, degradation, and suffering. Michelle Burnham declares that “[s]entimental novels reproduced the dilemma of agency and responsibility, not only in their heroines’ trials of virtue but in their readers’ responses of sympathy” (79). The term “domestic” in describing this fiction means that the content centers on the home and social relations within that home. Home life, however, is largely presented as unhappy. It is the heroine’s job to carve out a new space, a happy home in which she can influence those around her and mitigate the crassness of the world. The so-called seduction novel was an early form of the sentimental novel, its protagonist more passive than the later heroines, and sexual exploitation more pronounced. By the early 1800s female writers
were rejecting such constructs and instead embracing stories that taught their readers how to survive adversity. However, novels such as *Charlotte Temple* and *The Coquette* remained steady sellers into the last half of the nineteenth century.

Lacking a written literary tradition, emancipated female slaves who sought to write fiction had little choice but to embrace the models of the hegemonic culture. They adopted such conventions “to give expression to their social concerns and to demonstrate their intellectual competence in terms that the dominant culture respected” (Tate 65). How might a black women, who by the very definition of “slave” could not embody the traits delineated by the cult of true womanhood, how might she navigate an ideology which excluded her? An additional complication for African American women surfaces in the centrality of the home as part of the true womanhood ideal. As Nina Baym defines it, sentimentalism is a domestic ideal “set forth as a value scheme for ordering all of life, in competition with the ethos of money and exploitation that is perceived to prevail in American society” (*Woman’s* 27). Then it would follow that those who were home-less (those who did not have homes, could not get homes, or were deprived of their homes) could not participate in this ideal. African American writers, the non-participants in the dominant culture, needed to develop an alternative conception of womanhood. The four novels I have chosen, *Iola Leroy*, *Plum Bun*, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and *Linden Hills* are snapshots of the trajectory of this re-negotiated female self-authority.

Chapter one focuses on *Iola Leroy* (published 1892). It is perhaps the most misunderstood and the most interesting in terms of its intertextuality. Activist Frances E.W. Harper knew better than most about the grim lives of Blacks under Jim Crow, about rapes and lynchings, about the dearth of jobs, about daily humiliations and insults. So why, modern readers ask, did she write a novel in the sentimental tradition? Why did Harper choose as her protagonist the octoroon Iola Leroy: well-educated, refined, virginal, pious, a heroine so far removed from the realities of the post-Reconstruction South where most of the women lived in poverty as sharecroppers, servants, or laundresses? The answer is, of course, that Harper wrote what would sell and what the white publishers would print. Her audience had the same demographic mix of readers who had always bought sentimental novels: white women. Harper, then, was forced to use conventions that had been in place since the 1820s, but she reshaped and questioned
many of them. Her novel was didactic, but not in the same way as those of her predecessors, white females.

The text that *Iola Leroy* seems to signify on is Harriet Jacobs’ 1861 *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, a slave narrative written in the style of sentimental fiction. After Jacobs (Linda Brent) chooses a white lawyer as a sexual partner to repel the predatory Dr. Flint, she proposes that black women be judged with an alternative moral code, a code which acknowledges that black women do not have the same freedom of choice as their white sisters, that the system of slavery rests on the mythical construct of the loose, immoral black woman so as not to acknowledge the white southern male as rapist and his wife as enabler. Writing almost 40 years after emancipation, Harper’s political goal was to address this falsehood of the licentious black woman.

In order to win over her white audience, “Harper sought to soften as many differences as possible between the images of the black woman and the white woman” (Christian, *Women* 33). Therefore, the conduct of white males could be revealed as the brutish abuse it was, for it was committed against a woman much like the target audience of white women. Harper’s novel attempted nothing less than to change society. According to Frances Smith Foster, who wrote the introduction to the Schomburg Library edition of *Iola Leroy*, the novel “represents the transition from the antebellum period to the Harlem Renaissance and links Afro-American fiction to women’s fiction” (xxxvii). Harper’s only novel, then, provides an appropriate segue into two novels from Harlem Renaissance writers, Jessie Fauset and Zora Neale Hurston.

At the core of the four pillars of womanhood (piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity) is male dominance with woman as the ornament, a passionless guardian of the home. Male dominance and the complexities of power relationships are culturally coded in the exegeses of race in Fauset’s 1929 novel *Plum Bun*, the novel I discuss in Chapter Two. *Plum Bun* uses the template of the fairy tale and romance to, according to biographer and critic Deborah McDowell, criticize “the norms of female socialization and the sexual double-standard” and to endorse “female independence beyond traditional definitions of womanhood” (Introduction xxi).

*Plum Bun*, like Larsen’s *Passing*, explores the idea of woman as a commodity. Protagonist Angela Murray, after rejecting the model of domesticity gleaned from her
parents, first embraces and then rejects the subservient role of mistress demanded by her white paramour Roger. Sexual and sensual, Angela, without guilt, rejects the straitlaced purity demanded by the Victorians. Fauset reconfigures another key tenet, domesticity, by reconstituting the idea of home: believing that it held the best promise for black advancement, she championed a “rebuilt and improved home (material, metaphoric, and psychological) that granted greater freedom to the inhabitants” and that “could counteract damaging, widespread racist ideology, economic oppression and sexist expectations that women suppress their contributions and selves to serve others” (Allen 52). Fauset deconstructs the myth of middle-class romance by showcasing female entrapment. The novel leaves us with a vision of a reshaped Victorian configuration, one in which black women have authority over their own lives.

Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is the subject of Chapter Three. Another female writer of the Harlem Renaissance, Hurston chose as the setting of much of her novel not the middle-class world of Jessie Fauset, but the rural South, the land of juke joints, cane fields, and folk playing the dozens on the store porch. Although published in 1937—years after the Harlem Renaissance—*Their Eyes Were Watching God* embodies the ethos of the period. The life represented by the cult of true womanhood is everything Nanny wants for her granddaughter, Janie Crawford. Sitting on the front porch, perched on the pedestal of some man’s vision of womanhood, living a life free of toil: this life of the idealized white woman, the plantation mistress, is what Nanny wants for her light-skinned granddaughter. Nanny, who as a slave was denied the respect given to white women, sees the tenets of true womanhood as a way to insure for Janie the protection guaranteed by a husband and the attendant middle-class lifestyle.

*Their Eyes*, though, is largely a critique of Victorian patriarchy, a rejection of the power imbalances of heterosexual relationships. Like Jacobs and Harper before her, Hurston posits an alternate moral code for black women, and like Fauset, she writes of black women becoming active sexual beings and questioning their place as objects of male sexual desire; she writes of marriage not as a symbol of liberty but of material achievement (du Cille 87). Although Janie is in many ways a problematic protagonist, by telling her story, Hurston paves the way for the self-actualized black woman heroines to emerge in the fiction of the 70s and 80s.
One such text is Gloria Naylor’s 1985 novel, *Linden Hills*, which I analyze in Chapter Four. A dark exploration into the price of assimilation, the novel devastatingly critiques the price black women—and their men—must pay for a twisted version of the American Dream. Must blacks sell their souls to attain middle-class claims to respectable citizenship? Naylor seems to say yes, at least in *Linden Hills*. The Nedeed women are submissive, and all have marriage on their minds. We come to realize the quality of their lives is affected by the interrelationship of sexism and racism. In the novel, Naylor traces the fourth Mrs. Nedeed’s journey to self-discovery as she unravels the oppression inherent in living the role of the perfect wife. The novel is a commentary on the necessity of African American women adopting practices and stances for survival that may contradict traditional precepts of womanhood.

In my discussion of these four novels, I begin with the premise that black women were outside the “protection” of the ideology of womanhood. But after emancipation, many black women were eager to embrace the four pillars of womanhood as proof of their worthiness to enter the dominant culture. As Claudia Tate explains, “Idealized womanhood is an important symbol in black women’s post-Reconstruction domestic novels . . . representing the consummation of racial justice” (194). Novels by black women in the twentieth century wrestled with the racist, ideological system of the cult of true womanhood. They didn’t always find answers, but they exposed the disconnects.

As Gilbert and Gubar argue, “Unlike her male counterpart . . . the female artist must struggle against the effects of a socialization which makes conflict with the will of her (male) precursors seem inexpressibly absurd, or even . . . self annihilating.” Her battle is against a misreading of *her* (49). Although Gilbert and Gubar write primarily about white female artists, I think their comments have relevance to the power of African American female writers as foremothers: “[The female artist] can begin such a struggle [for Re-vision] only by actively seeking a *female* precursor who, far from representing a threatening force to be denied or killed, proves by example that a revolt against patriarchal literary authority is possible” (49). Twentieth century feminist critics have challenged and reconfigured what it means to be black and a woman. Critics bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins, Barbara Christian, and Hazel Carby have a place in the conversation
as their insights are woven into the tapestry of interpretation. They provide theoretical underpinnings.

My purpose is to analyze an alternate discourse of black womanhood in these four post-bellum novels. These are the questions I pose: How did the ideology of true womanhood influence and determine the shape of the public voice of black women writers? How did an ideology that excluded black women from the category “women” affect the ways in which black women writers wrote and addressed an audience? What do these novels reveal about a woman’s domestic space? What techniques do black female writers use to recount “socially forbidden stories”—techniques of indirection, circumlocution, ellipses? Texts in conversation with other texts, as well as texts shaped, sheltered, and promoted by ideologies of a particular time period: these forces informed my research.
CHAPTER ONE
IOLA LEROY OR SHADOWS UPLIFTED:
THE MASK OF SENTIMENTALISM

In the forward to the Schomburg Library edition of Iola Leroy, Henry Louis Gates recalls a Lippincott’s Monthly Magazine essay published in 1886. This essay, written pseudonymously by “A Lady from Philadelphia,” argues that the “Great American Novel” will be written by a black person—and not a man, but a woman. The “Lady” explains: “It was a woman who, taking the wrongs of the African as her theme, wrote the novel that awakened the world to their reality, and why should not the coming novelist be a woman as well as an African? She—the woman of that race—has some claims on Fate which are not yet paid up” (xiii). The comparison to Harriet Beecher Stowe is apt as both novelists wrote in the sentimental tradition but with a larger purpose. Fired by passion and with a sense of mission, both women desired nothing less than a political and social awakening of the nation, one to be brought about religious conversion, a sea change of the heart.

It is not unexpected that Francis E.W. Harper would accept the challenge from the “Lady from Philadelphia.” After all, by 1892, when she was 67, Harper was already well-known as an orator, social reformer, poet, and essayist who wrote on such topics as abolitionism, temperance, and woman suffrage. But she had never attempted a novel; many wondered if her effort could fulfill expectations. To fail would reflect negatively on the black race as a whole.

Shrewdly choosing to couch her story in the aesthetics of the late nineteenth century, Harper was rewarded by largely positive reviews and five printings within its first year of publication. It was “probably the best-selling novel by an Afro-American writer prior to the twentieth century” (Foster xxvii). Twenty years after its publication, however, the novel had fallen into disfavor. Overtly sentimental and melodramatic, outside the “protest” genre, and idealistic in its portrayals, Iola Leroy no longer appealed to modern readers. But, as Frances Foster argues, “[It] is a serious work written for a serious purpose by one of the most popular Afro-American writers of the nineteenth century” (xxxvii). It is a work of continuing interest and controversy as to its place in
African American and women’s literature. Within the Victorian culture, *Iola Leroy* embraced, questioned, and reshaped the conventions of the sentimental novel and its concomitant tenets of the cult of true womanhood—piety, purity, submission, and domesticity.

Piety among true women is a thread woven through most of the sentimental novels of the 1800s. *The Wide, Wide World*, a phenomenally successful novel published in 1850 (fourteen editions in two years), reads as a veritable *Pilgrim’s Progress* as it chronicles Ellen Montgomery’s struggle to follow Biblical teachings and to live a life of self-sacrifice. In E.D.E.N. Southworth’s *The Deserted Wife* (published in 1855), one of the virtuous female characters, Sophie, describes her resolve to marry the man she previously feared but now sees as a sufferer of uncontrollable mental violence: “The Lord has given me something to do for His sake, and endowed me with strength to do it. . . . [I will] nurse him back to health. . . .” (129). Religious feeling, self-devotion, and faith that “God is at the helm” (Southworth, *Deserted* 143) are hallmarks of Southworth’s white female protagonists.

The best-selling novel of the nineteenth century, the sentimental *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), presents one of its memorable characters, the beautiful light-skinned Eliza, as steadfast in her religious faith. Even when her husband confides in her his plans to escape because of his master’s cruelty, Eliza cautions him to “‘only trust in God, and try to do right, he’ll deliver you’” (Stowe 30). She trusts God to protect her young son Harry from the slave trader as she pleads, “‘Lord, Help! Lord, save me!’” (Stowe 64). In her manifestation of evangelical faith, Eliza, as well as the minor characters Emmeline and Susan, even though slaves, share characteristics with exemplary white Victorian women. Stowe repeatedly contrasts the pure religion of Eliza and other slaves to the false Christianity of those whites complicit in the slave system. In another precursory text and one with which Harper was certainly familiar, Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Jacobs contrasts the religion of Linda Brent (the name she gives to herself), her grandmother, and the other slaves hungry for the word of God, to the religion of the slave owners who twist the Bible for their own purposes. For example, Jacobs finds it ironic that when the congregation consists of the black parishioners, the sermon, delivered by the white Episcopal clergyman, always takes as its text the scripture about
servants obeying their masters. Another time at a Methodist class meeting, the white class leader and slave owner (who charged 50 cents to speak at the service), responds this way to a grieving slave mother who had just seen the last of her children sold: “[He] became crimson in the face with suppressed laughter, while he held up his handkerchief, that those who were weeping for the poor woman’s calamity might not see his merriment”; then “with assumed gravity,” he asked for prayers for her soul (61). No wonder, declares Jacobs, the slaves sing, “‘Ole Satan’s church is here below; /Up to God’s free church I hope to go’” (65). Jacob’s grandmother’s faith is true and unwavering, even when her son escapes, is captured, and imprisoned. He is close to death, and his mother can do nothing to help him. But her responses show no anger: “‘God’s will be done’” and “‘Put your trust in God. Be humble, my child . . . ’” (Jacobs 22).

As did these two antebellum authors, then, Harper took pains to contrast the false, hypocritical Christian faith of some whites to the true Christianity of the suffering former slaves. In *Iola Leroy* her purpose is twofold: (1) to send a message about the failure of conventional religion to minister to Blacks and (2) to establish Marie and Iola as pious, true Christians, as pious as any white woman living out the cult of true womanhood. Marie, Iola’s mother, is described by her future husband Eugene as possessing “‘something such as . . . seen in old cathedrals, lighting up the beauty of a saintly face’” (Harper 69). Consistent with the dominant evangelical view of children as innocent and holy beings, Harper paternalistically describes Marie as possessing “‘a simple childlike faith in the Unseen [whereby] . . . every base and unholy passion [has] died, subdued by the supremacy of her virtue’” (70). Harper further emphasizes Marie’s piety by comparing her to one of the biblical heroines: In her graduation speech, Marie pleads “[l]ike Esther . . . for the lives of her people” (75). Again, the biblical reference plays off Stowe’s novel, which likens the poor slave mothers bereft of their children to “Rachel weeping for her children” (131). In counterpoint to hypocritical whites, Marie learns her faith “at the foot of the cross” (Harper 107), in other words, through personal suffering, as Jesus had experienced.

Just as Harper uses ethereal images to describe Marie, the author employs the same technique with Iola, who is introduced as “‘[l]ookin’sweet and putty ez an angel’” (41). Iola’s brand of faith, though, has a larger purpose than just to comfort her alone:
applying faith is the force by which the nation can be healed. Iola insists that the only remedy for the nation’s ills is “[a] fuller comprehension of the claims of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and their application to our national life” (Harper 216). Harper analogizes Iola and Christ as Iola’s path is one she “had trodden with bleeding feet” (257). Furthermore, after she delivers a ringing speech comparing the trials of Negroes to those of Christ, Dr. Latimer refers to Iola as “‘angelic’” (Harper 257). As do Stowe and Jacobs, Harper quite pointedly paints her black protagonists, in this case Marie and Iola, as practicing the compassionate Christianity of Jesus while hypocritical whites only selectively apply biblical teachings. Upon arriving in a northern city, Iola is barred from a rooming house “conducted by professed Christian women” because of her Negro blood. Harper wishes to prick the conscience of her white readers by adding this judgment: “And these women, professors of a religion which taught, ‘If ye have respect to persons ye commit sin,’ virtually shut the door in her [Iola’s] face . . . .” (209). Another time, Iola’s mother is refused communion until the white parishioners have been served; in another instance, the poor homeless (“outcast”) black girls her mother is trying to help are refused entrance into the “asylum for fallen women” (Harper 232).

Addressing the tenet of sexual purity was crucial for African American women of the late nineteenth century. During the hundreds of years of slavery, the black female’s body was not her own; she was an objectified commodity, a possession. The rape of these slave women played into the stereotype of black female sexuality. Supposedly, so the myth went, after a ten-to-twelve hour day in the field, the female slave made her way to her primitive cabin to tend to her own family. Then, in order to satisfy her sexual needs, she eschewed nearby male slaves and instead ran to the Big House, where she entrapped the white master. So in patriarchal terms, it is not rape but sexual compliance. Sexual purity for the black woman was further complicated by the complicity of her white sisters. As bell hooks explains in Ain’t I a Woman?

White women held black slave women responsible for rape because they had been socialized by 19\textsuperscript{th} century sexual morality to regard woman as sexual temptress. This same sexual morality was adopted by slaves. Fellow slaves often pitied the lot of sexually exploited females but did not see them as blameless victims. (37)
Hooks stresses that rape was not the only method used to break black women: “Sadistic floggings of naked black women were another method employed to strip the female slave of dignity. In the Victorian world, where white women were religiously covering every body part, black women were daily stripped of their clothing and publicly whipped.” Appearing naked added to their humiliation (37).

Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative*, and Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* act as precursory texts exploring degradation visited upon female slaves by white males. As Hazel Carby explains, “If a slave woman attempted to preserve her sexual autonomy, the economic system of slavery was threatened: It was deemed a crime in her to wish to be virtuous” (*Reconstructing* 54-55). Moreover, continues Carby, “[m]easured against the sentimental heroines of domestic novels, the black woman repeatedly failed the test of true womanhood because she survived institutionalized rape, whereas the true heroine would rather die than be sexually abused” (*Reconstructing* 34). Supposedly, men because of their brutish nature could not help sinning, but woman—stronger and purer—must not give in.

According to E. Franklin Frazier in his study *The Negro Family in the United States*, “Promiscuity was encouraged among the slaves; systematic slave breeding was common” (36-37). Frazier’s findings are consistent with the writings more than half century earlier of black social thinker Alexander Crummell: “From childhood on [the slave woman] was the doomed victim of the grossest passions. All the virtues of her sex were utterly ignored. If the instinct of chastity asserted itself, then she had to fight like a tigress for the ownership and possession of her own person . . . ” (64).

The absurdity of this “blame the victim” thinking was not lost on Harper. Indeed, according to Elizabeth Ammons,

the theme that commanded Harper’s attention most urgently in *Iola Leroy* was the racist sexual mythology that assaulted black women in white America. The same ideology that denied sexuality to respectable white women of the middle and upper classes—the ideology that Kate Chopin would attack in *The Awakening*—defined black women as nothing but sexual.
Sexual liberation for this group, then, did not consist of the right to be *more* sexual but to be *less* sexual or even passionless (31). Related to the myth of black women’s sexuality is the documentation of thousands of lynchings of mainly black men (along with some black women) in the post-Reconstruction era. Again, according to Ammons, although the overwhelming majority (3/4) of lynchings were not even linked to the rape charge (of white women by black men), “the crime automatically evoked by a lynching in the eyes of white America” meant exactly that (24). Continues Ammons, “At the heart of this racist mythology were two elements: the allegedly monstrous libido of black men, who, freed from restraint by the collapse of Reconstruction, supposedly lusted uncontrollably after white women; and the presumed sensuality and insatiable sexuality of black women, whose carnality supposedly drove black men on” (25). Black men, black women, and white women were all dehumanized. For black women, the assumption of Victorian morality was not merely a frivolous bow to the hegemonic culture, but a key defense against the charge of sexual immorality. This defense of virtue “represented an essential part of their life-and-death struggle as women against lynching in the United States” (Ammons 25).

Iola and Marie, both light-skinned mulattas, serve as a rebuttal to the racist imaging of black women as licentious and readily accessible. Harper created these idealized colored heroines as a rhetorical device to link white and black womanhood under the protective banner of chastity and virtue. In order for her white female audience to accept Marie and Iola, it was necessary for Harper to contrive a plot whereby neither of the two heroines is violated.

Another component of this complex issue of purity is Harper’s belief in uplift. She hoped her novel would encourage newly-freed female slaves to act decorously and virtuously. We see this sentiment embodied in Marie, who believes “‘the true strength of a race means purity in women’” (Harper 78). As with her white Victorian sisters who would rather die than submit to rape, Iola fights to keep her purity, an action which results in her being sold seven times in six weeks. In describing Iola’s rescue by Union troops, the illiterate, fugitive slave Tom recounts—in his dialect—Iola’s response to the sexual overtures of her master: “‘I’ll die fust,’” she is reported to have declared. (Harper 41) Iola remains “beautiful, faithful, and pure” (Harper 66). Earlier, when escorted by
Lorraine’s predatory lawyer on the train home, she fights his sexual advances, “[springing] from her seat, her eyes flashing with rage and scorn, her face flushed to the roots of her hair, her voice shaken with excitement, and every nerve trembling with angry emotion” (Harper 103). Harper creates an evocative description of an affronted maiden, a description consistent with the sentimental novel tradition. Iola recounts that for all slave owners she felt only “[l]oathing and intensest horror” as they heaped upon her “outrage . . . which might well crimson the cheek of honest womanhood with shame” (Harper 115). “Iola,” states Barbara Christian “is no loose black woman. Nor is she coarse and loud, and therefore being a woman of high Christian morals, the novel insists, she does not deserve the brutal, immoral treatment that is part of the tradition of slavery” (Novelists 26).

Adding to the complexity of sexual behavior is a sort of duality: a double-consciousness which mandates that women deny their sexual feelings in order to be true women and, paradoxically, to gain power. Critic Nancy Cott calls this Victorian sexual ideology “passionlessness.” Its history stems from British social ideals embraced by white Americans in the mid-eighteenth century. Explains Cott:

In the beginning of the century when spokesmen for the new professional and commercial middle class began explicitly to oppose aristocratic pretension, vanity, and libertinism, reforming writers such as Daniel Defoe, Jeremy Collier, Richard Steele and Samuel Richardson portrayed sexual promiscuity as one those aristocratic excesses that threatened middle-class virtue and domestic security. . . . By elevating sexual control highest among human virtues the middle-class moralists made female chastity the archetype for human morality. (“Passionless” 223)

By downplaying their sexual desires, women showed themselves to be superior to men morally and spiritually. Thus, this positive shift allowed women to develop their human faculties and self-esteem. The paradox of this ideology, as outlined by Howard Gadlin is that “[m]en wanted to desexualize relationships to maintain their domination; women wanted to desexualize relationships to limit male domination” (318). Passionlessness promised power, but it also stultified. Not until decades later, in the vitality of the Harlem Renaissance, did the pendulum swing the other way.
In *Iola Leroy*, Iola certainly has passion for her mission of uplift, but she displays no hint of sexual passion. In her speeches about the future, Iola’s soul “flash[es] through the rare loveliness of her face” (Harper 257). Recounts her future husband Dr. Latimer, “‘The tones of her voice are like benedictions of peace; her words a call to higher service and nobler life’” (Harper 257). Both the Victorian white woman and the black woman aspiring to the cult of true womanhood attempt to control their lives by cordonning off those aspects of sexuality that threaten to make them feel powerless.

Like sexual purity, the quality of submission required the negation of personal desire. Because sentimental novels were an expression of evangelical faith, submission was tied to Godliness. Indeed, submission was evidence that a woman had conquered the tyranny of self. This overarching theme presents itself in text after text. One example speaks for many: In 1850, Susan Warner’s *The Wide, Wide World* burst upon the literary marketplace with unprecedented sales. In the novel, the child Ellen Montgomery must submit to separation from her mother and to abuse from a series of foster care givers. But it is only when she is emptied of self and embraces the view that God controls all things does she find peace. According to Jane Tompkins, the popularity of *The Wide, Wide World* lay with the real emotional experiences of its readers: “[I]t deals with the problem of powerlessness by showing how one copes with it hour by hour and minute by minute”; it is a suffering which Warner, as well as other novelists, claim must be faced by their readers or else remain unsaved (173).

Part of the Victorian myth was that women, whose province was the home, were unprepared to deal with the realities of the harsh outside world and thus should defer to the males in their lives concerning all things worldly. In the work I mentioned earlier, *The Deserted Wife*, Hagar is berated by the matrons of Churchill Point for her reluctance to marry the controlling Raymond. She is counseled to forget the freedom of her youth and to embrace passivity. As a white woman, the spirited Hagar, although poor, had options unavailable to the mulattas Marie and Iola. But Marie and Iola do embrace the idea of a husband who will lead, who will fulfill the dominant role society has mandated for him. After the teenaged Marie accepts Eugene Leroy’s marriage proposal, she daydreams about him as being the man “in whose honor she could confide and on whose love she could lean” (Harper 75). Marie defers to her husband Eugene in all matters, even
when his dictates go against her better judgment. He prohibits Marie from telling their three children about their Negro blood, and Marie acquiesces even though she fears a cataclysmic awakening. In addition, her forebodings about the villainous cousin Lorraine are dismissed by her husband as “useless fears” (Harper 82). Her status as a woman, a woman much younger than her husband, and her caste as a former slave, mandate deference.

Because of her genteel, refined appearance and manners, Iola appears as though she might be submissive and in need of protection. The fugitive slave Tom, entranced by Iola’s beauty, petitions the commander of the post to rescue her from a series of predatory masters. Iola is snatched “as a trembling dove from the gory vulture’s nest and given a place of security” (Harper 39). Harper continues the metaphor of the animal victim/prey in Dr. Latimer’s pronouncement to Iola that “[she is] like a tender lamb snatched from the jaws of a hungry wolf, but who still needs protecting, loving care” (273). On one hand, then, Iola fits the stereotype of the vulnerable feminine protagonist. She is often described as pale and too weak physically to work; she faints from sudden emotion. However, Harper also needed a heroine who would embrace the challenge of uplift, one willing to roll up her sleeves and sacrifice for her subjugated people: a woman of strength and tenacity. Of course, white female novelists had also created spunky heroines who navigated and often stretched the envelope of conventional behavior—but most often their agenda involved personal expectations, such as marriage or a career. Typical is one of the most famous heroines of the seduction novels, Eliza Wharton of The Coquette, who resists marriage to the staid, boring clergyman championed by her friends and her mother. Disregarding their advice, she glories in the freedom of the young, single woman—at least until she is ruined by the rake, Major Sanford.

Harper’s agenda goes beyond issues of marriage vs. the single life. In order to advance her emancipatory protocol, Harper crafts situations in which Iola (1) refuses to be sexually subjugated by her white owners and (2) rejects the opportunity to join the white world, a world into which she could easily pass. Although it strains credulity to think that a teenage slave girl could succeed in protecting her virtue against numerous slave owners and that the owners would not simply physically overpower her, Harper is not so much dealing in realism as with the idea of Blacks taking control of their lives in
all realms. Our first description of Iola is that she is a “‘reg’lar spitfire’” whom no one can subdue. Says Tom, “‘Dey [the slave owners] say dey can’t do nuffin wid her.’” Her fellow slaves “‘[glory] in her spunk’” (38). Later, after emancipation, her uncle Robert tries to dissuade her from seeking employment, but Iola is determined to try. When Iola joins the work force, she makes no secret of her Negro blood even though she knows public knowledge of it may result in her dismissal—which indeed it does. In another rejection of “passing” in the white world and as part of the love plot, which requires the heroine to have multiple suitors, Iola refuses marriage to the white Dr. Gresham by declaring, “‘I am not willing to live under a shadow of concealment which I thoroughly hate as if the blood in my veins were an undetected crime in my soul’” (Harper 233). The black Victorian love story and the black text of emancipation here intersect.

Submissiveness and domesticity are closely linked, for it was part of the mores of society that one way women showed submissiveness was by limiting their aspirations to those involving the family and the home. Sentimental novels focus on the protagonists living lives of servitude; the readers of these novels believed that the happiness which women created in domesticity (small acts, small kindnesses, small duties) could influence a whole generation. The Victorian woman was to rear the children and to insure that the home was a place of delight, a refuge for her weary husband after a day battling the harsh, outside world. Of course, domesticity as the cult of true womanhood defined it, was well-nigh impossible for the black slave woman. In the field for 10-12 hours a day, returning to her stark cabin and (perhaps) a husband and children, she would be intent only on survival, not on the “domestic arts.” And because family members could be sold off at the master’s pleasure, no assurance existed that one’s family could remain intact—and indeed it rarely did.

Even so, certain antebellum texts portrayed Black women, like their white counterparts, as loving, caring mothers, mothers capable of fierce family attachments. Harriet Jacobs’ autobiography gives a clear example of “one mother’s denial of her own self-actualization and illustrates the costs paid by Black mothers who assume the heavy responsibilities inherent in their blood-mother . . . relationships” (Collins, Black Feminist 136). Jacobs desperately wanted to escape, but she could not bear to leave her children. Says Jacobs:
I could have made my escape alone; but it was more for my helpless children than for myself that I longed for freedom. Though the boon would have been precious to me, above all price, I would not have taken it at the expense of leaving them in slavery. Every trial I endured, every sacrifice I made for their sakes, drew them closer to my heart, and gave me fresh courage. (“Perils” 59)

Jacobs recounts how she hid for seven years in her grandmother’s attic, a place of virtual entombment, to escape the life of a slave and to be able to watch over her children. Her narrative ends not with the expected joy of marriage (as would be the case in the traditional sentimental novel) but with the joy of freedom for her children. In his slave narrative, Fredrick Douglass remembers how his mother—after a day laboring in the fields—would walk twelve miles round-trip to lie down with him and get him to sleep and then slip away to be back at the fields for the sunrise roll call.

Consistent with her aim of revealing slavery to be inhumane because of the severing of family bonds, Harriet Beecher Stowe evokes the memorable scene of the slave Eliza jumping from ice floe to ice floe with her little son Harry to prevent him from being torn from her side. Stowe reinforces this theme of family attachment at the slave block with the wrenching apart of Hagar and her son Albert; John and his wife; Lucy and her child; Susan and her daughter Emmeline; and “the mulatto” and her husband, the blacksmith, and their four children. Stowe emphasizes with highly wrought prose the same depth of feeling within slave families that white families experience.

The extended narrative of Cassy’s children being torn from her and remanded into slavery parallels Harper’s story of Marie and her two children Iola and Harry. The details of Cassy’s story are worth repeating as they spoke most effectively to the first readers of the text and foreground subsequent episodes in the novels of Black Victorian female authors. After seeing her screaming little son and hearing his cries of “‘Mother, Mother,’” Cassy kills her master with a sharp bowie knife. With her daughter lost as well, upon the birth of a third child, Cassy “[takes] the little fellow in [her] arms, when [he is] two weeks old, and kiss[es] him, and cri[es] over him”; then she “[gives] him laudanum, and [holds] him close to [her] bosom, while he slept to death” (Stowe 388). (Four years after the publication of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, an actual, newly-escaped slave named
Margaret Garner would murder her child rather than see this child captured back into slavery; more than 100 years later, Toni Morrison would build her acclaimed novel Beloved (1987) around this horrifying episode.

Stowe paints a picture of idealized family life with the Quaker Rachel Halliday, a picture which is echoed in Harper’s text: the Halliday kitchen is replete with a singing tea kettle, chicken and ham cooking with “a cheerful and joyous fizzle in the pan,” perfect golden-brown griddle-cakes, a place where even “the knives and forks had a social clatter as they went on to the table” (155). The home is “a golden cloud of protection and confidence,” a place “of a living Gospel” (155). Similarly in Iola Leroy, Aunt Linda’s table boasts “biscuits . . . just as light and flaky as ever . . . jelly . . . as bright as amber, and . . . preserves [which] were perfectly delicious” (Harper 164). Aunt Linda’s house is bright and comfortable (with “a front room on which she bestowed so much care”) in contrast to her former slave mistress’s home which, as an example of poetic justice, has fallen on hard times (Harper 169). Thus Harper has narrowed the gap between behavior of whites and blacks by showing that black women, given the chance, can also create an attractive home that nurtures.

Domesticity is central to what Iola believes to be her life’s work among her people; it undergirds her mission of uplift. Deborah McDowell analyzes Iola’s role this way:

By giving Iola a role to play in the larger struggle for racial uplift, Harper modified the image of the southern lady, but it is important to note that Iola’s role in the struggle is enacted within the boundaries of the traditional expectations of women as mothers and nurturers, expectations that form the cornerstone of the cult of true womanhood. According to Iola, “a great amount of sin and misery springs from the weakness and inefficiency of women.” In “The Education of Mothers,” one of the two public speeches she gives in the novel (public speaking is largely reserved for men in the text), she appeals for “a union of women with the warmest hearts and clearest brains to help in the moral education of the race.” (“Changing” 96)
After her marriage, Iola herself is content to serve as a Sunday school teacher and church helper. Together with the pastor she plans “meetings for the especial benefit of mothers and children” (Harper 278). With this emphasis on elevation of the family, Harper links the private to the public: it was her hope, and the hope of many newly-freed slaves after the war, that success in creating a respectable family would correlate to a larger respectable citizenry, one that would earn its way into white acceptance. Harper and other nineteenth-century Black women writers viewed domesticity as a wedge opening into civil rights, social advancement, and economic prosperity. In other words, the domestic tropology served as the basis of a sustained allegorical discourse, one that would lead to racial equality. However, Harper does craft from the shifting mosaic of turbulence just before and just after emancipation an agenda of social issues outside the conventions of the sentimental novel and some in opposition to true womanhood traits.

Years before her marriage, when a fugitive slave, Iola serves as a nurse to Union troops. Nursing, of course, is one on the short list of tasks men believed women suited for; Iola’s work, though, has a greater significance than the Victorian woman’s simply embracing her expected duties in the sickroom. Through Iola, Harper pays tribute to the hundreds of black women who risked their lives for emancipation, two of the more famous being Harriet Tubman and Susie King Taylor. Just as these women were revered by their patients, so is Iola (Vashti Lewis 319). After moving north, Iola declares to her Uncle Robert her belief that “every woman should have some skill or art which would insure her at least a comfortable support. I believe there would be less unhappy marriages if labor were more honored among women” (Harper 210). For a time, Iola is employed as a salesgirl, an occupation probably closed to black women in the 1870s (most were domestics), but an aspiration nonetheless for those immigrants from the South.

Iola assumes the role of what Patricia Hill Collins terms “the othermother”: one who nurtures children within the Black extended family network. By rejecting an opportunity to marry the prestigious physician Dr. Gresham, which would mean disassociating herself from the Black community, Iola chooses instead to serve the African American community (130). Another component of Harper’s treatment of domesticity is the reunion of family members whom slavery had displaced. As a plot device, novels by white female Victorians might deal with unfortunate serendipitous
separations of lovers or loved ones (missed meetings, letters being lost or destroyed by villains, and so on), but the separations in *Iola Leroy* have social and political ramifications. Coincidences abound as Iola, Robert, and Marie all find their mothers; Iola, her brother, and the minor characters also miraculously reunite with family members who had been sold.

Imbued with these four tenets of womanhood, piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity, Harper grounded her protagonists in a familiar world acceptable to her white female readers, while embedding a radical vision of female possibilities as the subtext. The overplot (to use Nina Baym’s term) functions to disguise other hermeneutic possibilities. In this novel overlaid with sentimental convention, Harper carves out an agenda of key issues impacting the black community, such as sexual autonomy of its women, the view of Negroes as subhuman or at least an inferior species, lynching as a result of Klan activity, the buying of Negro votes, and the race prejudice of Northerners. Harper uses a variety of narrative techniques to interweave these topics: some are subjects of oratorical speeches, some serve as pronouncements in dialogue between characters.

In the antebellum period, female slaves were painted as possessing uncontrollable, animalistic sexual urges, a view which was propagated by white owners to absolve them of responsibility for sexual abuse. This rationale is articulated by a younger contemporary of Harper’s, Pauline Hopkins, in her novel *Contending Forces*. Hopkins tells of a white man, a state senator, who kidnaps and rapes his mulatta niece. He asks the girl’s distraught father, “‘What does a woman of mixed blood, or any Negress, for that matter, know of virtue? It is my belief that they were a direct creation by God to be the pleasant companions of men of my race’” (261). Given the persistence of this view into the 1890s, activist and lecturer Halle Q. Brown addressed a convention audience with this call to action: “‘The girls of the south are realizing that they must refute the dark prophecies concerning the race by lives of integrity and chastity’” (qtd. in Sewell 728). Harper’s refutation is the novel *Iola Leroy*. Her goal was to link chastity to uplift, which was linked so closely to the Black Women’s Club Movement. Harper uses conversation between Eugene Leroy and his villainous cousin Lorraine about “‘the virtue of these quadroon girls’” (70) to showcase the tradition of slander against black women.
Numerous speeches by Iola, Aunt Linda, and other female characters are meant to encourage masses of black women to accept Victorian ideas of morality.

Sentimental novels are often didactic, replete with preachy admonitions. The plot is frequently interrupted with sermons on how to think or behave. But rather than preaching only about a heroine’s misjudgment in matters of the heart or about her duty to live her life according to Christian teachings, Harper widens her focus to national concerns as they relate to the teachings of Christ. Early in the novel, Harper strives to counter the view of slaves as inferior humans by having the northern Captain Sybil comment to a listening colonel about the black soldiers’ valor in battle. The captain says he hopes that “‘the time will come when some faithful historian will chronicle all the deeds of daring and service these people [former slaves now fighting for the Union] have performed during this struggle, and give them due credit . . . . ’” (Harper 130). Periodically Harper inserts vignettes describing the heroics of individual black soldiers, such as Robert and Tom. The educated main characters all declare that the “‘spirit of the cross’” is the only thing that will set the nation aright (Harper 168).

As a key participant in the Black Women’s Club movement, Harper knew about the horrors of lynchings carried out by the powerful Ku Klux Klan and about the connection between black men being labeled as rapists (to legitimize lynching) and black women labeled as sexual animals. Her strategy for advancing a social and political agenda is to link the Klan with lawlessness and a brazen affront to American justice. Says Marie, Iola’s mother, in speaking of her son Harry’s future plans: “‘I . . . would rather—ten thousand times rather—see Harry the friend and helper of the poor and ignorant than the companion of men who, under the cover of night, mask their faces and ride the country on lawless raids’” (Harper 219). In setting up this dichotomy (brave helper of the poor vs. cowardly white Klansman), Harper hoped to illuminate this ever-expanding matrix of domination and intimidation.

Harper interjects another topic into her sentimental romance: the attempt of some whites to buy the Negro vote. Aunt Linda shares with Iola and the others going to the church service several tales of black men foolishly selling their votes: they endure scorn from their wives or discover the white buyers have deceived them in the promised recompense. The lesson is clear: those who try to sell out the race are “shabby” and
deserve whatever censure comes their way. While chastising ignorant blacks, Harper also condemns the unprincipled whites for their “shabbiness” (179) in taking advantage of newly emancipated slaves.

Acts of oppression are more blatant in the South, but neither is the North the hoped-for land of equality. When Robert and his mother venture north, they discover that numerous landlords “‘in the city of P—’” (probably Philadelphia) (Harper 189) refuse to rent to them because they are black. Also in the North, Iola is fired from several jobs because of her racial mix, and even the northerner Dr. Gresham, seemingly an advocate of Negro rights, will marry Iola only if she hides her racial background. As did Stowe in Uncle Tom’s Cabin, Harper views Northerners as complicit in the network of oppression.

Within the template of sentimental romance conventions, conventions which include rules for female behavior as delineated by the cult of true womanhood, Harper found ways to interject a subtext of an emancipatory protocol which introduces key issues impacting the black community. Present day readers and critics, however, are often puzzled, even openly hostile, about what seems to be an insult to the black community—namely, Harper’s depiction of her black female protagonists as incarnations of her seemingly uncritical embrace of Caucasian standards of beauty. Iola Leroy is written in a form familiar to nineteenth-century readers: replete with beautiful women and handsome men who are educated, genteel, and refined. Except for the minor character Miss Delany, introduced near the end of the book, and the countrified ex-slaves, the real heroines are all near-white. What, then, is Harper saying about standards of beauty for black women?

Best-selling seduction novels by white females in the late eighteenth century describe heroines as—in the case of Charlotte Temple—“tall, elegant . . . [and] lovely . . . [with] a blue bonnet, and with a pair of lovely eyes of the same colour” (Rowson 9,10); delicate, “lovely,” and full of graces (Eliza Wharton) (Hannah Foster 33). Later sentimental novelists use such phrases as “fair, soft, and gentle” with “golden hair . . . arranged in ringlets” to describe such beauties such as Rosalia in The Deserted Wife (Southworth 264) or the pale and fair Emily Graham of The Lamplighter. Why do similar descriptions surface in Iola Leroy?

According to Vashti Lewis, “During the antebellum years, the near-white black character played a central role in the American novel.” In abolitionist literature the
mulatta elicited sympathy from a white audience not because she was black but because she was an ill-fated white (314). The sympathies of the white female reader are aroused because the victim of injustice looks and acts just like them, like a true woman. Here, again, Stowe’s novel is an instructive precursor. It is worth quoting at length the description of Eliza in chapter one as she is perceived by the slave trader Haley:

[She had] the same rich, full, dark eye, [as her little son] with its long lashes; the same ripples of silky black hair. The brown of her complexion gave way on the cheek to a perceptible flush, which deepened as she saw the gaze of the strange man fixed upon her in bold and undisguised admiration Her dress was of the neatest possible fit, and set off to advantage her finely moulded shape;--a delicately formed hand and a trim foot and ankle were items of appearance that did not escape the quick eye of the trader . . . . (16)

She is “so white as not to be known as of colored lineage,” (65), and her beauty is of “the most dazzling kind” (Stowe 21). In chapter nine, after Eliza escapes to Ohio to save her son, we learn of her “mournful and pathetic beauty,” her “forlorn and imploring expression” with “a calm, settled depth of anguish” in her “large, dark eye[s]” (95) as she realizes that under the Fugitive Slave Law, she and her son have no real place of safety. Harper drew also on William Wells Brown’s heroine Clotelle, whose complexion is white and whose hair is “soft [and] silk-like” (52). She exhibits no trace of “African blood” except for a “slight wave in the hair, and the scarcely perceptible brunettish tinge upon the countenance” (112). Brown describes his numerous quadroon and octoroon heroines as ladylike and “beautiful,” with “finely-cut and well-moulded features.” They boast “silken curls” and either blue or “dark and brilliant” eyes (5).

Iola and Marie seem copies of Eliza and Clotelle. Marie is “beautiful,” and according to her master and future husband, “. . . no one would suspect that she has one drop of negro blood in her veins” (Harper 66). The young Iola “‘has the proud poise of Leroy, the most splendid eyes . . . , lovely complexion, and a glorious wealth of hair . . . , a girl with apparent refinement and magnificent beauty’” and “‘just as white as we [Lorraine’s lawyer and the lawyer’s friend] are’” (Harper 99-100). With specific note of skin color and hair, Harper emphasizes Iola’s Caucasian characteristics. The escaped slave Tom, who was instrumental in rescuing Iola from her predatory master, uses the
adjective “‘putty’” (pretty) four times in one page and “‘beautifu’l” twice in the next page in praising Iola. He admires her “‘[b]eautiful long hair . . . blue eyes . . . [claiming she is] jis’ ez white ez anybody’s in dis place’” (Harper 38-39). Consistent with the stereotype of the tragic mulatto, Iola is similarly ill-fated. She possesses a voice which makes one think “‘some great sorrow has darkened and overshadowed her life’” and a face “‘pervaded by an air of inexpressible sadness.’” When she smiles, “‘there is a longing in her eyes which is never satisfied’” (Harper 57). Her sorrow, it seems, makes her even more attractive in Dr. Gresham’s eyes, and because she can pass for white, he accepts her as “his ideal of the woman whom he [is] willing to marry” (Harper 59).

Why, then, did Harper choose physical characteristics which were the antithesis of how most black women looked? Why did she create two characters who seem to fit the stereotype of the tragic mulatto? Harper, of course, wrote for the times. Her first readers, women both white and black, would be familiar with the sentimental heroine. Although the heyday of the sentimental romance had passed by the 1890s, the plethora of novels from the early 1800s were still widely available and read. Black women read the books printed by the dominant culture, and by Harper’s time, literacy among black women had greatly increased, thanks to the Freedman schools. In order for her novel to be read, Harper had to write for the market; she had to write what white publishers would print. She knew the importance of knowing her audience. In 1926 James Weldon Johnson suggested that:

The Afroamerican author faces a special problem which the plain American knows nothing about—the problem of the double audience. It is more than a double audience, it is a divided audience, an audience made up of two elements with differing and often antagonizing points of view. This audience is always both white America and black America. . . . If the Negro author selects white America as his audience he is bound to run up against the long-standing artistic conceptions about the negro; against numerous conventions and traditions . . . against a whole row of hard-set stereotypes which are not easily broken up. . . . But when he turns from the conventions of white America he runs afoul of the taboos of Black America . . . there are certain phases of life that he does not touch, certain
subjects that he dare not critically discuss, certain manners of treatment that he does not dare to use—except at the risk of rousing bitter resentment. (477-78)

A contemporary of Johnson’s during the Harlem Renaissance, Zora Neale Hurston, recognized that common values and experiences were central to each race’s acceptance of the other. In her essay “What White Publishers Won’t Print,” she writes, “Argue all you will or may about injustice, but as long as the majority cannot conceive of a Negro or a Jew feeling and reacting inside just as they do, the majority will keep right on believing that people who do not look like them cannot possibly feel as they do, and conform to the established pattern” (952-53). Early novelists had to write under the strictures of a white racist society, a society which didn’t want to read about complex black characters. No wonder the characters were stereotypical and distorted, at odds with the richness and imaginative society of real blacks.

Besides the hard realities of the marketplace, why else did Harper people her novel with blacks who look just like whites? Perhaps Harper and other African American female novelists, such as Pauline Hopkins, emphasized the mulatta to highlight the reality of miscegenation, even in the face of racist denial by whites. The mulatta’s presence—in novels and in real life—was subversive to the prevailing racial ideology of separatism. Lewis sees Harper’s heroines as fulfilling a dual purpose: her near-white genteel heroine “can illicit [elicit] sympathy from whites, whom she physically resembles, while simultaneously appealing to the strong sense of pride of a black upper and middle class” (316). Many newly emancipated slaves believed that if they adopted the behaviors of the dominant white culture they could earn respect and the rights of full citizenship. Indeed, many clubs formed by black women incorporated the word “Ladies” into their name. Eager to shed their image of “mules of the world,” black women sought the same deference heretofore given to white women. Behavior was intertwined with appearance. In Iola Leroy, the near-whites wear stylish clothes, hold jobs, are highly educated, engage in intellectual discussions, and are physically attractive. Also, many writers perhaps felt the pressure to showcase only the best of their race for fear that any frank airing of failures and offensive behaviors would set the whole race up for ridicule and censure. What Harper describes through her bourgeoisie characters is not the reality but the hope,
the hope that Black women could be awarded the respect previously bestowed only on white women. In the period the novel describes, immediately post-bellum, that hope was very much alive. In addition, by creating “white” black characters (Marie, Iola and Harry), Harper locates “racial identity in one’s political consciousness, rather than one’s color,” and seeks to demonstrate to white readers their moral responsibility. After all, Iola advocates her proslavery views during her boarding school days, when she thinks she is white. But after her identity as an African American is revealed and she is sold into slavery, she embraces her blackness through her commitment to racial uplift (Gaines 221).

Today’s readers read the novel through a postmodern prism. Scholar and writer Joseph Campbell says, “Myths offer life models . . . . But the models have to be appropriate to the time in which you are living . . . .” (16). The myth of the tragic mulatta who aspires to the cult of true womanhood no longer applies; indeed, it is scathingly eviscerated by most black women. But as Ann du Cille argues, “The near-white heroines who dominated the pages of nineteenth-century novels—no matter how distasteful their pale skin, piety, and purity may be to modern readers—served important political and literary functions. They stand as signs of the racist contradictions at the heart of American society” (47).

The heroines of sentimental novels, unmarried women, spent most of their energies, it seemed, on pursuing an appropriate husband. Mimicking the patriarchal society familiar to its readers, the novel presented the heroine’s dilemmas as she negotiated difficult choices, choices circumscribed by her weak position of power. Buffeted by her parent’s wishes, the attentions of dull but respectable suitors, and the lure of an attractive rake or otherwise unsuitable match, she struggles to make the best decision, knowing she will have no autonomy after marriage. Cathy Davidson observes that “since the sentimental novel focused almost exclusively on young women standing virtually on the doorstep of definitive marriage choices, it necessarily dramatized the grounds on which the final crucial step was taken” (Revolution 125-126). Many of the heroines of the so-called “seduction novels” come to an unfortunate or even tragic end as they make unwise choices, lose their virtue, or die in disgrace. (Two of the most well-known examples are the previously mentioned Charlotte Temple and Eliza Wharton.)
The implied lesson is that “the woman must take greater control of her life and must make shrewd judgments of the men who come into her life” (Davidson, *Revolution* 113). Unlike these early “seduction novels,” later sentimental novels end happily with marriage as the desired end.

*Iola Leroy* juxtaposes two love stories—one of the mother, the other of the daughter. It would be ludicrous to think of any slave woman having the same choices as a white woman, so only after Marie is emancipated is she free to marry. What is interesting here, though, is that Harper creates a situation whereby a white man loves and chooses to marry a black woman, a former slave. Harper gives voice to what sometimes did happen: white men forming lasting relationships with women of African descent. Marie is predictably grateful and subservient to her new husband. The emancipated Iola must choose between two suitors, a standard quandary in the sentimental novel. She rejects one white doctor in favor of another near-white doctor. The tradition requires that the male’s passion be dominant; the female is to be blushing and reticent. For example, in *The Coquette*, Mr. Boyer writes of Eliza: “I must own that I have not been able to infuse into her bosom, the ardor which I feel in my own.” He goes on to ponder “the native modesty of the sex” (Hannah Foster 33). To be fair, Eliza does display gaiety and vivacity when in Major Sanford’s company. But animation and sexual passion are not the same. Similarly, Iola reveals little romantic feeling. Always controlled, the most she can muster is a limp hand and “lustrous eyes” as she answers, “Frank, I love you” in response to his words, which are “eloquent with love and tenderness” (Harper 271). Their love seems mainly focused, however, on their altruistic goal of helping their people; that mission is where Iola’s passion lies. So marriage is the predictable happy ending, but it is more of a partnership for their “grand and noble purposes” among the country folk in North Carolina (271). Interestingly, Iola’s choice in marriage contrasts with her mother’s: Marie marries a white man and agrees to hide her Negro blood; Iola refuses marriage to a white man largely on the grounds that she would have to deny her race. Iola’s choice is perhaps Harper’s vision of emerging African American pride. Using the traditions of the love story, Harper advances her emancipatory protocols.

Given that the cult of true womanhood sets down parameters of behavior for women and that these parameters are inscribed in the love stories of the romance novels,
what complementary codes are to be followed by men? In other words, what behaviors and attitudes of men act as foils to those of the women? In sentimental novels of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the father or his surrogate is frequently the guiding force in his daughter’s life. He sets standards of bourgeois decorum as the mother is often an invalid or ineffective. The daughter’s duty is to make the home an attractive place for the men of the household so they will not be tempted to find questionable entertainment elsewhere.

Men’s natures were brutish and needed the more refined female influences to subdue them. Consistent with the double standard, men were not to be blamed for attempting seduction, but women were to resist. All aspects of female-male relations were, at least in theory, patriarchally driven. With emancipation, many black men strove to assert themselves in male-female relationships as white men had done for centuries. I explore this tendency in later chapters treating *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Linden Hills*. However, except for Marie and Eugene’s antebellum marriage, Harper writes against this patriarchal domination. Iola and Frank, Harry and Lucille, even Aunt Linda and Salter (although all wooden characters, to be sure) do exemplify a relationship of equals, each couple working to advance the race. Race supersedes gender for Harper. She creates strong female characters who challenge male behaviors that threaten uplift. Lucille Delany is especially vocal about men who shirk their duty to their children. Writes Harper, “With a flash in her eye and a ring of decision in her voice,” Lucille asserts that “such men ought to be drummed out of town!” Her expression seems to say, “And I would like to help do it!” Lucille’s future husband Harry looks on with “admiration” (253). Lucille is more New Woman than Victorian. Similarly, Iola and Aunt Linda speak of low behaviors, such as vote-selling, which should be eradicated. Aunt Linda insists that if her husband John were guilty of such a transgression, she’d “‘whip him an’ leave him’” (176). Iola follows Frank not so much because he is male and can provide guidance, but because he can advance her corporate mission; he can out-sacrifice her for a larger social purpose.

Stylistically, *Iola Leroy* shares many conventions of earlier sentimental novels, but, again, Harper appropriates some of these for her own interpretive purposes. Iola’s stilted, formal diction is another characteristic linking her to white womanhood. The
patois of slaves was often a source of parody and exaggeration by the dominant culture, so the educated, formal diction of a lady such as Iola refuted the stereotype. The elegant, elaborate, and stilted language of sentimental novels is familiar to any reader of *The Coquette, Charlotte Temple, Clotelle*, or *The Wide, Wide World*. These few lines from one of Eliza Wharton’s letters in *The Coquette* are typical:

> I find the ideas of sobriety, and domestic solitude, I have been cultivating for three days past, somewhat deranged by the interruption of a visitor, with whom, I know, you will not be pleased. . . . But let the veil of charity be drawn over my faults; let the eye of candor impartially examine my present behavior; let the kind and lenient hand of friendship assist in directing my future steps; and, perhaps, I may not prove unworthy of associating with the respectable inhabitants of this happy mansion . . . .

(Hannah Foster 35, 37)

Iola’s speech and that of the narrator mirror this stilted and verbose style. Here is a speech Iola delivers to her lover, Frank Latimer: “‘To be . . . the leader of a race to higher planes of thought and action, to teach men clearer views of life and duty, and to inspire their souls with loftier aims, is a far greater privilege than it is to open the gates of material prosperity and fill every home with sensuous enjoyment’” (Harper 219). The major characters speak in this elevated diction, while the minor characters (illiterate blacks) speak in dialect. Because “Blacks were ridiculed in white plantation and Reconstruction humor for the rough rhythms, slurred words, malapropisms, and quaint images in their language,” Black novelists embraced the other extreme, creating cultured mulattoes who spoke in genteel English, every speech a seemingly deliberate oration (Elder 16).

The dialect of the illiterate slaves is more than it seems, however. The novel opens with the slaves speaking in code to outwit their white masters. Explains Ammons:

> [The code involves] talking about the Civil War by discussing fresh butter and eggs, hanging sheets out to dry in symbolic configurations, and wearing books in their hats. With this Harper tells us that we must look not simply at the literal language of people told to be silent. We must also
look at their coded language, their disguised speech, if we truly want to
hear what is being said. (32)

Speaking in code is one aspect of the organized resistance spearheaded by the slaves
against their unsuspecting masters. The two speaking patterns—one formal and
grammatically correct, the other crafted to symbolize the dialect of illiterate slaves--
encompass Harper’s larger purpose: to soften the differences between Blacks and Whites
and, at the same time, to create honest and authentic portrayals of Black life.

Sentimental fiction and the earlier seduction novels would often rely on
indirection to recount “socially forbidden narratives,” that is, stories of taboo sexual
relationships. In *The Coquette*, Major Sanford describes Eliza’s capitulation to his sexual
advances this way: “[T]he show is over, as we yankees say; and the girl is my own”
(Hannah Foster 94). But we have no description of the actual seduction scene. The
sexual relationship between the unmarried Charlotte Temple and the man who has
promised to marry her, Montraville, is described after the fact in terms of Charlotte being
“robbed of innocence” and by “thoughtless passion led astray” (Rowson 65, 66).
Utilizing conventional ellipses and circuitous narration, these and other authors avoid the
offense of pandering to prurient interests. Similar circumlocution was used in the
accounts of white on black rape in both abolitionist and sentimental literature. Stowe uses
such a device in describing the sexual slavery imposed on Cassy by Simon Legree. His
abuse of her, says Cassy: “‘could make any one’s hair rise, and their teeth chatter, if I
should only tell what I’ve seen and been knowing to, here—and it’s no use resisting! Did
I want to live with him? Wasn’t I a woman delicately bred . . . . I’ve lived with him, these
five years, and cursed every moment of my life,—night and day’” (Stowe 382).

In *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Harriet Jacobs lowers the veil on the
details of her difficult choice to submit to the sexual advances of the kind, white lawyer
Mr. Sands rather than be assaulted by her vile master, Dr. Flint. To justify this difficult
moral choice and to show how crucial it is for slaves to exhibit some control over their
lives, Jacobs appeals to the first readers, white Victorian women:

O, ye happy women, whose purity has been sheltered from childhood, who
have been free to choose the objects of your affection, whose homes are
protected by law, do not judge the poor desolate slave girl too severely. If
slavery had been abolished, I, also could have married the man of my choice. . . . I should have been spared the painful task of confessing what I am now about to relate. . . . It seems less degrading to give one’s self, than to submit to compulsion. (68)

Jacobs relates little: the language here is formal, the details of the prohibited sexual liaison omitted.

In *Iola Leroy*, Harper recounts socially forbidden stories using euphemisms and indirection. After being sold into slavery, Iola’s reckless and selfish master means “‘to break her in.’” Iola is “held in durance vile” by a master who is trying “to drag her down to his own low level of sin and shame” (38-39). Formal epithets sound oddly out of place as the fugitive slave Robert (later to be revealed as Iola’s uncle) declares the would-be rapist “‘a [g]raceless scamp [who] ought to have his neck stretched’” and who ought “‘to be made to live on herrings’ heads and cold potatoes’” (Harper 38, 41). Later Iola recounts to her fiancé, Frank Latimer, the terror of being “‘in the power of men whose presence would fill you with horror and loathing, and to know that there is no earthly power to protect you from the highest insults which brutal cowardice could shower upon you’” (Harper 273). Thus, phrases such as “durance vile,” “sin and shame” and “brutal cowardice” substitute for “rape” and “sexual abuse.” In addition to specific word substitutions, Harper glides over parts of the narrative where sexual abuse may have occurred. Marie, Iola’s beautiful mulatta mother, is remanded into slavery, but we learn virtually nothing of her life as Lorraine’s slave except that at one point her task is to preserve candied fruits. One can only conclude that Harper’s omission is deliberate in order to mask a socially prohibited story.

Both the precursory seduction and sentimental novels and *Iola Leroy* are flavored with a healthy dose of didacticism. In the precursory novels, the narrator often addresses the reader directly with cautions about preserving virtue or not breaking the hearts of devoted parents. The lessons are not subtly delivered; typical is the ending of *Charlotte Temple*, which concludes with this pithy moral: “[Charlotte’s death is] a striking example that vice, however prosperous in the beginning, in the end leads only to misery and shame” (Rowson 120). In *The Deserted Wife*, Southworth repeatedly addresses the reader in the second person:
I desire particularly to call your attention . . . to the great importance of
the formation of character in childhood and youth, and to the awful truth
that the blackest teacher, the deepest guilt, the direst misery, the utmost
perdition of men and women may sometimes be traced to the smallest
mistakes in the education of boys and girls. (392)

According to Hazel Carby’s introduction to the Beacon edition of the novel, Harper
published through a black religious press so as to reach an audience of black Sunday
school children as “a contribution toward their education in the ethical and moral
precepts of intellectual leadership” (xvi).

Harper uses didacticism and sermon-type oratory as stylistic devices; indeed, the
novel has an almost biblical tone. She describes the end of the Civil War in a language
linking Blacks to the chosen people of Israel: “The lost cause went down in blood and
tears, and on the brows of a ransomed people God poured the chrism of a new era, and
they stood a race newly anointed with freedom” (138). Even the routine conversations
between characters are crafted to teach a lesson, this one between Iola and Dr. Gresham
about how the nation can be enriched by the inclusion of black citizens: “[We will be] not
simply a nation building up a great material prosperity, founding magnificent cities
grasping the commerce of the world, or excelling in literature, art, and science, but a
nation wearing sobriety as a crown and righteousness as the girdle of her loins,” claims
Iola (Harper 219). All these oratorical proclamations are designed to give weight to
Harper’s most serious purpose: to promote racial uplift, the novel is an exemplum to
refute the insidious stereotypes propagated by such writers as Thomas Nelson Page. Thus
Harper relies on the declamation style associated with propaganda. To put it simply, the
novel is organic: form echoes content.

The beginning of this chapter on Iola Leroy opened with the assertion that
Frances E.W. Harper embraced, questioned, and reshaped protocols of the sentimental
novel, protocols which included the four pillars of the cult of true womanhood: piety,
purity, submission, and domesticity. The best of the sentimental novels of the early and
mid nineteenth century explored female independence, intellectual acumen, and
emotional quandaries. They forged a link with intended readers, exhorting them, telling
them how and how not to live, but these works, also intentionally incorporated a high

34
degree of ambiguity. So within the conventions of the sentimental novel, we already find some pushing of the envelope. However, Harper’s goal was to use the individual experiences of a protagonist quite familiar to her public audience to awaken a national conscience or, using Hazel Carby’s phrase, to hand her readership a “political weapon” (*Reconstructing* 94).

In embracing aspects of the cult of true womanhood, Harper of necessity reshaped them. The first readers, Victorian white women, expected the traditional heroine to possess these characteristics, but to accept a mulatta as a true woman was something revolutionary. Harper had to carefully build her case by blurring the differences between near-white mulattas like Marie and Iola, and her readers. The choice of a mulatta as protagonist also served Harper’s larger purpose. As Carby explains:

> In relation to the plot, the mulatta figure allowed for movement between two worlds, white and black, and acted as a literary displacement of the actual increasing separation of the races. The mulatta figure was recognition of the difference between and separateness of the two races at the same time as it was a product of the sexual relationship between white and black. (*Reconstructing* 90)

The conditions of real life for blacks in the 1890s were brutal, but the content of most sentimental/domestic novels written by black authors was optimistic, reflecting the dream of assimilation. Harper’s afterword note in verse points to that dream:

> There is light beyond the darkness,
> Joy beyond the present pain;
> There is hope in God’s great justice
> And the negro’s rising brain.
> Though the morning seems to linger
> O’er the hill-tops far away,
> Yet the shadows bear the promise
> Of a brighter coming day. (282).

*Iola Leroy* was written not so much as art, but from a need to help effect social change and thus acts as the historical root of subsequent African American novels.
CHAPTER TWO

PLUM BUN: A NOVEL WITHOUT A MORAL:
REVISION OF THE FAIRY TALE

“‘White readers just don’t expect Negroes to be like this,’” explained the first publisher to see Jessie Redmon Fauset’s first manuscript as he rejected it (qtd. in Starkey 219). *There is Confusion* did ultimately find its way into print, as did three more novels, the second of which was *Plum Bun* in 1929. Literary editor of *The Crisis*, where she worked under W.E.B. DuBois; author of four novels, numerous short stories, poems, and essays; and promoter of leading writers of the Harlem Renaissance, Fauset was often criticized for her middle-class outlook, an outlook at odds with the outrageous depiction of primitive black life demanded by white readers.

However, Fauset wrote what she knew: of a life caught between white Victorian values and the pain and frustration of having to live the circumscribed existence of an African American woman. Fauset’s writing about the power imbalance inherent in both racial and gender oppression is more progressive than critics have recognized. This alternate view of black womanhood went against the tastes of publishers, critics, and readers; it took courage to write as Fauset did.

Using the template of the Bildungsroman so familiar to the readers of sentimental novels, Fauset crafts a novel exploring the unfulfilled expectations of black women. She uses the familiar in unfamiliar configurations to expose deficiencies in the norm (McDowell, Introduction xxix), while exploring issues now central to the fiction of black women: the experience of passing, the tensions in heterosexual relationships, racial oppression and identity, and the importance of female bonding. *Plum Bun* signifies on antebellum sentimental novels by white women as well as on post-bellum works in the same genre written by black women (Harper’s *Iola Leroy* and Pauline Hopkins’ *Contending Forces*, for example). Using irony and subtlety, Fauset resists many of the earlier controlling images of womanhood and carves a new definition.

The four tenets of true womanhood—piety, purity, submission, and domesticity—are minimized or deconstructed to make way for a reconfiguration of the social and
political order. Unlike the precursory sentimental novels written by white women and unlike *Iola Leroy, Plum Bun* largely ignores references to piety except in the idyllic description of the Murrays heading to church on Sunday mornings and singing hymns Sunday evenings. Angela is restless and bored during the services, thinking the waste of a Sunday morning “stupid” (Fauset 22), but the other family members are visibly moved and comforted by the familiar rituals. Excursions to church and contemplation of the afterlife ground the family, serving to underscore family cohesiveness. Just as Junius is proud of being able to support his family economically, so is he proud of escorting his attractive, fashionable family of females to Sunday services, an opportunity certainly denied to his slave ancestors. Piety, to Angela’s mother Mattie, is just another warm, deeply satisfying experience she shares with her husband. When she thinks of death, she thinks not of any reunion with Jesus, but of her earthly husband “stretching out his hand and guiding her through all the rough, strange places just as yest asy ago” (Fauset 25). After the deaths of Angela’s parents, the novel mentions nothing of church, the afterlife, or Christian precepts. Once in New York, Angela and Jinny both seem to adopt a fatalistic approach to life, waiting for events to unfold. When circumstances work in her favor, Angela might think “Oh, God [is] good!” (Fauset 259), but this ejaculation reveals no real connection to the Bible or desire to emulate Jesus Christ, behaviors which were central to *The Wide, Wide World, The Lamplighter, Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, and *Iola Leroy*.

Angela does, however, find an outlet which fulfills many of the needs that religion did for earlier heroines: her art. In the nineteenth century, religious identity enabled [women] to rely on an authority beyond the world of men and provided a crucial support to those who stepped beyond accepted bounds—reformers, for example. . . . Religious faith also allowed women a sort of holy selfishness, or self absorption, the result of the self-examination intrinsic to the Calvinist tradition. (Cott, *Bonds* 140)

It is precisely after her white paramour Roger abandons her and she loses Anthony to her sister Jinny that Angela finds refuge in a vocation beyond the world of men. Her absorption in art becomes “the greatest, most real force in her life” (Fauset 332). In fact, when Roger seeks to renew their old relationship and agrees even to marriage (albeit a clandestine one), Angela is impatient for him to go away since she is eager to get back to
her sketching. She recognizes in her art “the blessed narcotic value of interesting occupation” (Fauset 318). It becomes her means of self-actualization.

Just as the Victorian concept of piety was reconfigured by Fauset, so also was the once dominant tenet of sexual purity. To be sure, as in Iola Leroy, black women, here in the guise of Mattie, are perceived by whites as sexually promiscuous. According to the white actress who employs the young Mattie, “[high ideals and personal self-respect] were incomprehensible and even absurd in a servant.” She felt that “[all colored people] were naturally loose” (Fauset 29). Mattie must protect her virtue by appealing to Junius to rescue her from the predatory white male she is commanded to visit. Mattie embraces the ideal of sexual purity as well as the convention of a beloved male as the agent ensuring that this purity remain inviolate. Indeed, it is the African American women in the novel who value sexual chastity as a badge of respectability. The Murrays’ servant Hetty Daniels regales Angela with tales of how she “held out” to preserve “her pearl of great price.” However, Fauset’s word choice, “unslaked yearnings” (66), to describe the feelings lurking in Hetty’s eyes suggests an unhealthy suppression, at least as perceived by Angela. No mention is made of Jinny’s sexual behavior; however, she is often described as innocent and girlish.

The sophisticated, urban white woman of Fauset’s 1920s New York has rejected the belief in sexual purity as an indicator of a woman’s character. Angela’s new friend Paulette has had many lovers, and others in Angela’s New York circle openly engage in heterosexual liaisons. The self-absorbed women of Angela’s social network of white acquaintances seem unconcerned with any alternate, traditional view of purity. Angela arrives in New York a virgin, but Fauset tells us that “her purity was a matter not of morals, not of religion, nor of racial pride; it was a matter of fastidiousness” (199). But when Roger fulfills her high but capricious standards, Angela gives herself freely with no guilt. Like her white counterparts, Angela feels no regret, no sense of shame about her loss of virginity. Later, she experiences shame only because of the “unworthiness” of the affair (Fauset 245); in other words, she regrets that Roger showed himself to be shallow and weak, unlike Anthony.

As did Kate Chopin two decades earlier, Fauset explores the reaches of female desire and the erotic imagination. Indeed, Fauset is one of the first novelists to confront
the sexuality of a black female subject. Fauset rewrites the tenet of sexual purity to reflect changing political and cultural values. These changing values (changing as compared to those reflected by Harper, Hopkins, and most other nineteenth-century writers) include an earthier and franker recognition of the power of sexual attraction and desire.

One of the signifiers that most reflected changing values was the emergence of female vocalists singing the blues. As the “midwife” of the Harlem Renaissance, Fauset was certainly aware of the role of the blues in recognizing women as sexual beings. In his study of Negro life in the early twentieth century, E. Franklin Frazier recounts a lyric popular in the 1930s in which a woman sings to her man:

I’s dreamin’ of you...
Every night.
I’s thinking of you….
All right.
I’s wantin’ you….
Day an’ night. (213)

The longing and desire is palpable. Ma Rainey, the first major female blues singer to be extensively recorded, sang “of mature, sexual women” (Lieb qtd. in Collins, *Black Feminist* 101); her contemporary Sara Martin sang of potential sexual delight, while at the same time rejecting the cult of true womanhood and its narrow images of beauty: “Now my hair is nappy and I don’t wear no clothes of silk/Now my hair is nappy and I don’t wear no clothes of silk/But the cow that’s black and ugly has often got the sweetest milk” (Harrison qtd. in Collins, *Black Feminist* 101). In her provocative analysis of early Black blues women, Angela Davis probes the myriad ways in which black women subvert the politics of cultural representation. In Ma Rainey’s and Bessie Smith’s time, “women’s blues bore witness to the contradictory historical demands made of black American women.” On one hand, they were expected by the dominant culture to be domestic and subordinate, but given the limitations imposed by a Jim Crow society, “their lived experiences rendered such ideological assumptions flagrantly incongruous” (22). Davis further posits that in the blues “gender relationships are stretched to their limits and beyond” (22).
Even though Fauset herself was described as prim and straight-laced (after all, she was an unmarried, proper, thirty-eight year old Washington school teacher when she moved to New York), she had all around her in Harlem, Van Vechten parties, all-night cabarets, excess—and music. She wove the strands of male dominance, frank sexuality, and emerging female independence into the fabric of a novel, giving shape to an oppositional attitude toward gender and racial oppression.

Fauset makes Angela an active sexual being who ultimately questions her role as the object of a male’s (Roger’s) desire. Consumed with passion, she recognizes their complete absorption in each other, but at the same time she is able to separate herself. Fauset describes Angela’s outside self this way: “... something watchful, proud, remote, from the passion and rapture which flamed within her, kept her free and independent” (204). But this remoteness crumbles with her true love, Anthony. Sensual details abound as he takes her “in his arms and kiss[es] her slowly, with rapture” while she returns his kisses. Continues Fauset, “For a long time he held her close against his pounding heart; she opened her languid eyes to meet his burning gaze which she could feel rather than see” (282). Language such as this reminds us more of The Awakening or Chopin’s short story “The Storm”—or perhaps Edith Wharton’s The Age of Innocence or The House of Mirth rather than The Wide, Wide World, The Lamplighter, or Iola Leroy. Fauset’s expressed views on black female sexuality, extramarital sex, and marriage do not fall within the definition of gentility (McLendon 47).

Just as Fauset shifts the role of sexual purity as a component of black women’s space, so does she craft a new episteme regarding submission. According to those espousing the cardinal tenets of true womanhood, submission was perhaps the most feminine virtue expected of women. With obedience, humility, and a child-like dependence as hallmarks of their behavior, women were to be the passive, deferential responders to the active world of men. In addition, the true woman was to work only for her husband’s affection—not for monetary gain or fame. Fauset offers an alternate world view for all women, but particularly for black women who wish to resist the controlling images of black womanhood. At first, many of Angela’s goals seem to mesh with the convention of women being weak and tender, needing a man for protection. For example, the young Angela, still in her parents’ home, believes that “[p]ower, greatness, authority,
[are] fitting and proper for men; but there [are] sweeter more beautiful gifts for women, and power of a certain kind too” (88). This sentiment seems identical to the Victorian belief that a woman’s sphere encompasses the province of the heart while men command the head (intellect).

Furthermore, Angela decides that she must marry for protection—and that because of his higher status, this marriage partner must be a white man. Perhaps Fauset is also giving voice to the sad reality that black men were powerless to protect their women against sexual assault by white men. Fauset here explores the intersection of two determiners of power: gender and race. Marrying up is one way Angela can climb a rung in the hierarchy of the Great Chain of Being, one way she may be assured of a prosperous life with a fine house, fashionable clothes, and whatever else money can buy. In her girlish fantasies she seems to accept a type of submission to gain the material ease she seeks. And once she and Roger begin their affair, “[f]or awhile his wishes, his pleasure [become] the end and aim of her existence. . . .” Angela comes to realize that “men had other aims, other uses but . . . the sole excuse for being a woman was to be just that,—a woman” (emphasis mine) (Fauset 203-04).

Her submission (evidenced by relinquishing her marriage demand, living for her lover only and abandoning her other interests, being constantly available upon his summons, and so on) are rooted not in any Biblical sense of a woman’s role but in a mix of materialism and hedonism. Perhaps the submission is not really to Roger, but to her own sexual desires and self-absorption. At any rate, the “for awhile” ends after a few months, and Angela seems oddly unaffected by her lover’s rejection. Unlike Victorian women who always waited for their male suitors to make the first move, Angela pursues her true love Anthony, even traveling to his Harlem apartment at 11:00 at night to convince him of her love. She is a character of contradictions: assuming the male role of the hunter but also longing “to be a beloved woman, dependent, fragile, sought after, feminine . . . [seeking to be] ‘womanly’ to the point of ineptitude” (Fauset 296-97).

Submission, according to the sentimental novelists, was crucial because the very act of submitting was a form of discipline, and discipline helped one attain virtue. Those women who wished to serve God and be with their Savior forever in the afterlife must be virtuous in their earthly lives. Ellen (The Wide, Wide World,) Gerty (The Lamplighter),
and Hagar (*The Deserted Wife*) were popular nineteenth-century female protagonists who suffered adversity but triumphed by a purging of the will. Angela clearly rejects any Biblical construct of passive acceptance. In other words, she cannot accept that misfortune is the will of God. After she learns of Anthony’s engagement to Jinny, she decries “the meaningless ferocity of life” (Fauset 309). She admits to envying “people possessed of a blind religious faith, of the people who could bow the head submissively and whisper: ‘Thy will be done.’” She understands a blind passivity, but she cannot understand a force which bestowed blessings but then “with a careless sweep of the hand wipe out the picture” (Fauset 309).

Service and sacrifice do not come naturally to Angela: she changes her life by cutting ties with her family and their way of life and turning her back on those who would remind her that she is a Negro. But she does realize her selfishness as she remembers how she rejected Anthony that day in the park: “How easily she might have made him happy if she had turned her thoughts to his needs. But she had never thought of that; she had been too intent always on happiness for herself” (Fauset 275). Jinny, her mother, and her father have always been the ones to give; she has always taken. However, Angela does conquer—or at least repress—her passion for Anthony, not for religious reasons, but to protect her sister. At great physical and mental cost, she wills herself to abdicate in favor of Jinny. In this difficult self-willed act, she echoes the Bildungsroman construct of the sentimental novel. Jane Tompkins synthesizes this theme in *Sensational Designs*: “The pain of learning to conquer her own passions is the central fact of the sentimental heroine’s existence” (172).

Descriptions of domesticity in *Plum Bun* are, on one hand, consistent with depictions in the precursory sentimental novels, but Fauset reconfigures the idea of home as the best promise for black advancement. The Victorians viewed home as a refuge, a counterpoint to the dehumanizing, degrading, masculine world of work, an idea consistent with Karl Marx’s later analysis of alienated labor. Marx claimed that “the worker . . . feels at ease only outside work, and during work he is outside himself. He is at home when he is not working and when he is working he is not at home” (292-93). The canon of domesticity was a bulwark against the coarse army of exploitation and pecuniary values. This description from *The Lamplighter* is typical: “The fire-light
reflected upon the white curtains, the fragrant perfume which proceeded from a basket of flowers upon the table, the perfect neatness and order of the apartment, the placid peaceful face of Emily and the radiant expression of Gertrude’s countenance . . . proved such a charming contrast to the [discordant] scenes presented in other parts of the house” (Cummins 249).  *Plum Bun* opens with a similar romantic description of Mattie and Junius’s happiness in their little cracker box of a home. There are the singing of hymns in the parlor, sumptuous food, and satisfaction in performing the cleaning chores of the home. The love of the parents for each other and for their two daughters brings to Jinny “a sensation of happiness which lay perilously near tears” (Fauset 21).

The loving preparation of food is also a component of domesticity. For example, attention to meals is an important ritual in *The Wide, Wide World*. The detailed description of young Ellen making tea for her mother is worth quoting, as it provides a counterpoint to Jinny’s romanticized domestic service in *Plum Bun*:

[Ellen made] sure the kettle had really boiled; then she carefully poured some water into the teapot and rinsed it, both to make it clean and to make it hot; then she knew exactly how much tea to put into the tiny little teapot . . . . [S]he used to set it by the fire while she made half a slice of toast. How careful Ellen was about that toast! The bread must not be cut too thick nor too thin; the fire must, if possible, burn clear and bright, and she herself held the bread on a fork, just at the right distance from the coals to get nicely browned without burning. (Warner 13)

Jinny, like Gertrude and Ellen, revels in old-fashioned, idealized domesticity: By the age of twelve, Jinny had already developed a singular aptitude and liking for the care of the home. . . . First the kettle must be started boiling, then the pavement swept. Her father’s paper must be carried up and left outside his door. . . . She prepared the Sunday breakfast which was always the same, -bacon and eggs, strong coffee with good cream for Junius, chocolate for the other three and muffins. After the kettle had boiled and the muffins were mixed it took exactly half an hour to complete preparations. Virginia always went about these matters in the same way. (Fauset 20)
These fictional characters find happiness and reward in simple housewifely tasks executed the right way.

Jinny desires a life just like that of her parents, a life of community and the “sweet satisfaction” of service (Fauset 20). Home for the three Murrays is an oasis, a sanctuary, a refuge. It is a place where a poor Black man—Junius—carved out protection for his wife against white exploitation. Angela, however, desires escape to a finer life, a place with “broad thoroughfares, large, bright houses, delicate niceties of existence” (Fauset 12).

Once in New York, Angela displays feminine interests, such as cooking, home décor, and housekeeping, but these interests play into the novel’s critical analysis of society. She takes delight in re-creating some of the “homely, filling” family fare from Opal Street. For Anthony she cooks “corn-beef hash, roasted sweet potatoes, corn pudding and . . . muffins” (Fauset 101). Both Anthony and Matthew appreciate her cooking skills, but, interestingly, until her relationship with Roger is nearing physical intimacy, he seldom wants her to cook and instead prefers eating restaurant meals. After he wins her, “he grew to like her plain, good cooking” (Fauset 194). In sentimental novels, domesticity with its inherent positive moral influence was meant to tame the savage instincts of the uncouth, worldly male. Assuming this role, Angela, as the “Angel of the House,” promises to work on changing Roger after they marry, persuading him to help “coloured people,” for example, as the two of them live their “very useful” lives (Fauset 144).

Home as an actual physical structure is elusive for Angela. Consistent with her eye for art, Angela appreciates her friend Martha’s house “with its simple elegance, its fine, soft curtains and steady, shaded glow of light that stood somehow for home” (emphasis mine) (Fauset 113). It isn’t home; it is only an urban substitute. Angela doesn’t really have a home. She tries to re-create one with the remnants from her former life on Opal Street as she and Roger engage in “playful housekeeping” (Fauset 193), and she exchanges housewifely tips with her apartment neighbor Rachel.

Attachment and reattachment to home, preference for or rejection of domestic activities (like cooking) chart the novel’s plot. Plum Bun, like Fauset’s three other novels, begins “with an ideal home which quickly falls into disarray because of a wayward young
subject” (Allen 62). Carol Allen further argues that Fauset’s female subjects “obtain a worldly, cosmopolitan view before settling down, replacing the myopic and limited experiences of young female subjects of the nineteenth-century domestic tradition” (62). It is important to note that as Roger’s mistress, Angela rejects the opulent “palace” he would rent for her, and instead she insists on keeping her small apartment on Jayne Street. This is the space she has carved for herself, a place where she may retain some measure of authority over her life. So instead of home serving as the Victorian model of refuge for the male, it serves as an emerging place of freedom for the female.

Angela’s visit back to Philadelphia brings her full circle, back to her family home. She sees their little house now as “a tiny island of protection” . . . “a little redoubt of refuge against the world,” especially beautiful with “some one beloved,--with Anthony” (Fauset 366). When envisioning a blissful, but poor, life with Anthony, Angela eagerly anticipates doing all the domestic chores except washing and ironing. She savors this domestic connection with her mother, who taught both her and Jinny housewifely chores in their home of love and laughter. In Angela’s eyes, home now seems the best place to heal, to recover from violence, insensitivity, and unfulfilled dreams. Angela’s home at the novel’s close—Paris—and her reunion with Anthony suggest the possibility of a reconstituted, more vibrant home. She has changed from a starry-eyed ingénue to an adult admitting boundaries and realizing that marriage may not guarantee class ascendancy; home can, however, serve as a buffer against the effects of oppression.

Another part of the Bildungsroman motif so familiar to the first readers of sentimental novels was the role of female friendships in shaping the character of the protagonist. These fictional friendships reflected real life intense attachments between women. In her study of New England womanhood from 1780-1835, Nancy Cott describes how women looked to each other for moral support: “. . . the diaries and correspondence of New England women suggest that from the late eighteenth through the mid-nineteenth century they invented a newly self-conscious and idealized concept of female friendship” (Bonds 160). Typical is the evolving relationship between the fictional Gertrude Flint and Emily Graham of The Lamplighter and Ellen Montgomery and Alice Thompson in The Wide, Wide World. Cummins writes that Gertrude is “in the constant
enjoyment of Emily’s society . . . finding . . . new causes of contentment and rejoicing” (121). Emily’s and Gertrude’s friendship is based partly on recognition that “sacrifice is one of the noblest and most important traits of character a woman can possess” (134). In other words, they are drawn together by common values, one of them being that duty to others is paramount. Similarly, Ellen’s friend and mentor, Alice, loves and guides Ellen through Ellen’s Job-like trials. Openly physically affectionate with kisses and caresses, Alice adopts Ellen as a “sister” and teaches her both school subjects and Christian precepts. Ellen’s lessons are “delightful” and a “wonderful pleasure . . . a labour of love to both teacher and scholar” (Warner 338).

A further model of female affection, this time conflated with the model of domesticity, is developed by Stowe as she describes the idealized Quaker community of Rachel Halliday and her friend Ruth Stedman. They too share a core belief: the belief that God’s law demands that they help runaway slaves to freedom. This shared purpose engenders a deep trust. In literature depicting conditions of slavery, friendships between women were often undertaken at great risk. In *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Jacobs recounts how the slaves Sally and Betty and the white mistress Aunt Martha hid and protected the runaway Jacobs (Linda Brent) in spite of the danger to themselves and their families. They did so because they liked Linda and shared a long-standing affection for her grandmother. In Harper’s *Iola Leroy*, Iola finds sustenance and delight in her nascent friendship with Aunt Linda, largely because both of them share a common goal in the uplift of the race. For African American female authors, post-bellum and beyond, the exploration of gender specific relationships are part of the effort to find a voice. As Patricia Collins argues, “As mothers, daughters, sisters and friends to one another, African-American women affirm one another” (*Black Feminist* 96).

In *Plum Bun* Angela first embraces affirmation within the closed family circle but then severs connections as she tries on a new identity in New York. The “Henrietta Jones” joke is a private one between Angela and Jinny—a sort of sisterly ritual, part of the family dynamic of belonging. The sisters talk through the thin bedroom wall, exchanging confidences. They banter, argue, and complain. After Angela cuts Ginny at the train station, that close relationship disappears until the end of the novel when Angela reclaims her Negro heritage. Just as Emily and Alice act as teachers of often harsh truths,
Jinny upbraids Angela for her rejection of her racial identity. Angela yearns for the sisterly closeness of their childhood and is hurt when Jinny hides the news of her engagement from her but informs her new roommates. Angela seeks intimacy but only on her terms. At the same time, attempts at establishing friendships within her New York crowd prove unsatisfactory. The only close female relationship—and occurring only after her breakup with Roger—is with her neighbor Rachel Salting, a relationship initiated by Angela, “seeking . . . nothing other than those almost sisterly intimacies which spring up between solitary women cut off in big cities” (Fauset 244). As were the earlier protagonists Gert and Ellen, Angela is devastated when her friend must depart. It is “a catastrophe” which makes her sick at heart (Fauset 249). However, the friendship with Rachel is not without constraint as Angela cannot be honest about her racial background. Angela’s solidarity with Miss Powell is a reconfiguration of the friendship of idealism and risk present in Uncle Tom’s Cabin and Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl. No crusader, Angela does somehow feel moved to shock the smug, race-baiting white reporters hectoring Miss Powell and invading her home. Like earlier women characters who take risks, Angela decides “no price would be too dear” as she “[throws] away every chance [she’s] ever had in the world” for “truth” (Fauset 349).

Fauset shows Angela periodically yearning for female friendships as a way to undergird herself, to cope with the vicissitudes of life, and finally as a way to transcend a limiting context of self.

As was true for many black novelists dependent on the white publishing industry and a white readership, Fauset used the overlay of a familiar genre to mask a more radical subtext. Often seen as just another “passing” story or a conventional romance, Fauset used familiar templates to deconstruct the social and political order of middle-class black society. Just as sentimental texts embodied a stratum of meaning, so does Plum Bun. At its heart, the novel explores in complex treatment “the intricacies of gender oppression” using irony and subtlety (McDowell, Introduction xv). Angela’s parents realized the double handicap Angela would face, so they prepared her and Jinny for one of the few occupations open to black women which would insure independence. But the two Murray girls do desire marriage—Angela, for economic reasons, Jinny, because she fears being alone. The marriage plot, then, is central: Angela is obsessed with marriage to a
prosperous white man. But sex role stereotyping and her unrealistic romantic expectations act as obstacles.

Angela realizes that in order to marry a white man, she must cross over: She must choose to “pass” since marriage between a black woman and a white man would be well nigh impossible. According to black feminist critic Patricia Collins, “Traditionally, freedom for Black women has meant freedom from white men not the freedom to choose white men as lovers and friends” (191). Through Angela, a light-skinned African American with Caucasian features, Fauset decries the absurdity of arbitrary racial categories. Although the goal may be the same, an advantageous marriage, the motivations between the sentimental heroines of the past and Angela reflect a hard-edged disillusionment with the options for black women.

Angela seeks to overcome two limiting factors: race (by passing) and female subservience (through the right marriage). Both are subsets of the prevailing unequal power relationships in American society. Angela brings to the quest a fresh innocence, a belief that all things are possible, and a naïve confidence in her ability to control events while Roger brings experience, wealth, and a sense of entitlement. It is a contest which Angela will lose. After they become lovers, Roger chides her for telephoning him so much, reminding her that it’s something men can do, but not women. Roger’s condescension baffles and disillusions Angela. She becomes angered by the “unbridgeable difference between the sexes; everything was for men, but even the slightest privilege was to be denied to a woman unless the man chose to grant it” (Fauset 229). Paradoxically, she believes that women should have the right to behave just as aggressively and independently as men, but at the same time Angela yearns for a man “to shield and advise her,” someone to lean on (Fauset 264). And once she realizes her love for Anthony, she sees marriage “in a different light”: as “the most natural and desirable end” for women (Fauset 274).

Fauset’s complex treatment of gender oppression is signified by the metaphors of the marketplace. The title, obviously, refers to the nursery rhyme describing a successful market transaction:

“To Market, to Market
To buy a Plum Bun;
Home again, Home again,
Market is done.”

Fauset was, of course, familiar with food (for example, a jelly roll) representing sex—especially in the blues lyrics of Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith. So with Plum Bun’s double entendre on “tail,” an unsuspecting reader might anticipate a sensational and exotic novel on “lower class” black life, similar to Carl Van Vechten’s Nigger Heaven (1926) or Claude McKay’s Home to Harlem (1928). But Fauset defies expectations. Instead, the novel provides a clear-eyed, nuanced commentary on the politics of male-female relations. It is a relationship based on commodities. Angela is selling sex and devotion in return for marriage and its attendant economic security. Tellingly, Roger boasts to Angela, “Anything . . . that money can buy, I can get and I can give” (Fauset 179).

Angela plans to hold out, to encourage Roger, but not too much, while he goes on “wanting, wanting.” Believing that “men paid a big price for their desires,” she decides “[h]er price would be marriage” (Fauset 183). She sees this commodities exchange as a game: dangerous, but winnable. The culture has taught her that women are economically dependent on men, so women must of necessity be good negotiators. Feminist Charlotte Perkins Gilman in her 1898 text Women and Economics analyzed the situation this way: “The virtuous woman stands in close ranks with her sisters, refusing to part with herself—her only economic goods—until she is assured of legal marriage” (109). But the power exchange is unequal. Just as in the business world where men make the deals and where women consume the goods, so also in sexual relationships are there strict gender roles. When the novelty wears off, Roger leaves Angela. She reacts by raging against Roger’s trickery: “God, isn’t there any place where man’s responsibility to woman begins?” (Fauset 233). Illogically, Angela consoles herself with the thought that she “had not sold herself” (Fauset 233). True, in her new urban milieu, virginity is not much prized, but she has invested her passion, her dreams of a successful marriage, and her pride in a relationship, but her body is treated as commodity and her devotion held in contempt. Fauset here criticizes the sexual double-standard and the subordinate, sacrificial role of women. It is only when Angela escapes this entrapment and becomes self-sufficient can she freely give of herself.
Angela’s development is reflected in how she negotiates the historical, biological, psychological, and economic realities of her ambiguous position. The poignant scene of the black family turned away from the restaurant, Angela’s choice to “cut” Jinny in favor of Roger, and the rescinding of Miss Powell’s award because of her color are events which contribute to Angela’s reassessment and ultimate rejection of white hegemony. Fauset seems to be saying that blacks waste their time trying to be “white”; clamoring after “whiteness” is nothing short of a social disease (Exum 15). Angela’s darker sister Jinny sees the greed of the white race in her lighter sister: “Perhaps . . . selfishness was what the possession of white blood meant: the ultimate definition of Nordic Supremacy” (Fauset 275).

The ideal woman of the sentimental novels and one who epitomized the cult of true womanhood was Caucasian, often blue-eyed and fair-haired. We have seen how Frances E.W. Harper copied this convention with her light-skinned heroines in *Iola Leroy*. In *Plum Bun* the description of the nearly-white Angela mimics what readers would expect such a heroine to look like: a “creamy complexion and . . . soft chestnut hair” and an “aquiline nose . . . which gave . . . that touch of chiselled immobility” (Fauset 14). But, of course, here the point is that Angela does eventually realize she can have a much richer life as a woman of color than as one who passes for white. Her light skin color is often an embarrassment, as she is censored by the public when she appears with her darker friends, such as Matthew. Although she revels in the freedom of the Caucasian world—first on excursions with her mother and later alone in New York-- it is not so much the actual physical characteristics that she wants, but the wealth and privileges that naturally go to those who possess those features.

Notably, the richest physical description is reserved for her back females. Fauset sets up alternative standards of beauty in three female characters: Jinny; the unnamed young teacher at Martha’s gathering; and Angela’s fellow artist, Miss Powell. Jinny’s skin is smooth, “rose and gold”; her hair “black, alive and curling, [ending] in a thick velvety straightness like cut plush” (Fauset 164). She is a “striking, dainty colorful robin” (Fauset 78), healthy and glowing. The word choice connotes vibrancy, a sensuous energy which contrasts to the coldness of the pallid blond Caucasians, such as Roger. Clothes come in jewel tones: red mules (shoes) and a deep green dressing-gown. The
unnamed teacher has coloring similar to Jinny, “of a beautiful tint, all bronze and soft red” (Fauset 115). Her richness overshadows everyone else in the room. Miss Powell is also breathtakingly beautiful in a thin silk flaming red dress which exposes the satin blackness of her neck. Her teeth are dazzling and perfect; her high cheek bones show a touch of red (Fauset 164). All three descriptions suggest the exotic, the elegant, the deliberate choice of color to set off dark skin.

Interestingly, Fauset wrote at a time when the emphasis was on glamour, so much so that it was this decade (the 1920s) that “put a beauty parlor in nearly every small town, saw cosmetics grow from a minor business into one with a turnover worth $500 million a year, and created a whole new career for young women, that of the beautician” (Perrett qtd. in Williams 543). Fauset also knew Harlem’s greatest success story, Madame C.J. Walker, the richest self-made woman in America. Madame Walker made a fortune marketing hair products to black women who, like white women, wanted simply to look attractive, if not compelling. Even the magazines of the day showcased the “black is beautiful” theme. And the waning of Victorian standards encouraged men to appreciate all hues of black beauty. Complexions were compared to “ginger, honey, cinnamon, dusky sunsets,” and so on (Giddings 185). The glamour-conscious magazine Half-Century: A Colored Magazine for the Home and Homemaker counseled its readers in its September 1921 edition: “‘Don’t hesitate to send in your picture because you don’t consider yourself unusually good looking. . . . There are many types of colored beauty. Not all of them appeal to every individual’” (qtd. in Giddings 186). Fauset’s preference for the alternate feminist aesthetic—as typified by her dark women—was a statement of rejection of existing white hegemony standards that objectified women (Collins 88). The “New Negro” brought not only a bold new rhetoric, but a bold and confident appearance. It was exhilarating for both men and women to escape from a stereotyped past and try on new identities. Especially in Harlem “Black women clearly embraced the beauty ethos of the time” (Giddings 185).

The beautiful heroine has another purpose. Fauset uses two familiar genres—the romance and the fairy tale—to scaffold her tale and undercut expectations generated by marriage and the attendant roles of women. The effect is an unexpected satire on these two familiar forms. Possessing the four tenets of womanhood is supposed to, in the
sentimental novel tradition, insure success for the heroine, success not in a career or in attaining material possessions, but in spiritual reward and in marriage to a like-minded man of high principle. The genre of the romance novel is akin to the English and American sentimental novel in that both are replete with seemingly innumerable trials and misunderstandings which ensnare the heroine, but she preserves with marriage as the end result. The romance novel, however, stresses the secular, rather than the spiritual. Roger, like the English courtier of old and like the wooden, masculine hero of the romance novel, wins Angela with “his best Walter Raleigh manner,” cloak and all, if she had desired (Fauset 140). Fauset continues the trope of the knight and his lady as Angela deems their affair “the ultimate desideratum, the finest flower of chivalry” (Fauset 225).

Another marker of the romance novel is the belief that love conquers all. Before hearing Anthony’s story of his parentage, Angela assures him that the past doesn’t matter, that it is only the future that she’s interested in. Here the conventions of the romance novel only heighten the disconnect between stories internalized by female children and the real powerlessness of the marginalized.

Descriptions of physical passion, written in discrete language, are common to the romance. Similar clichéd props of seduction are showcased in chapter two of the “Plum Bun” section of the novel. A “plum” is the best part of anything, and Roger here is set on the best part of Angela, her sexualized body. After months of showering her with presents (in the form of large hampers of delicacies), chauffeuring her to clubs and parties, and bestowing sweet words and kisses, he is successful: They consummate their relationship on a stormy night in front of a fire.

The descriptions are wonderfully clichéd: “He put his arm about her, kissed her; her very bones turned to water”; “[T]he air was charged with passion”; “She could feel him trembling, she was trembling herself” (Fauset 201-02). He sweeps her in his arms with assurances that they “were meant for each other,” and that she should “trust” him (Fauset 202). Panting, Angela succumbs. In the tradition of the sentimental novels with their ellipses and omissions, we have only blank space and five dots before the text resumes days after the fireside event. Fauset’s style here is reminiscent of Warner’s in *The Wide, Wide World* as Ellen describes her sexual submission this way: “‘[S]ometimes
I am almost afraid I am too happy,’” followed by the authorial comment, “The answer to this need not be described” (583).

By choosing to layer formulaic details, Fauset forces readers to confront the mechanical remoteness of it all. The scene by the fire in which Roger sweeps Angela into his arms has been recreated, thousands of times, in fiction and film. In fact, this scene is so familiar that today’s readers perceive it visually like a film, because they have seen it before in many renditions. Because this scene does prefigure so many others like it in the later narrative cinema of the twentieth century, it raises many of the same questions about sexual difference and inequality generated by Laura Mulvey’s 1975 essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” Mulvey explores how Hollywood narrative film “looks at women as passive objects subordinated to the male gaze” (Leitch 2180). According to Mulvey, understanding the mechanisms of pleasure illuminates how audiences (and, I would add, readers) are encouraged to see women as objectified sexual objects. Viewers (readers) experience pleasure two ways: (1) making others the object of their controlling gaze and (2) identifying with the gaze of the male protagonist who is projecting his fantasy into the female figure. Thus, the female functions as the erotic object for both.

In the aforementioned scene in Plum Bun, Fauset paints Angela as “warm,” “soft,” “sweet,” and “languid” (201-202). Roger’s glance devours Angela as “his eyes are [on] her every motion” (202). We view her through Roger’s eyes as Fauset explicitly tells us of “the terrible lassitude [which] enveloped her” (202). The reader, as well as Roger, is caught up in the erotic pleasure of looking. This scene is consistent with one of the themes of the novel as a whole: the inequality of power relationships between men and women.

Plum Bun begins in classic fairy tale tradition: “In one of these houses dwelt a father, a mother and two daughters” (Fauset 11); furthermore, we learn that “[w]hen Angela and Virginia were little children and their mother used to read them fairy tales she would add to the ending, ‘And so they lived happily ever after, just like your father and me’” (Fauset 33). Just as Angela is conditioned to the conventions of the fairy tale as a template for women’s expectations, readers expect to find elements of the deep structure inherent in the familiar tales such as “Cinderella” or “Sleeping Beauty.” And we do find such elements—deconstructed.
A recurring theme of fairy tales is about growing up: how the powerless (usually children or young women) gain power, and often this growing up ends with a romance. Derek Brewer, in his seminal text, *The Interpretation of Fairy Tales*, posits that fairy tales talk about family tensions, “the protagonist’s need to leave the nest and find a male,” her ambivalent feeling towards her parents, and her and her mate’s re-integration back into society (7). Jack Zipes, Marxist critic and prolific author of 25 books on fairy tales, adds to this paradigm by describing the typical protagonist as “opportunistic”; females are “beautiful, passive, and industrious.” They demonstrate “cunning”: Indeed, “they all know how to take advantage of the rules of their society and the conventions of the fairy tale to profit” (xxvi). Marrying a rich and handsome prince is often the female protagonist’s reward. Angela, like a fairy tale heroine, sets her cap for her rich and handsome prince, convinced that winning him will ensure success and happiness. After meeting Roger, she sees “her life rounding out like a fairy tale” (Fauset 131). Roger “tall, and strong and beautiful” assumes she wants “a palace” in which to meet for their sexual encounters (Fauset 200, 181). Anticipating a marriage proposal, Angela is bewildered when “her castle, her fortress of protection, her refuge” turns out to be simply a mistress’s “love-nest” (Fauset 182). Fauset satirizes the romantic, happily-ever-after ending as the prize—her blond prince—so dearly bought is revealed to be all glitter and no substance.

The satiric tone carries a secondary purpose beyond serving as merely a vehicle to deflate the romance and fairy tale. It serves as the underpinning of a larger social critique. In *Plum Bun*, Fauset uses the unique capacity of literature to change perceptions of social reality by exposing the latter’s own fallacies. Like the sentimental novels by white women, novels which were a political tool of considerable cultural significance, *Plum Bun* exposes a middle-class world where misconceptions about race, class, and gender force a re-evaluation of black women’s space. *Plum Bun*, like the sentimental novel, provides a basis for remaking the social and political order in which events take place. It is important to remember that the first readers of the sentimental novel were “disenfranchised and lacking power in political life” (Ellis 3). These young white women were entranced by characters who experienced the same circumscribed conditions as they did. Just as upper and middle-class white women in the nineteenth century began to
participate in the public fields of print culture, so did the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s usher in similar expectations for African Americans.

The race issue was especially predominant in the 1920s as Black soldiers from World War I returned to a segregated America, as Black musicians and artists negotiated their roles with the white, moneyed patrons of the Harlem Renaissance, and as economic exploitation mocked the dreams of the hopeful. Like the African Americans of the time, Angela doesn’t understand why blood mixture should be the main factor in personal relationships, job opportunities, and general economic welfare. Through the characters Angela, Miss Powell, and others whose just rewards are denied them once their “colored” lineage is discovered, Fauset provides a scathing critique of America’s myopia. Through the ostracism by her childhood friend Mary Hastings, the cruelty of Esther Bayliss, and the rejection of her art teacher Mr. Shields, Angela discovers early how others can circumscribe life for her. She often puzzles over “the fallaciousness of a social system which stretched appearance so far beyond being” (Fauset 58). Having always to announce that one is colored seems absurd to Angela. (Perhaps in her depiction of Angela, Fauset was aware of the occasional passing for convenience sake of writer and lecturer Alice Dunbar-Nelson and the Chicago clubwoman Fannie Barrier Williams.) Angela’s departure for New York signals a resolve to grab what is rightfully hers without the arbitrary strictures of color prejudice. She reasons, “It’s not being colored that makes the difference, it’s letting it be known” (Fauset 78). One way Caucasians appropriate power is by the epistemological practices of naming and evaluating (Goldberg 150); because of her ability to pass, Angela attempts to thwart that power—or at least assume it for herself.

Just as gender politics underscore the unequal power relationships in American society, so do racial barriers illustrate another type of disempowerment, obstructing fulfillment of the most basic of desires. From the start, Fauset’s choice of subject matter (the black middle class) was contrary to what white publishers wanted to print. What sold was the exotic, the primitive. Fellow Harlem Renaissance writers Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston constantly battled white patrons for the right to construct works outside the world of sexual promiscuity and the beat of the tom-tom. According to Barbara Christian, Jessie Fauset “wanted to correct the impression most white people had
that all black people lived in Harlem dives or in picturesque, abject poverty” (*Black Feminist* 173).

As had Frances Harper 35 years earlier, Fauset believed only black writers could write authentically about the experiences of their race. In the introduction to the Beacon Press edition of *Plum Bun*, Deborah McDowell recounts how Fauset once “admitted to an interviewer that she began to write fiction in earnest when T.S. Stribling’s novel *Birthright* failed, in her estimation, to depict blacks authentically” (xxix). Writing in opposition to the dominant culture, Fauset remained true to the political purpose of the sentimental novel, a form “halfway between sermon and social theory, that both codifies and attempts to mold the values of its time” (Tompkins 126). Writing about the values of the emerging black middle class, Fauset hoped to mold public opinion to recognize the absurdities of racial hierarchies.

Fauset’s critique of middle-class values and mores sets up contradictions as to the logic of the goals of the “Talented Tenth.” Fauset, Charles Johnson, Walter White and others believed that the “assimilated, cultured Afro-Saxon was every whit the equal of his ‘Nordic’ counterpart” (David Lewis 148). On one hand, *Plum Bun*’s admirable black characters are committed to the race as a whole and want to prove that they are, as the saying goes, a credit to the race. But, on the other hand, they, like Angela’s mother believe that “‘[l]ife is more important than color’” (Fauset 333); in other words, sometimes the routine business of living is all one can manage. In the first section of the novel, Matthew snarls to his friend Porter, “‘You’ll be of much more service to your race as a good dentist than as a half-baked poet.’” Jinny agrees, believing in sacrificing “‘for the sake of the more important whole’” (Fauset 68). Porter adds that if he and his fellow African Americans are “‘the very best . . . [white] people will just have to take [us] for what [we] are and overlook the fact of colour’” (Fauset 54). Miss Powell, especially, feels this burden as she yearns for the chance to “‘show America that one of us can stick’” (Fauset 110); after winning the art prize, she “gave the impression of having justified . . . her race” (Fauset 334). Like the Talented Tenth, however, Fauset’s characters overlook the fact that racial prejudice is irrational, that hatred and fear do not respond to reason. Angela wearies of the talk of race and sacrifice. Self-absorbed, she wants only to be happy, “like the women one reads about” (Fauset 181).
Fauset, as did many blacks in the 1920s, became disillusioned about the value of uplift so embraced by Frances E.W. Harper and other post-Reconstruction activists and authors. Uplift, the self-help ideology developed by educated African Americans as a response to legal segregation, “sought to refute the view that African Americans were biologically inferior and unassimilable” (Gaines xiv). According to researcher Kevin Gaines in *Uplifting the Race*, “Believing that the improvement of African Americans’ material and moral conditions through self-help would diminish white racism, they [the black elite] sought to rehabilitate the race’s image by embodying respectability, enacted through an ethos of service to the masses” (xiv).

*Plum Bun*’s darker-skinned characters do aspire to make something of themselves, to live usefully and enlarge that fissure of opportunity they see glimmering through the wall of oppression. Teenagers Henson and Sawyer from the Opal Street neighborhood talk “of ideals and inevitable sacrifices for the race; the burnt-offering of individualism for some dimly glimpsed racial whole” (Fauset 117). However, instead of finding positions as a dentist or an engineer, they can find jobs working only in the post office or teaching at an African American school. There are no employment opportunities for them to advance themselves or others. Jinny also believes in sacrifice and is critical of Angela’s decision to pass for white when with her artistic success, she could “‘do something for . . . all of us who can’t look like you but who really have the same combination of blood’” (Fauset 79). Angela has vague, fleeting moments of conscience when she sets up a mental list of the people she will uplift: she will help “down-and-outers and give them a hand” (Fauset 144); she promises at one point “to be good to humanity—lots of coloured folks” (Fauset 162); but, unfortunately, she has already forgotten the names of the people from her past she promised to help (was it “Seymour Porter” or “Arthur Sawyer”? she wonders) (Fauset 131).

So, although Fauset applauds the optimism and courage of young African Americans such as the fictional teenagers of Opal Street and the cosmopolitan Miss Powell and Anthony Cross, she brackets and harpoons the way the dream is deferred. According to Hiroko Sato, *Plum Bun*, as well as Fauset’s other novels, is “full of references to racial problems and bitterness toward the injustice done by the whites to her race” (68). Ultimately, the rhetoric of racial uplift must have rung hollow for Fauset.
However, the judgmental gaze of the dominant culture, a gaze internalized by many elite blacks, made it necessary for African Americans to conceal any shortcomings or personal doubts.

Also, Fauset’s depiction of Angela appropriating the power and privileges of the dominant race examines how African American men and women, traumatized by oppressive social systems, in turn, oppress each other. Consistent with the role of sentimental novels as a tool by which to expose social and political predicaments, *Plum Bun* takes as its subtext economic oppression, an often over-looked remote cause of the ills which necessitated “uplift.” Gaines succinctly argues, “The bitter contradiction between lofty personal ambitions and uplift ideals and the suffocating realities facing black elites made racial uplift ideology a faulty construction that offered little protection . . .” (xxi).

The best-selling sentimental novels of the early and mid nineteenth century—*The Wide, Wide World*, *The Lamplighter*, *The Hidden Hand*, *The Deserted Wife*, for example—tell a woman’s story. A young girl, usually an orphan, is without financial and emotional support. She must make her own way in the world. She stumbles, she despairs, but she ultimately triumphs. Although at the end she may be rewarded with fortune and love, her own efforts and discipline make her succeed. It is on their working out of her own destiny that the plot centers. Such novels do not merely describe obstacles; they propose solutions, or at least advise ways the heroine can best navigate the circumscribed realities of her life. Well-known critic Nina Baym believes that such fiction “attempts to show that women who cultivate dependency, passivity, or decorative uselessness—the very qualities extolled by the cult of true womanhood of the era—are dangerously unfit for real life” (Introduction x-xi).

Protagonists such as Hope Leslie (*Hope Leslie* by Catharine Sedgwick), Ellen Montgomery, Gertrude Flint, Hagar Withers, and another Southworth heroine, Capitola Black (*The Hidden Hand*), learn to negotiate a vision of female self-authority appropriate for their time. Jessie Fauset’s foray into a world of complex intercies of race, class, and gender was appropriate for her time. Using a trope from the past, sentimental rhetoric, Fauset sought to create for her first readers a work both familiar and comprehensible, but also disconcerting and ambivalent. Today’s readers may see this novel as a timid...
exploration of women’s roles, but for its time, the work did venture into unpopular topics, namely social conventions which insured unequal power relationships in American society. It was a theme that Fauset in the 1920s could not yet fully actualize. Later artists in dialogue with *Plum Bun* would re-plot and expand her vision of female self-authority. Fauset set a foundation for another writer of the Harlem Renaissance, Zora Neale Hurston, and prefigured themes explored by Gloria Naylor.

Perhaps, then, *Plum Bun*’s title is Fauset’s final irony: The novel *does* have a moral, one that could not be actualized in Fauset’s time but one that continues to be inscribed by new generations of African American women writers as they discover their public voice.
The recipient of two Guggenheims and the author of four novels, a dozen short stories, two musicals, two books on black anthropology, dozens of essays, and a prize-winning autobiography, Zora Hurston died in a welfare home in Fort Pierce, Florida, in January 1960 and was buried in an unmarked grave in a segregated cemetery. She had died penniless, and a collection had to taken up to pay for her funeral. Hurston, however, had lived a rich life. Rising from obscurity out of Eatonville, Florida, paying her own way from age fourteen, courted by the literati of the Harlem Renaissance, and creating an exceptional body of literature, she had indeed fulfilled her mother’s exhortation to “jump at de sun” (Hurston, *Dust Tracks* 13).

As an African American, Hurston navigated a world in which the American dream for her people was often deferred, often circumscribed. However, her childhood in the all-black town of Eatonville, Florida, isolated her from the ugly aspects of racism. The town provided a showcase for blacks as undiminished human beings—a theme which permeates Hurston’s writings. According to Lillie Howard, “Her works . . . may be seen as manifestos of selfhood, as affirmations of blackness and the positive sides of black life; . . . they reveal life’s possibilities” (133). Her most critically acclaimed work, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, both embraces previous works by white and black women and charts an alternative discourse, one which extols a new vision of female self-authority.

More than any other of the nineteenth-century sentimental novels by white women, Warner’s *The Wide, Wide World* deals with power and the lack of it. Those who have guardianship of Ellen Montgomery—her father, Aunt Fortune, Uncle Elliott Lindsay, and John Graham—assume they “own” her. The female protagonist of Hurston’s novel faces the same sort of attitude by those with legal ties to her, Nanny, Logan Killicks, and Joe Starks. The female protagonists of sentimental novels tried to find a way to negotiate some control over their lives and thereby survive in their cultural reality.
Such is Janie Crawford’s quest in Zora Neale Hurston’s 1937 novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

As in *Iola Leroy* and *Plum Bun*, Hurston’s novel reconfigures the four tenets of true womanhood by which a woman judged herself and was judged by others, thereby making way for a more modern black woman, one closer to a vision of female autonomy.

From the title, one might think the novel focuses on God’s role in the lives of its characters. However, piety and God are largely absent. Absent, too, is the formal, traditional, evangelical language of the Protestant religion, language found in most of the precursory sentimental novels by white women. In *Their Eyes*, language describing God or events in the Bible is typical Hurston—lyrical and poetic and lush. Instead of the single event of the Creation described in Genesis, Janie “knew that God tore down the old world every evening and built a new one by sun-up” (25). The mythology continues with the account of how man was made: “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 chipped 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” (*Their Eyes* 90). These stories are reminiscent of Native American, African, and Caribbean myths, many of which would be known to Hurston, the anthropologist. The only reference to Jesus comes with Janie’s desperate ejaculation as she fears Tea Cake has come to a bad end gambling with “Double-Ugly.” She pleads, “Please, Jesus, don’t let them nasty niggers hurt her boy. If they do, Master Jesus, grant her a good gun and a chance to shoot em” (*TE* 126). Praying to Jesus for success in a revenge murder is rather at odds with the staid evangelical texts of the nineteenth century.

The novel gives us several hints that Hurston, the daughter of a part-time Baptist preacher, became disillusioned with the promises of Christianity. On the same page as her evocation to Jesus, Janie imagines “so-called” Christians, “hypocrites,” criticizing Tea Cake. She has nothing but scorn for these “backbiters” (*TE* 126). Her study of hoodoo in Louisiana and voodoo in the Caribbean gave Hurston a view of alternate religions. (Interestingly, *Their Eyes* was composed during seven weeks in Haiti.) After Joe falls ill, many in the community surmise Janie has paid a conjurer to “fix” him. Root

---

2 Hereafter cited parenthetically as *TE*
doctors visit Eatonville with their “cures.” Pheoby informs Janie that one of these “multiplied cockroach[es]” was “around last summer” trying to sell gophers. Gopher
dust (dirt or powder) is, according to a current witchcraft website, “used to defeat
enemies and those sending negative energies” (“Big Fat”). “Gopher” is also the generic
term for a “complex folk system of magic” (“Uses”). In contrast to the conventional
religion of Iola Leroy and even Plum Bun, the text reveals Hurston’s openness to
alternate forms of spirituality.

The title, of course, comes from the terror during the hurricane. Janie, Tea Cake,
and Motorboat watch the door, expecting the flood to burst through: “Six eyes were
questioning God” (TE 159). Janie and the others evince a belief in God but seem to have
little faith He can rescue them. They expect to be at the mercy of events, a scenario which
they have experienced many times as African Americans. They have learned that is the
way the world works.

All in all, then, piety in the traditional sense as defined by the cult of true
womanhood is not important to Janie, nor does it seem to be important to those around
her. But Janie does possess a spirituality which serves, in at least one dimension, the
same purpose as religion—as an antidote to the restlessness of the human heart. In her
excellent overview of the lives of white middle-class women in the nineteenth century,
Barbara Welter explains that religion acted “as a kind of tranquilizer for the many
undefined longings which swept even the most pious young girl, and about which it was
better to pray than to think” (22). In her marriages to both Logan and Joe, Janie yearns
for the fulfillment promised by the pear tree, for a meaningful love without loss of self-
esteeem. She develops a split psyche: one that lets her manage life with Joe and the store,
the other where she sits “under a shady tree with the wind blowing through her hair and
her clothes,” while nearby someone is “making summertime out of lonesomeness.”
Hurston describes this state as “like a drug” (TE 77), a simile used by some in explaining
the spell of religion.

Another component of the so-called cult of true womanhood is sexual purity. To
Nanny, a victim of rape by her white master, sexual purity is important as it is
emblematic of the choices available to the post-bellum Black woman. Nanny sees in the
life she can create for her grand-daughter the chance “to preach a great sermon about
colored women sittin’ on high.’” She explains to Janie, “‘Ah said Ah’d save de text for you’” (TE 16). The fear that Janie will lose her virginity is, of course, the reason Nanny rushes her into marriage, after seeing Johnny Taylor “lacerate” Janie with a kiss (TE 12). Like Angela Murray in Plum Bun, Janie is a sexual being, but unlike Angela, Janie’s sexuality is active, not passive. Hurston is plotting new ground here. With none of the blushing modesty of Iola Leroy, Gertrude Flint, Ellen Montgomery, or Rosalie Churchill (of The Deserted Wife), Janie is the foremother of the sensual and sexual black female protagonist crafted by Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Ntozake Shange, Paule Marshall, and Gloria Naylor, among others. Only two pages into Hurston’s text, we are introduced to Janie Woods’ physical body: “her firm buttocks like she had grape fruits [sic] in her hip pockets; the great rope of black hair swinging to her waist and unraveling in the wind like a plume; . . . her pugnacious breasts trying to bore holes in her shirt” (TE 2). Hers is an aggressive sexuality. Janie’s earliest memories, she recounts to Pheoby, are of the bee in the pear blossom, a sexual image of the desire for an orgasm.

Much is made of Janie’s leaving her first husband without benefit of divorce. But perhaps a divorce is moot. It is possible that the marriage was never consummated: Logan is old and unattractive, and Janie seems sure after two months of marriage that she can not be pregnant. She confides in her grandmother that Logan has smelly feet; in fact, the odor is so strong she won’t even turn over in bed, worried about stirring up the air. So perhaps there was no real legal (consummated) marriage when Janie sets off for Green Cove Springs with Joe Starks. In the early days of the marriage, Hurston indicates affection between Joe and Janie, but no erotic passion. Later, as Joe becomes more abusive and Janie becomes more disillusioned, we learn that “[t]he spirit of the marriage left the bedroom and took to living in the parlor. . . . It never went back inside the bedroom again. . . . The bed was no longer a daisy-field for her and Joe to play in” (TE 71).

It is with Tea Cake that the mature Janie finds the “bee to [her] blossom” (TE 108). Janie tells Pheoby that she and Tea Cake are sexually intimate before marriage and that their love requires learning “the maiden language all over” (TE 115). Disturbingly, Hurston weaves the most erotic passages of the text with images of violence. After finding Nunkie alone with Tea Cake, Janie chases her and confronts Tea Cake “[cutting]
him short with a blow.” Continues Hurston, “They fought from one room to the other, Janie trying to beat him.” But then the anger turns to love-making:

They wrestled on until they were doped with their own fumes and emanations; till their clothes had been torn away; till he hurled her to the floor and held her there melting her resistance with the heat of his body, doing things with their bodies to express the inexpressible; kissed her until she arched her body to meet him and they fell asleep in sweet exhaustion.

(TE 137, 138)

Critic P. Gabrielle Foreman interprets Hurston’s choice of defining Janie as a sexual being, one who rejects the Victorian morality of women protagonists who preceded her, as the voice of the author anticipating the critics’ reactions to her unconventional text. Foreman imagines the critics’ queries: “‘What does Hurston think she’s doing creating a sensual folk hero?’ . . . ‘What happened to Angela Murray’?” (659). The complex dialogue between texts before and during the Harlem Renaissance illuminates the radical underpinnings of this 1937 novel. As I indicated in chapter one, Frances E. W. Harper’s priority was to counter the denigrating nineteenth-century images of black women as animalistic, naturally lewd, and impure. She shifted representations from licentious to chaste and virtuous, a rhetorical device designed to link white and black womanhood. Harriet Jacobs in her Incidents slave narrative articulates the dilemma facing a beautiful, light-skinned woman. She was physically attractive to white men and—because of her condition as a slave—sexually available to these men as no white woman would ever be. Jacobs notes, “[I]f God has bestowed beauty upon her [the female slave], it will prove her greatest curse” (27). This belief in a black woman’s inherent sexual immorality persisted for decades and led to restraint by African American women writers in depicting sexuality, a portrayal which Gloria Naylor describes as “whitened and deadened to the point of invisibility” (“Love” 22). This was to change during the Harlem Renaissance. According to Naylor, “[Y]ounger writers of the Harlem Renaissance were . . . rebelling against the burden of ‘lifting the race’ to white approval” (“Love” 22). Works such as Cane and Home to Harlem and the lyrics of the blues and the rhythms of jazz ushered in a celebration of folk and overtly ethnic life, the lusty, sensual side of black culture. Other works, however, (Quicksand and There is Confusion come to
mind) only suggest a desire to defy convention. With *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Hurston adds to this complex mix of texts in conversation with each other.

In the precursory sentimental novels, domesticity defined the role of the female protagonist. Cooking, cleaning, creating a nurturing refuge for her family, and assuming most of the child-rearing responsibilities were approved tasks for the Victorian female. After the reality of slavery during which children and grandchildren were routinely sold (as was the plan Marse Robert’s wife sets forth for Leafy), Nanny invests her dreams into the daughter and grand-daughter who, now, no one can wrest from her. Her family is foremost; she eschews marriage because she “didn’t want nobody mistreating [her] baby” (*TE* 19). In order to “make de sun shine on both sides of de street” for her daughter, Nanny finds some “good people” who employ her (*TE* 19). Like the idealized white mothers of the advice tracts, Nanny sets out to do the best for her children. Also at work here is what would become the stereotype of the black matriarch. Gerdna Lerner in her study of the origins of patriarchy asserts that “[o]ver and over again the defense of the family is seen as the primary concern of black women” (69). Because of her horrible experiences, Nanny sees the “domestic pedestal as the safest escape from the dangers of racial/sexual oppression” (Bethel 183).

Janie embraces some aspects of this so-called virtue of domesticity while rejecting others. With Logan, she sees her sphere as the kitchen, not in the fields plowing, doing a man’s work. She is fulfilling her grandmother’s plan for her. In antebellum times, slave women worked as field hands alongside the men; both were “mules of the world.” After emancipation, former slave women embraced the domestic sphere, imitating the white women of the dominant culture. Janie, however, rejects plowing or shoveling manure not because of any fastidiousness but because she doesn’t like Logan, doesn’t want to be near him, and has no stake in trying to please him. Perhaps because of the absence of children, a dynamic which reduces at-home time, and because Joe Starks views his pretty wife as a showpiece, Janie’s second husband saddles her with a dual role: presiding over the home and working at the store. Clearly he controls her space. Just after she and Joe are married, when Tony asks “Mrs. Mayor Starks” to make a speech at the store opening, Joe takes the floor instead and announces, “. . . mah wife don’t know
nothin’ ‘bout no speech-makin’. Ah never married her for nothin’ lak dat. She’s uh woman and her place is in de home” (TE 41).

Things change with Janie’s third marriage. With Tea Cake, Janie rejects the separation of male/female spheres. Hurston gives us details of Janie’s cooking skills (“big pots of blackeyed peas and rice. . . . pans of navy beans with plenty of sugar and hunks of bacon laying on top . . . and dessert”) (TE 132), so we know she is skilled in the kitchen. However, during the day, she chooses to leave the kitchen and join Tea Cake in the muck picking beans, just so the two of them can be together. At the end of the day he helps her get supper. They share an egalitarian marriage, with the male/female roles blurred.

*Their Eyes* acts as a bridge text, straddling the Victorian attitude of marriage as the ideal domestic state for women (Nanny’s view) and the modern view of marriage as limiting and inimical to self-definition (as we will see later in *Linden Hills*). As I noted earlier in *Iola Leroy*, in post-Reconstruction texts, the freedom to marry was a concrete manifestation of emancipation, of the recognition that former slaves were entitled to the full rights of citizenship. The family served as a microcosm of what might be possible in society. In *Iola Leroy*, for instance, marriage and personal fulfillment are not mutually exclusive. Personal fulfillment comes through service to the community, as with Iola’s and Frank’s commitment to serve former slaves down south and Harry and Lucille’s management of “a large and flourishing school” (Harper 281).

Hurston’s novel begins with 16-year old Janie conflating sexual awakening with self-awareness. When her grandmother mandates marriage as the socially acceptable response to this awakening, the generic “cover story” for the sentimental novel is put in place. For the nineteenth-century white woman, “[m]arriage was a demonstrable step up in the hierarchy of society, one of the few ways in which a woman could make such a move” (Welter 8). Similarly, for a former slave such as Nanny, marriage symbolized an increase in status and validation of the promise of respectability, a respectability formerly reserved only for white women.

Nanny’s concern, though, is not for Janie’s self-fulfillment but for her protection from male sexual privilege. She desires for her granddaughter the middle-class bourgeois life she (Nanny) was denied as a slave. Her account of sexual exploitation by her white
master echoes that described in *Iola Leroy*, and thus the domestic trope seems both to Iola and to Nanny key to the black woman’s dignity and progress.

Janie, however, comes to hate her grandmother who “had twisted her so in the name of love,” who had “pinched [the horizon] in to such a little bit of a thing that she could tie it about her . . . neck” (*TE* 89). For Janie, marriage is simply incompatible with a liberational protocol—at least until she meets her third husband, Tea Cake. Marriage is antagonistic to Janie’s quest for worldly exploration and self-discovery. In her excellent study of twentieth-century women writers, Rachel Blau Du Plessis interprets the movement from domestic tropology to a modern paradigm this way: “[I]t is the project of twentieth-century women writers to solve the contradiction between love and quest and to replace the alternate endings in marriage and death that are their cultural legacy from nineteenth-century life and letters by offering a different set of choices” (4). Negotiating this different set of choices comprises the plot of *Their Eyes*. With romantic illusions shattered (“marriage did not make love,” Janie discovers), she begins her quest “for [the] far horizon . . . [for] change and chance” (*TE* 25, 29).

In antebellum sentimental novels, women were expected to submit to fortune and to designated males (fathers and later, husbands) since they were believed to be ordained by God as superiors. George Burnap in his 1854 lectures *Sphere and Duties of Woman*, referred to a woman’s life as “a series of suppressed emotions” (172). Ellen Montgomery of *The Wide, Wide World*, Hagar Withers of *The Deserted Wife*, Gerty Flint of *The Lamplighter*, and Clotelle of *Clotelle, or, The President’s Daughter* are among those heroines who learn to bow to fortune’s whim and to the tyranny of the males in their lives. Southworth’s protagonist Hagar Withers is perhaps most relevant as we analyze Janie Crawford. Hagar’s husband Raymond desires to control all aspects of his new wife’s life—and the marital advice given to Hagar by her foster mother supports this right: “‘Yield now, dear, yield. There is no degradation in making a sacrifice to love’” (*Deserted* 232). Society sanctions a Victorian hegemony which stresses the sacrifice of the female. Sophie counsels her newly-married foster daughter Hagar on the realities of marriage: “‘You gave yourself away to him [husband Raymond], and now he *very naturally* expects you to conform your manners to his tastes. . . . [I]f liberty were dearer to you than love, you should never have given yourself to a husband’” (230) (emphasis
mine). In other words, the expectation is that if the wife doesn’t find self-fulfillment in marriage, it is her fault, and she must shift expectations. The narrative voice informs the readers that with the wedding ceremony, Hagar has now the experience of “being owned,” of being no better “than a bondswoman”; “[H]er very name and title are all gone,” traded for a husband with “a life-long authority over her” (Southworth, *Deserted* 179).

Upon marriage, Raymond restricts Hagar to a narrow, stifling sphere: that of the subservient showpiece whose only purpose is to cater to his needs, even to the extent of threatening to remove their twin babies from the home as they appropriate too much of Hagar’s time and devotion. The spirited Hagar, more at home in riding clothes than fine silk, is commanded to eschew common tasks, such as housekeeping. She is to “cultivate [her] beauty” since she has “nothing else to do, except take lessons in music” (Southworth, *Deserted* 241). Raymond instructs her to put on “fine dresses” which harmonize with his “fine house” to show him “honuour” (Southworth, *Deserted* 241). As he invites no outside company, Hagar’s beauty is for him only. Raymond practices repression in the name of pampering.

His goal is to break Hagar, as one would a spirited horse. He desires nothing less than unstinting obedience. Anguished at her confinement, Hagar exclaims, “‘Can I not escape your eye and voice anywhere, anywhere?’” Raymond explains his initial attraction to his future wife as a desire for possession, much in the way he would covet a luxurious object for his fine house: “I wished to possess her. . . . I wanted her for interest, amusement, occupation . . .” (Southworth, *Deserted* 210). In her introduction to *The Hidden Hand*, a later Southworth novel (pub. 1859), Joanne Dobson argues that Southworth’s “enduring concern is the fettering of individuality, and such tampering with personal freedom provides the locus of evil. . . . [The Deserted Wife is] a close study of the deliberate, calculated attempt of a man to destroy the independence of a high-spirited, passionate woman by marrying her and using her love for him to bring her to a state of humiliation and dependency” (xxiv). As Raymond promises his new wife that she will be “‘docile by and by,’” she snaps, “‘I wish you joy of your automaton!’” (Southworth, *Deserted* 228). This trivialization of Hagar’s existence, in the hands of the sinister and
manipulative Raymond, results in a “weary and lonesome” lethargy (Southworth, Deserted 242).

Like the novels of Southworth, Warner, Cummins, Brown, and others, Their Eyes features repressive males and a female protagonist who must learn to control her feelings. To escape the ire of her second husband, Joe Starks, Janie learns to suppress her emotions. She copes by deflecting confrontation; she appears outwardly submissive. After Joe chastises her for wanting to be part of the community mule-dragging, she remains angry about being excluded, but instead of arguing, she “[takes] the easy way away from a fuss. She didn’t change her mind but she agreed with her mouth” (TE 63). She learns to control her impulses, especially in reaction to Joe’s physical violence. After he slaps her for the dinner of scorched rice and underdone fish, Janie puts her emotions in a lock box, “in parts of her heart where he could never find them. . . . She had an inside and an outside now and suddenly she knew how not to mix them” (TE 72).

Just as Southworth’s Hagar Withers is tamed, Janie is subdued as well, at least on the surface: “The years took all the fight out of Janie’s face. For a while she thought it was gone from her soul. No matter what Jody did, she said nothing.” Janie was like a rutted road “beaten down by the wheels” (TE 76). Hurston continues, “Joe wanted [Janie’s] submission and he’d keep on fighting until he had it. So gradually, she pressed her teeth together and learned to hush” (TE 71).

Janie assumes a gender mask to appear to be outwardly submissive. The mask acts a protective armor, keeping secure the empowerment and self-actualization yet to come. I’m reminded of Julia Anna Copper’s rhetorical question in A Voice From The South (pub. 1892) about women diminishing themselves to fit a man’s conception of what a proper woman should be: “‘How shall I so cramp, stunt, simplify and nullify myself as to make me eligible to the honor of being swallowed up into some little man?’” (70). The inside/outside theme is a broad one, relevant to the precursory sentimental novels and to Hurston’s text.

Janie is to be a showpiece for Joe. Like the white Victorians and like Hagar, Janie is to be an extension of her husband’s taste, of his position. With their first meeting, Joe establishes Janie’s role as a “‘pretty doll-baby’” who should do no manual labor but merely “‘sit on de front porch and rock and fan [herself]’” (TE 29). For the ceremonial
opening of the store, Joe tells Janie to dress up “in one of her bought dresses . . . a wine-colored red . . . [with] silken ruffles [which] rustled and muttered about her,” while the other women had on “percale and calico.” He meant for “nobody else’s wife to rank with her”; she “must look on herself as the bell-cow, the other women were the gang” (*TE* 41). Joe, like the previously-mentioned Raymond, and John Humphreys (of *The Wide, Wide World*), and Mr. Graham (of *The Lamplighter*), objectifies the female protagonist. In this case, it is Janie’s beauty that spurs Joe’s possessiveness. Janie’s gorgeous long hair is a temptation to the other men whom Joe has seen “figuratively wallowing in it” (*TE* 55). Enraged with jealousy after he sees Walter brushing the back of Janie’s braid so lightly that she doesn’t feel it, Joe commands her to tie her hair up in a head rag when in the presence of the men at the store: “She was there in the store for *him* to look at, not those others” (*TE* 55).

The actions of Janie’s first two husbands are consistent with the plot line of nineteenth-century sentimental novels, the theme of male responsibility in re-making or shaping the young female heroine. Almost always, the men are older, and the relationship mirrors that of parent-child. Several examples from the most popular of these novels are pertinent here. The character and priorities of Ellen Montgomery of *The Wide, Wide World* are shaped by John Humphreys, the older brother of her confidante, Alice. He buys her a pony and teaches her to ride, he guides her Bible reading, he cautions her against reading novels. John devises her curriculum and schedules her day. Warner describes Ellen’s eagerness to please: “. . . her whole soul was given to the performance of whatever he wished her to do. The effect was all he looked for” (354). He chastises her when she is selfish and calms her during her frequent bouts of weeping. Predictably, he takes her as a child-bride as soon as she reaches eighteen. Willie Sullivan of *The Lamplighter* acts as a guiding older brother to young heroine Gert. Less exacting and oppressive than John Humphreys, Willie, nevertheless, sets out to rid Gert of her quick temper, abusive language, and ignorance of Christianity. He also returns to claim the woman who had so stirred his heart when she was a child. I have already discussed the manipulative Raymond Withers of *The Deserted Wife*. These males are not identical, of course. Raymond’s intimidation is covert and sinister, while John exhibits a sanctioned, though repressive, patriarchal control. To be fair, Willie’s guidance is much more benign,
as his goal is to civilize the wild child, Gert. His kindly attentions to her reflect Cummins’ description of him as possessing “uncommon beauty, winning disposition, and . . . evidence of a manly and noble nature” (36). His guidance is loving but firm, but it is patriarchal, nonetheless.

Both Logan Killicks and Joe Starks desire to shape their child-bride Janie. Killicks, for example, is set on turning his sixteen-year-old wife into a field hand, going so far as to buy a second plow mule “all gentled up so even uh a woman kin handle ‘im” (TE 27). He orders her to help move a manure pile, emphasizing that she has no particular sphere: “‘It’s wherever Ah need yuh’” says Logan (TE 31). Janie rejects this role by symbolically tossing her apron on a bush and taking her chance with Joe Starks. Just as controlling, Joe continues the overt oppression begun by Killicks. He sees her place as in the home and early in the marriage refuses to allow her to give a speech at the store opening. He “want[s] her to use her privileges” (TE 54), but only the “privileges” he sanctions. Joe seeks to transform Janie into a manifestation of his position. She is to play the role of “Mrs. Mayor” and abstain from activities engaged in by the common folk: playing checkers, participating in the store porch stories, and attending such community activities as the mule-dragging. Indeed, Joe seems to take pleasure in hustling her inside whenever he sees she may descend to the level of the folk. Decorum must be preserved.

Interestingly, Tea Cake, the antithesis to Logan and Joe in many ways, also engages in sexual politics. Here the difference is that Janie welcomes his decisions. He picks out the colors for her to wear (“a new blue dress”) and promises they “will start out Tea Cake’s way” (TE 113, 114). He “was glad she took things the way he wanted her to” (TE 128) (emphasis mine). Tea Cake is about twelve years younger than Janie, but he often assumes the paternalistic role, referring to himself as “papa Tea Cake” and “yo’daddy” (TE 116, 127). Despite the positive and often lyrical descriptions of their romance, there is also something oppressive and stifling in Tea Cake’s possession of Janie. She awakens to Tea Cake almost “kissing her breath away, [h]olding her and caressing her as if he feared she might escape his grasp” (TE 107). Hurston continues, “He seemed to be crushing scent out of the world with his footsteps . . . Crushing aromatic herbs with every step he took” (TE 106). Later, Janie feels “a self-crushing love” (TE 128). Tea Cake’s decisions are not always wise: He ignores the warnings of
the Indians about the hurricane, he leaves the shelter of the house where Motor Boat waits out the storm safely, he doesn’t seek medical attention for the dog bite which later turns out to be rabid. Janie never second-guesses Tea Cake, however. With the hurricane raging she thanks Tea Cake for his being her “‘light at daybreak’” (TE 159).

Because of Janie’s “Mrs. Mayor” status, Tea Cake at first tries to shelter Janie from his “commonness.” He leaves her alone in the boardinghouse when he hosts a macaroni and chicken supper for “railroad hands and dey womenfolks,” no “high muckety mucks,” only common folk who like to party, fight, and dance (TE 124). But Janie wants off the pedestal and to “partake wid everything,” no matter what it is (TE 124). In spite of Janie’s joy at finding the “bee to [her] blossom” (TE 106), Tea Cake is not an unblemished hero. He, too, demands submission of his wife. In an uncritical depiction of violence, Hurston details how Tea Cake whips Janie to show “he was boss”: “Being able to whip her reassured him [of] possession . . . [n]ot because her behavior justified his jealousy, but it relieved that awful fear inside him” (TE 147). The next day, cowed and subordinate, Janie hangs helplessly on Tea Cake, inspiring envy among the men and women of the muck. The men relish the thought of whipping a “tender woman” like Janie whose skin shows the marks of every slap, and the women swoon over Tea Cake’s pampering and petting of Janie afterwards. After describing to Sop de Bottom how Janie could have chosen to remain in Eatonville in her fine house, Tea Cake brags: “‘Janie is wherever Ah wants tuh be. Dat’s de kind uh wife she is and Ah love her for it’” (TE 148). What is one to make of this melding of love and violence? In her study of feminist theory published in 2000, bell hooks explores the connection in a modern context:

Love and violence have become so intertwined in this society that many people, especially women, fear that eliminating violence will lead to the loss of love. Popular paperback romances, like the Harlequin series, which ten years ago had no descriptions of male violence against women, now describe acts of hitting, rape, etc, all in the context of romantic love. It is interesting to note that most women in these romances now have professional careers and are often sexually experienced. Male violence, the romances suggest, has to be used to subdue these “uppity” women
who, though equal to men in the workplace, must be forced to assume a subordinate position in the home. (*Feminist* 124)

Hooks, here, is describing how the male uses force to “transform the ‘uppity’ woman into a passive, submissive being.” The typical man in a romance is “white, rich, and a member of the ruling class” (*Feminist* 124); however, I think the basic premise applies to the dark-skinned, underclass Tea Cake. Fearful that Janie might be tempted by the more prosperous, lighter-skinned brother of Mrs. Turner, Tea Cake subdues Janie by physical force. The act of banishing any hint of potential “defiance” (no matter how baseless) heightens sexual pleasure (Hooks, *Feminist* 124). Although Tea Cake’s violence against Janie is the most disturbing, Hurston includes other episodes which establish its pervasiveness: In response to Janie’s complaints about Logan, Nanny responds. “‘Lawd, Ah know dat grassgut, liver-lipt nigger ain’t done took and beat mah baby already! Ah’ll take a stick and salivate ‘im!’” (*TE* 22) (emphasis mine). Nanny’s premise is that she expects Logan to beat Janie, just not this early in their marriage. I’ve already alluded to Joe Stark’s hitting Janie; his behavior seems consistent with the views of the men of Eatonville. In the store, for example, after Mrs. Robbins wrangles an extra cut of meat from Joe, Walter comments on her brazenness, claiming he’d kill her “‘cemetery dead’” if she were his wife. Joe Lindsay, another porch sitter, chimes in with “scornful disapproval” of her conduct, promising “‘Ah’d kill uh baby just born dis mownin’fuh uh a thing lak dat’” (*TE* 74-75).

Although Hurston’s father John never hit his wife Lucy, at least as far as Zora remembered, violence against women was sanctioned when Zora was growing up in Eatonville—and spoken about openly. It was common for the men to sit around Joe Clarke’s store and brag about beating their wives. Zora recalled her Uncle Jim’s (Lucy’s brother’s) words: “‘[I]f a woman had anything big enough to sit on, she had something big enough to hit on.’ Uncle Jim scoffed at men like John [Zora’s father], who preferred not to strong-arm women” (Boyd 30). Episodes of love and violence in the novel reflect the real Eatonville of Hurston’s youth.

Another perspective on the link between love and violence comes from popular blues lyrics during the Harlem Renaissance. In her reinterpretation of the performances and lyrics of four blues singers from the 1920s-40s, Angela Davis maintains that the
blues depict a historical reality: They confront raw emotional and sexual matters that were previously unacknowledged in lyrics and, I would add, literature. Argues Davis, “Naming issues that pose a threat to the physical or psychological well-being of the individual is a central function of the blues.” The process of naming is a means of establishing aesthetic control over the object named (33). The pairing of love and violence reflects the complexity of gender politics by refusing to romanticize love relationships and instead exposes the stereotypes and contradictions of those relationships. Indeed, the blues as a prefeminist discourse acknowledges matters not explored by white feminists until the 1970s. I believe, then, that Hurston has a similar purpose: to break the silence about domestic abuse; to make the private, public; to write what is true, not what one would like to be true. Gloria Naylor notes that “[i]n the writings of Afro-American women, the test of love is what the black woman stays through. It is normally only death or desertion that tears her from the man” (“Love” 29).

In the sentimental novel, the wife’s submission is often played out in the public arena. To the repressive males, public veneration and outward posture are most important as they serve as tangible evidence of the husbands’ power over their females. Raymond Withers privately excoriates Hagar for any outward display of turmoil but is noted for the “gentle and assiduous attention always given her, in public” (Southworth, Deserted 228) (emphasis mine). He demands that in front of others, she give no indication of their unhappiness. His looks, his iron grip on her arm tell all. Similarly, Joe Starks tightly controls Janie in the public arena of the store. For years he humiliates her with references to her intelligence, her looks, and her carelessness. He berates her there for the way she cuts tobacco, for the loss of a bill of lading for pigs’ feet, and for her desire to be part of the porch story-telling. Therefore, the location of the store porch for Janie’s devastating signifying on Joe is important as it makes public his emasculation, his lack of sexual potency.

Female friendships loom large in nineteenth-century sentimental novels. As indicated in the previous chapter on Plum Bun, these fictional friendships were close and sustaining, with participants often referring to each other as “sisters.” Eliza Wharton and Lucy Freeman of The Coquette, Hope Leslie and Esther Downing of Hope Leslie, Ellen Montgomery and Alice Humphreys of The Wide, Wide World and Gertrude Flint and
Emily Graham of The Lamplighter are typical examples. Not only are the relationships emotionally close, but physical contact is commonplace, as well. Typical is Sedgwick’s description of close friends Hope and Esther in Sedgwick’s 1827 novel: these young women are as sisters. They sleep in the same bed, nestling close to each other, Hope falling asleep on Esther’s bosom (277). In Warner’s novel, after Alice chastises Ellen for Ellen’s failure to read her Bible and pray, Ellen weeps uncontrollably and then wraps her arms around Alice’s neck, “laying her face upon her shoulder. . . . And they kissed each other before either of them spoke” (154). Warner describes in later scenes the two as “caressing,” Ellen sitting on Alice’s lap, and Ellen’s arms drawn “very close round her companion . . . her face . . . laid in Alice’s bosom” (173, 226). In The Lamplighter Emily kisses Gertrude for a bunch of violets and thanks her “as if they had been so many diamonds” (109). They share intimacies and serve each other in myriad ways.

In her analysis of the American woman in the nineteenth century, Barbara Welter writes that “the crush or intense ‘woman friendship’” provided a testing ground for later heterosexual relationships (19). In the meticulously detailed analysis “The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth-Century America,” Carroll Smith-Rosenberg argues that strong, emotional same-sex friendships were the norm. Such relationships were encouraged, and Smith-Rosenberg’s careful reading of women’s diaries and correspondence attests to these relationships’ enduring and passionate nature. The relationships were often sensual and physical; the diaries describe the comfort of being in each others’ arms and end with exclamations such as “A thousand kisses—I love you with my whole soul” or “Imagine yourself kissed many times by one who loved you so dearly”(5, 6). Girls’ and women’s relationships grew from shared experiences and mutual affection as they were segregated from male society.

Whatever needs they fulfilled, whether as a dry-run for marriage or independently as a deeply fulfilling bond between those of similar experiences, these friendships were a staple of the actual lives of women as well as a convention of the sentimental novel. Fictional friends give advice and provide physical comfort, companionship, and an empathetic listening ear. They tell harsh truths when such truths need be told. Such is the intimate relationship between Janie and Pheoby in Their Eyes Were Watching God.
Interestingly, the central trope Hurston uses in describing this relationship is the same one popular in precursory sentimental novels and in the primary sources analyzed by Smith-Rosenberg: the kiss or kissing. Janie refers to Pheoby as her “kissin’-friend” (TE 7) and declares that she trusts Pheoby implicitly to accurately tell her story to the gossiping women on the porch since, according to Janie, “‘Dat’s just de same as me ‘cause mah tongue is in mah friend’s mouf’” (TE 6). With Pheoby as her hungry listener, Janie begins her tale in the “kissing, young” darkness (TE 7).

In the sentimental novels, one of the key functions of a female friend is to warn the heroine of dangers, of the folly of unwise choices. In The Coquette, for instance, Lucy Freeman repeatedly warns Eliza Wharton to repulse the attentions of the rake Major Sanford. In one of her early letters she writes, “Forgive my plainness, Eliza. It is the task of friendship, sometimes to tell disagreeable truths” (Hannah Foster 27). Later Eliza writes of her yearning to have Lucy by her side: “Oh that you were near me, as formerly, to share and alleviate my cares! To have some friend in whom I could repose confidence, and with whom I could freely converse, and advise, on this occasion, would be an unspeakable comfort!” (Hannah Foster 27). In The Wide, Wide World and The Lamplighter, both Alice and Emily counsel their respective friends Ellen and Gertrude on the need to hold fast to the Christian faith and to subdue their tempers. In Their Eyes, Pheoby, worried that Janie might end up like Annie Tyler, whose young lover left her destitute and alone, cautions Janie about the improvident Tea Cake and persuades her to pin inside her shirt $200 as “insurance” money.

Absent are feelings of jealousy or meanness as intimate friends desire to protect each other. Confidences are absolute. Relying on imagery from the rural life she knew so well, Hurston creates this dialogue between Pheoby and Janie upon the news that Janie and Tea Cake are planning marriage:

Pheoby: “‘Ah just lak uh chicken. Chicken drink water, but he don’t pee-pee.’”

Janie: “‘Oh, Ah know you don’t talk’” (TE 114).

Even in the face of demands from the gossips of Eatonville to know Janie’s business, Pheoby stands firm in protecting her friend from their prying.

In the earlier sentimental novels and in Hurston’s novel, female friends often act as foils to the unfriendly, antagonistic members of the community. Sentimental novels,
with their overt didacticism, use the saintly and moral friend to highlight the un-Christian, often cruel, or at least self-absorbed, members of the community. Not surprisingly, most of these antagonists come to a bad end or, more frequently, convert to Christianity and repent their ill deeds. (A striking example is Aunt Fortune’s transformation from Ellen’s manipulative tormenter to grudging admirer or Mr. Graham’s reversal from stubborn critic to admiring champion of Gertrude.) Hurston, though, crafts a different purpose for Pheoby. She serves as a bridge to the community, particularly to the women who sit on their front porches passing judgment, hoping Janie will fall to their level someday. As both Janie’s friend and an accepted member of the community, Pheoby is a trusted emissary able to relate the true import of Janie’s tale. Janie herself won’t tell her tale because the porch-sitters have violated the spirit of intimacy; they are united in their “mass cruelty.” As they follow Janie’s path home through Eatonville, without Tea Cake, they hope the answers to their questions are “cruel and strange” (TE 4). Critic John F. Callahan describes Pheoby’s role this way: “An audience earns the right to hear a story, as Pheoby has done with her acts and words of hospitality and friendship. No one should take for granted the right to hear someone else’s story because they live in the same place, or share the same race, gender or class” (94). The storytelling here is personal. Pheoby’s role of conveyer of Janie’s story reconfigures the tone of the oral tale.

In creating the character Pheoby, Hurston stresses the limits of storytelling: it is not enough to repeat another’s tale to an audience. To become actualized, one must live the experience for oneself. In other words, Pheoby has Janie’s permission to tell her tale, but as Janie says in her last speech in the novel, “‘Yo’ papa and yo’mama and nobody else can’t tell yuh and show yuh. Two things everybody’s got tuh do for theirselves. They got tuh go tuh God, and they got tuh find out about livin’ fuh theirselves’” (TE 192). Pheoby is transformed (growing “‘ten feet higher from jus’ listenin’”) (TE 192), and the potential exists for others to be changed, as well.

The Bildungsroman template, so familiar to the first readers of sentimental novels, is the scaffold upon which Hurston builds her novel. As I mentioned previously, Ellen Montgomery and Gertrude Flint learn to navigate and to survive a world of enforced feminine powerlessness. The subtext is the personal cost of that survival. These
are not novels of rebellion but of accommodation, of learning to create satisfactory lives in a circumscribed world. Ellen, Gertrude, and countless other heroines grow from within as their stories unfold, but their growth is synonymous with self-control as they accept obedience to authority as a given in their lives.

Janie is born into a world of female powerlessness, with less stature even than her white sisters because she is a black female. Nanny makes this subordinate position clear to Janie, telling her a black woman is “‘de mule uh de world’” (TE 14). Though she shares their marginal status, Janie experiences inner growth differently than the heroines of nineteenth-century novels. Janie’s inner growth is toward independence, while the growth of the precursory heroines focuses on mastery of the self. A key revelation for Janie comes after a year’s marriage to Logan. No longer does she believe marriage guarantees that love will follow. Images of starry romance, as those under the pear tree, have faded. Her sights change: “The familiar people and things had failed her so she hung over the gate and looked up the road towards way off” (TE 25). She is now seeking the “far horizon,” for “change and chance” (TE 29). Janie’s growth parallels her ever-expanding geographic sphere: her home with Logan in West Florida, to her home with Joe in Eatonville, to the Everglades with Tea Cake. Of course, Janie’s horizon is not merely geographical but metaphoric.

One element of Janie’s journey “‘tuh de horizon and back’” (TE 191) is her gradual appropriation of power over her male overseers. She speaks up to Logan about the possibility of her leaving him someday—and then does leave without so much as a glance back at his house with its 60 acres and an organ in the parlor. After years of submission to Joe, Janie finds her voice, challenging Joe and the other men on the store porch after their speeches defending wife beating: “‘Sometimes God gits familiar wid us womenfolks too and talks His inside business. He told me . . . how surprised y’all is goin’ tuh be if you ever find out you don’t know half as much ‘bout us as you think you do’” (TE 75). Later, Janie devastatingly signifies on Joe, comparing him to a woman experiencing the change of life. She completely reverses the power structure, “robb[ing] him of his illusion of irresistable maleness that all men cherish, which was terrible. . . . [S]he had cast down his empty armor before men and they had laughed. . . . There was
nothing to do in [his] life anymore” (TE 79-80). The gaze shifts to Joe, and all men look at him differently now.

Another step in Janie’s developing self-awareness is the satisfaction she finds in being single. She revels in her freedom after Joe’s passing and is in no hurry to marry even though Pheoby and the other members of the community urge her to do so. She casts aside her mourning clothes, declaring “‘mourning oughtn’t tuh last no longer’n grief’” (TE 93). She also asserts herself in choosing the good-time, ramblin’ man, Tea Cake, rather than an established patriarch, like the undertaker from Sanford with his fine house. Janie is ready to be selfish, to do the things she wants to do: learning to play checkers, fishing at midnight, laughing, and loving. Janie here is rebelling against the selflessness and obedience to authority so much a part of the survival paradigm of the nineteenth-century heroines. Clearing rejecting her grandmother’s vision, Janie declares to Pheoby that she and Tea Cake are going to “‘start all over Tea Cake’s way.’” She continues, “‘Dis ain’t no business proposition and no race after property and titles. Dis is uh love game. Ah done lived Grandma’s way, now Ah means tuh live mine’” (TE 114).

On the muck, Janie participates in the public sphere for the first time, an opportunity denied her in Eatonville. There are now a “crowd of people around her and a dice game on her floor. . . . [S]he could listen and laugh and even talk some herself is she wanted to. She got so she could tell big stories” (TE 134).

In many ways, though, Janie’s journey doesn’t begin until Tea Cake’s death. Their two years together has constituted her trip to the horizon and back. Her forty years of experiences and relationships shape her inner life, proving the truth of the novel’s opening-page observation: “Now 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. Then they act and do things accordingly” (TE 1). This perspective allows Janie agency to shape her own reality. She has reclaimed the pear tree of her youth when “no” was a word she had not yet heard. More importantly, Hurston has created a young version of an emergent Black woman carving out a new definition of Black womanhood.

Henry Louis Gates, among others, has written about how Hurston’s stylistic choice of free indirect discourse emphasizes Janie’s emerging self-awareness. Free indirect discourse meshes the dual voices of the narrator and the character into the same
speech pattern. The narrator adopts the phraseology of one of the characters (in this case, Janie) and vice versa. In other words, the thoughts are that of the character, but the syntax is that of the narrative voice. In Their Eyes, the effect is that Janie’s voice is almost “inseparable from the narrator’s—a synthesis that becomes a trope for the self-knowledge Janie has achieved” (Washington, “I Love” 251).

At least two other protagonists of nineteenth-century sentimental novels invite comparison to Janie. The first is the aforementioned Hope Leslie, the heroine of an early sentimental novel by Catharine Maria Sedgwick. Although published in 1827, the novel’s setting is in Puritan times, specifically the New England of John Winthrop. Hope challenges the unqualified obedience of Puritan women to their men. A heroine of spirited independence, she escapes from Indian captivity, designs an ingenious plot to free the innocent Indian girl Magawisca from her dungeon prison, and generally succeeds in living a life on her own terms. Just as did Jane in her post-Joe-Starks life, Hope subverts or ignores society’s dictates for female conduct.

Another strong protagonist is E.D.E.N. Southworth’s counter-image to the sentimental heroine, Capolita Black of The Hidden Hand (pub. 1859). The novel is an engaging antidote, published as it was, nine years after the introduction of Ellen Montgomery in The Wide, Wide World. The heroine “Cap” dashes from one outrageous adventure to another: capturing outlaws, rescuing a saintly friend, fighting a duel, and saving the reformed renegade “Black Donald.” The novel is a romp, a great joke, and still quite funny after all these years. Clearly a farce, this light-hearted novel nonetheless presents an alternative to the conventional novels of submission and restriction for women. The tremendous popularity of this story attests to the allure of a counter-story, one which takes as its text a perfect version of feminine freedom. In the introduction to the American Women Writers Series edition, Joanne Dobson declares, “[S]o Cap goes out, as the respectable female reader might long to do but could not, ‘in search of adventures’” (xiii). Capitola Black is a dashing imp of a girl, who “has never been taught obedience nor been accustomed to subordination” (Southworth, Hidden 174), who has “no reverence, no docility, no propriety” (Southworth, Hidden 186). She’s a character the real-life Zora would have understood: outrageous and brash. Joanne Dobson succinctly analyzes Southworth’s theme:
[Southworth] presents Cap’s life as satisfying and independent, refusing to be contained within limiting conventions of feminine passivity and vicarious living. Southworth’s comic stance allows her much liberty to make important statements about the potential equality—indeed superiority—of women, as well as about the effects of their current oppression, and her melodramatic counterplot, while in some ways extolling ideal femininity, actually compounds those messages. (“Hidden” 233)

Cap denigrates men (much like Janie does in her “women and chickens” speech), refuses to submit to authority, and generally does what she pleases. Neither *Hope Leslie* nor *The Hidden Hand* nor *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is a story about marriage; in other words, marriage is not central. They are novels about the cost of conforming to society’s rules on how a woman should conduct herself and about the alternative life possible as a result of flouting those rules.

My first two chapters consider the complexities of the author’s choice of skin tone for her protagonist. In *Iola Leroy*, Harper consciously describes Iola as light-skinned, blue-eyed, and beautiful so as to garner sympathy from white readers and to appeal to the strong sense of pride among middle and upper-class blacks (Vashti Lewis 316). In *Plum Bun*, the plot rests on the intersection of race and gender, so creating Angela as near-white and her sister Jinny as dark-skinned is a necessary duality to effect Fauset’s purpose.

Janie echoes the standards of beauty of previous sentimental heroines, standards already discussed in the previous chapters. Hurstons includes at least eight references to Janie’s heavy, luxurious, Caucasian-like hair. Aware of its power to entice, Janie makes sure it cascades down her back just when young Joe Starks walks by on his way to what will become Eatonville. After their arrival in Eatonville, the rebuffed Hicks declares, “‘T‘aint’ nothin’ to her ‘cept dat long hair’” (*TE* 38). And Tea Cake’s dream is to comb Janie’s hair; he even comes prepared with his own comb to do the job. He explains, “‘Ah ain’t been sleepin’ so good for more ‘n uh week cause Ah been whishin’ so bad tuh git mah hand in yo’ hair. It’s so pretty. It feels just’ lak underneath uh dove’s wing next to mah face’” (*TE* 103). In her study of the intersections among blackness, femininity, and
Victorian culture, Jennifer Brody states, “Hair has long been considered a signifier of race, class, and gender, as well as a marker of sexuality” (87).

Janie, a quadroon, has a light “coffee-and-cream” complexion and a curvaceous figure. Other elements connect Janie to the conventional heroine of romance novels. Men are attracted to her; she is desirable and sexy, even in overalls. Mary Ellen Washington explains how the “excitement and tension” of romantic seduction novels are employed in *Their Eyes*:

Tea Cake—a tall, dark, mysterious stranger—strides into the novel and wrenches Janie away from her prim and proper life. The age and class differences between Janie and Tea Cake, the secrecy of their affair, the town’s disapproval, the sense of risk and helplessness as Janie discovers passionate love and the fear, desire, even the potential violence of becoming the possessed are all standard features of romance fiction. (“I Love” 250).

Tea Cake is the fictional persona of Hurston’s real-life romantic interest, the younger (by more than 20 years) Percy Punter, “tall, dark brown, and magnificently built,” one who, in Hurston’s words, “stood on his own feet so firmly that he reared back” (*Dust Tracks* 205). Hurston describes their relationship as “the real love affair of my life” (*Dust Tracks* 207), a love that is echoed in the story of Janie and Tea Cake. Writes Hurston, “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* 211). Just as this episode in Zora’s life reads like a romance novel, so does her fictional re-creation.

Secure in her sense of self, Hurston was not color-struck and evinced no desire to be lighter-skinned; however, she was smack in the middle of a Harlem culture that was fixated on color. The reasons for her choosing to create a Caucasian-featured protagonist are both obvious and obscure. Well aware of what white publishers would and would not print, Hurston always walked a tightrope between the stories she wanted to write and what would sell—or what her white patrons would fund. After years of stretching the boundaries with her long-time patron Mrs. Osgood Mason, Hurston was not naïve. Like her predecessor, Frances E.W. Harper, Hurston needed to create a character appealing to white readers.
In addition, perhaps she was merely reflecting the reality that most African Americans were mixed race, as she was herself. According to Valerie Boyd’s excellent biography of Hurston, Zora’s father John was “high yellow muscle,” a man of “golden skin, grey-green eyes, a powerful build, and handsome features” (15). A census taker identified John’s father as “a mulatto” (Boyd 15). Boyd adds this possibility, as well: “The Notasulga [Alabama] rumor mill provided another explanation [for John’s light color]: that John himself was a mulatto, the bastard son of a certain white man” (15). Almost 40 years earlier, a character in Pauline Hopkins’ *Contending Forces* proclaimed that “[i]t is an incontrovertible truth that there is no such thing as an unmixed black on the American continent. . . . I will venture to say that out of a hundred apparently pure black men not one will be able to trace an unmixed flow of African blood since landing upon these shores” (151). Hurston herself resembled her father. She admitted, “I looked more like him than any child in the house” (Boyd 31). Perhaps her choice of a light-skinned heroine is a reflection of her admiration of her father even though she never could seem to win his favor; he clearly favored his older daughter Lucy. Whatever the reason, Hurston did endow Janie with Caucasian-like hair and lighter skin, features shared by other fictional heroines of the Harlem Renaissance and reminiscent of the women of sentimental novels.

*Their Eyes* is in dialogue with nineteenth-century sentimental novels and with the cavalcade of texts launched during the 20s, the decade of the so-called “New Negro,” and the 30s, which saw the emergence of the protest novel. *Their Eyes* bucked both trends. Key members of the Talented Tenth believed that art should be in the service of propaganda. W.E.B. Du Bois, for instance, wrote in a 1926 *Crisis* editorial: “We want Negro writers to produce beautiful things but we stress the things rather than the beauty” (“The Negro Art”). A few months later he made his point even more unequivocal: “I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda” (qtd. in Boyd 118). Against this strident view, the Niggerati (Hurston’s term) rebelled. In his manifesto on Negro art, Langston Hughes spoke for many: “An artist must be free to choose what he does, certainly, but he must also never be afraid to do what he might choose” (1039). Writing about the common people, “the folk,” was what Hurston chose to do in *Their Eyes.*
Richard Wright’s scathing critique of Hurston’s novel as a work carrying “no theme, no message, no thought” is well-known (17). Because she chose to write a woman’s story, because she chose not to center her plot on white people, and because she chose to write instead a novel of Black affirmation, she was derided as naïve, superficial, and catering to the minstrel tradition. Many of her first readers misunderstood the novel. In comparing Wright and Hurston, June Jordan argues, “[W]e were misled into the notion that only one kind of writing—protest writing—and that only one kind of protest writing deserves our support and study” (5). She continues, “[A]ffirmation of Black values and lifestyle within the American context is, indeed, an act of protest” (5).

At its heart, then, *Their Eyes* is a woman’s story that, while not openly political, did encourage social change. That focus is consistent with reinterpretations of nineteenth-century sentimental novels, which portray issues important to women: family relations, interplay between dependence and independence, and definitions of virtue and femininity. Joanne Dobson’s analysis of Southworth’s novels can apply to *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as well. Dobson calls Southworth “a master story teller” who presents “an attractive and previously unarticulated alternative for the contemporary representation of women” and who “influenced imaginative possibilities for gender definition” (Introduction xi).

Intertextuality cuts both ways in that a work is in dialogue with the past and the future. Cultural theorist and feminist Julia Kristeva’s explanation is pertinent here. In *Desire in Language*, she borrows Bakhtin’s concept of the “‘literary word’ as an intersection of textual surfaces. . . . [A]ny text is the absorption and transformation of another” (65, 66). The seminal nature of *Their Eyes* as a touchstone for future dialogue is clear to many critics and authors. Marjorie Pryse, for example, writes that “however important the nineteenth-century origins were . . . the literary tradition of Black women’s fiction finds its second beginning and first real flowering in Hurston” (112). More specifically, Barbara Christian declares, “[in] its radical envisioning of self and its use of language as a means of exploring the self as female and black, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is a forerunner of the fiction of the seventies and eighties” (*Black Feminist* 175).

More than *Iola Leroy* and *Plum Bun*, *Their Eyes* maps new terrain in Black women’s space. The novel, through the trope of the sentimental novel and the attendant
cult of true womanhood, grapples with the theme of a Black woman as the questing hero. Janie Crawford Killicks Starks Woods has wrested control of her life, adding her voice to the public conversation of Black women past and those yet to come.
Born January 25, 1950, Gloria Naylor is continuing the tradition of rich lyrical women’s writing begun by Zora Hurston, expanded by Naylor’s mentor Toni Morrison, and celebrated by a new generation of African American women writers. Her first novel, *The Women of Brewster Place*, won the 1983 American Book Award for first fiction. With the advance from her publisher for her second novel, *Linden Hills* (pub. 1985), Naylor rewarded herself with a trip to southern Spain. But unlike previous American male writers such as Ernest Hemingway and James Baldwin, who found European travel liberating, Naylor was harassed for traveling alone as a woman. She came to resent the double standard of freedom for men and women, and her anger found vent in her fiction. Her work features women who defy convention, thereby affirming the self. Like *Iola Leroy*, *Plum Bun*, and the Joe Starks chapters of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, *Linden Hills* directly addresses middle-class issues intrinsic to African American life. The plot centers on the exclusive Linden Hills, an enclave for blacks established in 1820 by the first Luther Nedeed as “[a] wad of spit—a beautiful, black wad of spit right in the white eye of America” (Naylor, *Linden Hills* 9).³ Reminiscent of the descending circles in Dante’s *Inferno*, the posh development is ruled by the current fifth-generation Luther, an undertaker and real estate developer who presides over a bleak and bitter community of fellow African Americans who ransom their souls for material gain. Into this hell wander two free-spirited poets and self-styled handymen, Willie Mason and Lester Tillis, who chronicle the sad desperation of the residents. The novel ends with the escape of Luther’s wife from the basement where she has been imprisoned.

The elasticity of the sentimental novel genre, which can incorporate the subgroups of the seduction novel and the captivity narrative, allows an aesthetic interpretation of *Linden Hills* that brings together a material and epistemological constitution of race, class, and gender. Naylor subverts the themes of the Victorian sentimental novel and the virtues of true womanhood mentioned earlier, in ways that are nevertheless consistent

---

³ Hereafter cited parenthetically as *LH*. 

86
with the aim of the most accomplished of the sentimental novels: to effect social change and to affirm the resilience of its female protagonists. As did the heroines of sentimental novels, Naylor’s “contemporary women characters battle emotional and spiritual starvation” (Kubitschek 112). And similar to the sentimental novels and like *Iola Leroy*, *Plum Bun*, and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, *Linden Hills* is a woman’s story, its focus the “tempests that blow through a woman’s world” (*LH* 122).

One of the most popular of the so-called seduction novels was Susanna Rowson’s *Charlotte Temple*. According to Cathy Davidson, it “became America’s first best-selling novel in the earliest years of the Republic . . . and it remained a best-seller well into the beginning of the twentieth century” (Introduction xi). It spoke to powerless women facing bewildering social changes, women who empathized with Charlotte’s feelings of loneliness, betrayal, loss. Seduction is at its core a scenario of the empowered versus the marginalized, its message that women will continue to be victims until the social structure is reformed. For most of the novel, Charlotte plays the weepy victim, but Rowson spins a cautionary tale urging her readers to avoid Charlotte’s gullibility and introducing strong women like the charitable Mrs. Beauchamp, who risks social censure to do the right thing in ministering to Charlotte. Rowson’s purpose is to counsel those “who are so unfortunate as to have neither friends to advise, or understanding to direct them, through the various and unexpected evils that attend a young and unprotected woman in her first entrance into life.” She fears especially for those “without the least power to defend themselves” (Rowson, Preface 5). This concern with the appropriation of power and the need to effect social change to ensure that women’s lives have value links seduction novels and *Linden Hills*.

*Charlotte Temple* is also a novel of captivity: Charlotte is imprisoned figuratively by her unrealistic dreams of romantic love and the paternalistic love of her parents—and later literally by Belcour in a small country house in the far-off colonies, where she is denied proper food and protection. By the time *Charlotte Temple* was published in 1791, captivity narratives and sentimental novels were increasingly indistinguishable from one another. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar assert that “[d]ramatizations of imprisonment and escape are so all-pervasive in nineteenth-century literature by women that we believe they represent a uniquely female tradition in this period” (85). The focus
on a particular woman, on her “trials and triumph” (as the subtitle of one particular story puts it) appealed to the burgeoning population of female readers. In the persona of “Mr. Yorick,” novelist Laurence Sterne describes the wisdom of depicting the specific captive over a general panorama:

I was going to begin [writing a sermon] with the millions of my fellow creatures born to no inheritance but slavery; but finding, however affecting the picture was, that I could not bring it near me, and that the multitude of sad groups in it did but distract me.—I took a single captive, and having first shut him up in his dungeon, I then look’d through the twilight of his grated door to take his picture. (201)

Christopher Castiglia explains in Bound and Determined how the growing social and commercial success of American women novelists in the late eighteenth century and throughout the nineteenth re-energized the captivity narrative genre, a transformation generated by the flood of sentimental and domestic fiction, resulting in an increased “fictionalization” of the captivity narrative (107-109). Rowlandson’s nonfiction captivity narrative establishes the foundation of later sentimental novels of captivity. Close readings of A Narrative of the Captivity and Restauration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson (pub. 1682), Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, (pub.1861) and Uncle Tom’s Cabin (pub. 1852) reveal key characteristics of the captivity genre and provide a foundation for an interpretation of Linden Hills as a novel of captivity.

Captivity narratives were enormously popular in England and America beginning in the late eighteenth century and continuing throughout the nineteenth (Burnham 55). Like the previously discussed sentimental novel The Hidden Hand with its unconventional heroine Capitola Black, captivity narratives allowed women an alternate vision of female agency. As noted by Michelle Burnham, Rowlandson’s widely read account of her three-month captivity by the Algonquin Indians “documents her [Rowlandson’s] assumption of a role among them [her captors] that is a radical alternative to available roles for colonial New England women” (26).

Although women in these early captivity narratives cling to their role as mother, plot twists ensure that the role will be under siege. From the very beginning, Rowlandson identifies herself as a mother. She describes how during the onset of the Algonquins’
attack on the settlement, “the bullets flying thick, one went through my side, and the
same (as would seem) through the bowels and hand of dear Child in my arms.” Her focus
is on “Mothers and Children crying out for themselves, and one another” as the violence
against them continues (Rowlandson 444). She recounts how the Indians pulled her “one
way, and the Children another” (Rowlandson 445). The first part of the narrative shifts to
worry over her daughter Sarah, “her poor and wounded babe” (446) as Rowlandson
grieves that she has no medicine or food to relieve her child’s suffering. She continues to
carry Sarah in her arms “until her [Rowlandson’s] strength failed” (446). After her child
dies, she turns her attention to the two remaining living children, who are also held
captive but by separate groups. Two conflicting currents are at play here: (1)
Rowlandson’s attempt at mothering, at exerting control over her children, when their
paths do cross (such as when she and son Joseph read the Bible together) and (2) her
realization that her children are outside her control, that the situation does not allow her
to be the diligent mother she once was. She laments, “[T]hat I should have Children, and
a Nation which I knew not ruled over them” (Rowlandson 448). Burnham summarizes
Rowlandson’s anxiety this way: “Her motherhood has been usurped and her maternal
supervision over her children incapacitated” (27).

In *Linden Hills*, the desire to reclaim her identity as a wife and mother is what
spurs the imprisoned Willa Prescott Nedeed to climb the steps out of her basement
dungeon. The reader’s introduction to Willa begins with her mourning her son, Sinclair.
A “long, thin wail” sears the night as she crouches “over the shrunken body of her son”
(*LH* 60, 61). She continues to cradle him, as Rowlandson does Sarah: Willa’s son’s head
rests on her shoulder, the limp body “hugged to her chest while the pale, shriveled arms
and legs dangled behind her back” (*LH* 65). Like Rowlandson’s, Willa’s grief and guilt
are compounded with the realization that she can not fulfill the traditional role of a
mother to protect her children. She can not stem his decline—there is minimal food and
water and no medicine to relieve his fever. She regrets not taking her body, pressing it
across his face, and putting “her baby to sleep” (*LH* 65) before his suffering became
acute, but there was always the hope that Luther would unlock the door since the child
was sick. Willa remembers Sinclair’s plea, “Mama, help me” (*LH* 66). She remembers
the fierce love she and her son shared, and to honor him, to “let them know that she
cared” (*LH* 92), she decides to dress the body for burial. While rifling through old trunks for something that could be used as a shroud, she finds artifacts pointing to other mother-son attachments of the previous Mrs. Nedeeds. These mothers’ passion for their children and the mothers’ devastation at the children’s’ removal (an emotional removal orchestrated by each husband Luther) is a thread throughout the novel. This removal usurps key duties of motherhood, to feed, to converse, to nurture. The first Mrs. Nedeed, Luwana Packerville, is prohibited from cooking for her son and from doing other duties around the house. Her role as a mother with some authority over her child is erased. When she bakes some molasses cakes, formerly her son’s favorites, he refuses to touch them though he was “sorely tempted”; the child is now “constantly with his father” recounts Luwana. (*LH* 119). All the Nedeed women have loved their children but have had them wrenched away by their captors, the iron-willed Luther Nedeeds.

Both Rowlandson’s narrative and Naylor’s novel link their respective captors (the Indians and Luther) to the devil. Rowlandson’s portrayal is consistent with other texts at the time in that it supports the colonists’ negative representations of Native Americans as “savages” who inhabited Satan’s domain. Through such depictions, the dominant culture could justify the “removal” of the Algonquins and other native peoples. In addition to describing the Indians as attacking with guns, spears, and hatchets” (444), Rowlandson repeatedly calls them “merciless Heathen,” “Infidels,” “ravenous Beasts,” “Barbarous Creatures,” “merciless enemies,” “inhumane creatures,” and so forth, enemies of “devilish cruelty” who make a pit for Christians “as deep as hell.”

Many of these epithets could describe Luther, who, in his twisted version of the American Dream, has become Satan-like, plotting to destroy the souls of those who aspire to Linden Hills. He plots Winston Alcott’s descent into despair—and future suicide—by anonymously mailing compromising photos of Winston and his homosexual lover to Winston’s father and by tempting Winston with keys to Crescent Drive, an address which is synonymous with a conventional, heterosexual lifestyle. Luther pushes Laurel Dumont to suicide by decreeing that with her husband gone, she has no right to the Tupelo Drive house, a pronouncement which signifies she doesn’t exist. Anticipating her head-first leap into the empty pool, Luther walks to the back of the house to witness the event and then silently glides away. Critic Catherine Ward describes how in a letter to
her, Naylor says that “she gave [Luther Nedeed’s] house [the] number [999] because in Linden Hills, where up is down, 999 ‘is really 666, the sign of the beast’” (69). (Unlike the layout of most upscale developments, the most prestigious Linden Hills addresses are at the bottom of the hill.) In an interview with NPRs Robert Cromie, Naylor explains how she derived the name Nedeed from an inversion of “de eden.” She felt the name was appropriate because the Nedeeds are the Satanic rulers of this false paradise. And each subsequent Luther Nedeed becomes crueler and colder. Luwana Packerville recognizes the demonic nature of her husband as evidenced by an entry in a letter to her alter ego: “I fear that I have been the innocent vessel for some sort of unspeakable evil” (LH 123).

The present Luther, barbarous, merciless, and inhumane, imprisons his wife and five-year old son in the basement to teach his wife a lesson. He suspects, erroneously, that she has been unfaithful, a conclusion based on his son’s light skin color. This deliberate intent to cause harm is at the heart of most definitions of evil. Moreover, in many religions, evil is personified by Satan. Thus is Luther Nedeed linked to the Indians as depicted by Puritan writers of captivity narratives, to Dr. Flint in Incidents, and to Simon Legree in Uncle Tom’s Cabin.

Part of the titillation of the captivity narratives was the possibility of rape or forced marriage or consensual sex between a white woman and a darker “Other.” Speculation existed on both sides of the Atlantic concerning Mary Rowlandson’s chastity during her captivity. This speculation fueled Increase Mather’s anxious assurances as to “this Gentlewoman’s modesty” as he warned his readers in the Narrative preface: “I hope by this time none will cast any reflection upon this Gentlewoman” (Mather 440). Rowlandson herself takes pains to affirm her virtue. Even after a night of drinking, her Indian master shows “no incivility” (462). Later in her list of “remarkable passages of providence” (462), she attributes to God’s power the fact that “not one of them ever offered [her] the least abuse of unchastity . . . in word or action” (464).

The potential for sexual transgression is the reason Luther Nedeed gives for locking his wife in the basement. He fears she has broken the rules of his household, the “routines” (LH 68) of the society established four generations ago by the first Luther Nedeed. He is punishing her for trying “to make a fool of him” by giving birth to a “bastard” (LH 68). His son’s appearance violates the strict tradition of the Nedeed
patriarchal line. In the Indian captivity narratives, the focus is on the possibility of the captors violating the female captive, while in *Linden Hills*, the conflict centers on—in Luther’s mind—Willa’s decision to violate the chastity requirements of a monogamous marriage and thus subjecting him to ridicule from the community. But in both cases, the female can be or is damaged by the charge, whether true or not.

In captivity narratives, women are viewed as objects of commerce. Indeed, as soon as Rowlandson is captured, she is put on the market as a commodity of exchange both within Indian society as she is traded among various masters, and outside with the Puritans for ransom. When the Indian Saggamores desire to know how much her husband will give for her release, Rowlandson sets upon a figure of 20 pounds, which her husband ultimately pays. The slave woman as a commodity is part of the story of the establishment of Linden Hills. We are told about the rumor that Old Luther “actually sold his octoroon wife and six children for the money that he used to come North and obtain the hilly land” (*LH* 2). The next Mrs. Nedeed was Luwana Packerville, whom Luther bought, married, but refused manumission. Because the child follows the condition of the mother, Luwana realizes “[h]e owns the child as he owns me”; incredibly her journal is “now the diary of a slave” and not merely ramblings which might amuse a husband (*LH* 117). Luther has bought her not to bestow freedom but as a piece of property to produce an heir. The view of women held by the men of the Nedeed dynasty echoes psychoanalytic feminist Luce Irigaray’s claim that Western patriarchal society “is based upon the exchange of women” (170). The captive, whether a white woman taken by Amerindians or an African American female slave sold to the highest bidder, represents pure exchange value.

In Naylor’s novel, even women of the twentieth century are commodified. The *Penthouse* centerfold of a Black woman “with an airbrushed body glisten[ing] between the thin leopard strips that crisscrossed under her high, pointed breasts” in a lush tropical forest proves to Linden Hills residents Xavier and Maxwell that black women “are moving up” (*LH* 115). But both Lester and Willie feel only shame at viewing the photograph, realizing it as evidence that now not only white women, but black women, too, can be “sold out.”
Paradoxically, captivity can lead women to assume a vision of female self-authority unavailable in their home cultures. Survival depends upon the degree to which the captive can abandon her own identity and acculturate to the new. Burnham perceptively contends that “Indian captivity, as it was documented in colonial American, was an occasion for the simultaneous invention and destruction of the self” (21). Rowlandson, for example, gains an “economic independence that permits her a kind of temporary escape from patriarchal subordination” (Burnham 33). She is paid for her sewing and knitting, she asserts herself in challenging the Algonquin version of events (for instance, that her son was roasted and eaten by the Indians), and abandons some of her old attitudes. Rather than displaying compassion as would befit a “worthy and precious Gentlewoman, the dear Consort of . . . Reverend Mr Rowlandson” (Mather, Preface 441), Mary focuses on survival of the self. She is glad when a papoose dies as there is more room in the tent, and when captured English children cannot chew the tough meat, she snatches it out of their hands and eats it herself. She becomes accustomed to a new diet, finding bear meat and boiled horses’ feet quite savory. With each “remove,” she becomes “increasingly distant from her own culture and moves further and further into a wilderness familiar only to her Algonquin captors” (Burnham 22).

Willa Nedeed is transformed by her captivity: She discovers the key to remaking the social and political order in which she lives. She regains control of her life, jettisoning the old, transcending the boundaries arbitrarily imposed by Luther, and embracing the new. The key to this transformation is Willa’s exploration of the artifacts left behind by her predecessors. She finds peace when she realizes that each of the former Mrs. Luther Nedeeds rejected “the status of victim, found a means of emotional survival, whether it was perfecting recipes, maintaining a journal, or merely reveling in her own beauty” (Wilson 65). Willa discovers in this community of black women insight into her own experiences as she makes connections with those who have gone before. She realizes that she is responsible for reclaiming her identity. Just as she had weeks earlier “walked down twelve concrete steps,” she could now, “whenever she was good and ready . . . walk back up” (LH 280). In her introduction to the 1988 edition of *The Hidden Hand*, a novel first published 100 years before *Linden Hills*, Joanne Dobson notes that, in most of the best-selling sentimental novels, “the writer struggles with the cultural ethos of
feminine obedience and selflessness in a manner which clearly coalesces the issues and reveals their implication for an individual woman” (228). Willa Nedeed struggles with how to gain self-determination and to name her own reality. She chooses to survive by renegotiating the terms of her role as wife and mother, terms that will be played out in the house she shares with her husband, twelve steps up from the basement.

Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* is a narrative depicting double captivity: that of a slave and that of a literal incarceration in a coffin-like garret. Largely describing events before Jacobs’ escape in 1843, but not published until 1861, *Incidents* conflates the slave narrative with the sentimental novel and its subgenre, the captivity narrative. Her theme was “gender under siege”; her hope was to galvanize white women into action against slavery (Pine vi). In both *Incidents* and *Linden Hills*, secrets are kept by both captive and captor as each seeks power over the other. As Jacobs recounts, slaves have no last name; the goal is to keep the names of the fathers hidden. Acknowledging the biological connection might open the door to legitimizing a slave’s claim to certain rights. Slavery actually promoted deception. Lying about the treatment one received from one’s master or about stealing food was necessary for survival. Jacobs admits, “So far as my ways have been crooked, I charge them all upon slavery” (165).

But on a more personal level, silence, secrecy, and the masking of truth were weapons used by both Dr. Flint and Linda Brent (Jacobs’ pseudonym). Flint repeatedly lies to Jacobs about freeing her children and, after she escapes, about his willingness to assent to her relatives buying her freedom. Frequently described as “wily” and “cunning,” he fabricates the contents of a letter from Jacobs, telling the grandmother that Jacobs is miserable and wants to come back south. Later he pens a letter supposedly by his young son imploring her to return and promising her good treatment. Jacobs analyzes their battle this way: “My master had power and law on his side; I had a determined will. There is might in each” (73). Captivity generates resistance. Jacobs had to use all available weapons in her arsenal to defeat her persistent, formidable adversary. But first it was necessary to thwart the panoptic eye. In preparation for her escape, she has her friend Sally remove the clothes from her trunk, so Flint will assume she has fled the area. Jacobs resolves to “match [her] cunning against his cunning” (106). Several times she writes letters to him from her attic prison but arranges for them to be mailed from New York
and Boston. She thus convinces him she has escaped to the North, and he immediately sets off to the northeast to pursue her. Jacobs’ creating a loophole to escape surveillance has freed her from Flint’s gaze. Burnham notes that “[t]he absence of freedom, the physical hardships, the separation from children and family, and the secrecy that all mark the slave’s condition are repeated and exacerbated by Jacobs’ confinement” (154). Yet she is free from the gaze of the one most onerous to her as now she is alone “where no eye but God’s could see [her]” (Jacobs 110).

The Nededd wives rely on duplicity, silence, and secrecy to survive their reality. Luwana Packerville writes letters to her sister, actually Luwana’s alter ego, letters which are, of course, never mailed. Luwana’s description of her crazed mind and of her need to write in order to connect with the world is echoed in Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s 1892 short story, “The Yellow Wallpaper.” After her husband confines her to an upstairs bedroom and forbids her to write, Gilman’s unnamed protagonist argues that “I think sometimes that if I were only well enough to write a little it would relieve the press of ideas and rest me” (427). As with Gilman’s fictional heroine, Luwana finds her “scribblings” to be one of the few places she can express her torment. She hides between the pages of her well-worn Bible poignant accounts of her living death. She then retreats into silence, speaking no more to her husband or son but merely nodding in response to their inquiries.

Evelyn Creton, the next Mrs. Nededd, secretly prepares aphrodisiacs to sneak into her husband’s food. Concealing “every inch of exposed flesh . . . with her wide-brimmed hat and long gloves,” she heads to “dingy back rooms filled with incense and evil-smelling oils” to retrieve “dried bull testicles” and strange herbs (LH 188). She fears his discovering her secret, cringing “at each meal, wondering if he could taste traces of those things in his food” (LH 188). Later, after she has given up trying to change Luther, Evelyn eats herself to near death, meticulously calculating the amount of laxatives necessary to strip away the nutrients of her body. Willa’s secret is her invasion of Luther’s sacred place, his morgue where she witnesses the macabre fetishness of his work. She hides in the shadows, and later denies to herself what she has seen.

For both Harriet Jacobs and for Willa Prescott Nededd, their dungeons are the most confining spaces possible but also, paradoxically, become places of escape. This
duality of enclosure and the promise of progress through connection with community is consistent with one of the “ritual grounds” that Robert Stepto describes as “those specifically Afro-American spatial configurations within the structural topography that are, in varying ways, elaborate responses to social structure in this world” (68). Ritual grounds “offer . . . exhilarating prospect[s] . . . while often birthing a sense of enclosure that may reach claustrophobic proportions” (Stepto 68). Like Harriet Jacobs, Willa escapes the constant gaze of her oppressor and is able to plan her escape. The crates of packed artifacts in the basement tell stories of the past Mrs. Nedeeds and teach Willa the necessity of reclaiming her identity. Her captivity forces her to ponder how she got where she is and how she can craft a new episteme of emancipation.

Another novel about slavery, Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin, links the slave narrative to the captivity narrative and to the sentimental novel. One element common to all three—and to Linden Hills—is the disruption of the family. These genres generate reader sympathy for their captive figures by emphasizing this splintering of the family, especially the breaking of maternal ties. The image of Eliza’s desperate flight over the ice floes is iconic in American literature. In my first chapter, I discussed this novel’s numerous examples of mother love. The deathbed scenes of maternal powerlessness and loss were especially moving to the first readers. Little Eva’s death is rendered in typical rhetoric of the time:

The child lay panting on her pillows, as one exhausted,—the large clear eyes rolled up and fixed. Ah, what said those eyes, that spoke so much of heaven? Earth was past, and earthly pain; but so solemn, so mysterious, was the triumphant brightness of that face, that it checked even the sobs of sorrow. . . . A bright, a glorious smile passed over her face . . . and she passed from death unto life! (Stowe 314)

The death of Sinclair Nedeed mimes the strategies of the sentimental novel in evoking the pathetic death of an innocent. Like Little Eva, Sinclair is sick with a fever. As Willa waits for a miraculous reprieve from Luther, she listens to Sinclair’s “heaving chest, enduring the fevered touch.” He implores, “Mama, help me,” but she cannot (LH 66). His body withered, he is only a “shell” in the “cradle of her mind” (LH 91). The religious imagery is missing in Naylor’s rendering, but both incorporate the idea of death bringing peace.
Captive women in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and in *Linden Hills* assume agency forced upon them by the cruelty of their captors and supported by a sisterhood of collective identities. With the support of her “fellow-sufferer” Emmeline (443), *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*’s Cassy hatches a plan of escape encompassing details seen later in *Incidents* and *Linden Hills*. She and Emmeline live for a time in the garret of Legree’s house until they can effect their escape. It is a place he never thinks to search as he is convinced they immediately headed north. To terrorize the drunken Legree, Cassy wraps herself in a white ghost-like costume and beckons him to follow. Interestingly, *Linden Hills* ends with the defiant Willa half-wrapped in the white bridal veil which she had used to shroud her son. Emboldened by the strength of the sisterhood of Nedeed wives, Willa triumphs over Luther, bringing the Nedeed dynasty to an end.

Reclaimed motherhood emerges in the conclusion of most captivity narratives as well as in *Linden Hills*. Mary Rowlandson is reunited with her two remaining children, Harriet Jacobs sends both Ellen and Benjamin north, and even the defiant Cassy is transformed into a mother once again. When reunited with her daughter and granddaughter, she sinks “into the bosom of the family,” her despair and “haggard expression” giving way “to one of gentle trust” (Stowe 456). Willa Nedeed cannot resurrect her dead son, but she can possibly give birth to another child, and therefore she emerges to claim that right.

Captivity narratives provided, and continue to provide, the metaphorical structure for women’s life narratives. Dissatisfaction with the straits of prescribed behavior often find voice in captivity narratives and novels. Sandra Gilbert writes that “women writers have frequently responded to sociocultural constraints by creating symbolic narratives that express their common feelings of constriction, exclusion, dispossession” (35). These works often suggest strategies of survival applicable to women’s everyday lives as they exploit the paradoxical nature of imprisonment as a means of resistance and escape.

In *Linden Hills*, the four virtues of true womanhood are subsumed in the overarching trope of the captivity narrative. By 1985, when *Linden Hills* was published, the second wave of feminism was well nigh established, further diluting the importance and certainly monolithic standard of behavior previously extolled, behavior which stressed piety, sexual purity, submission, and domesticity. Naylor, however, reaches back
to these Victorian standards of conduct for white women to portray “the range of ways that African-American women experience internalized oppression” (Collins, *Black Feminist* 83) and in the process inscribes an alternate discourse.

Luwana Packerville’s rejection of piety, indeed of any religious comfort, reveals her despair. She yearns for relief from hopelessness and isolation, but finds no solace in her Bible. She writes inside its front cover, “There can be no God” (93). Forbidden to attend church because Luther quarreled with the minister, she sinks further into unbelief. Naylor seems to be advocating a more personal responsibility, not one dependent on religion. In Linden Hills, religion is sterile, perverted. It has no power to minister to Laurel Dumont or to any of the Reverend Hollis’s parishioners.

There is little discussion of the Nedeed women’s sexual experience before marriage, but because all the Luthers choose their wives carefully and because the suspicion of adultery is what sends Willa to her basement prison, sexual purity does seem to be important. Unlike the Victorian women who were supposed to have no interest in sex, Evelyn Creton desired a sexual relationship with her husband and resorted to “slivers of orchid root and ginseng” and dried bulls’ testicles to concoct aphrodisiacs to sneak into her husband’s food, in hopes of satisfying her needs. But to no avail. As with all the Nedeed men, for this Luther sex was rare, calculated, and precise, engaged in for one purpose only: to produce a single male heir. Willa Prescott tries to entice her cold, indifferent husband with exotic perfumes and expensive makeup, trusting Lancome, Nina Ricci, and Lanvin to fix the “something that she just wasn’t doing right” (*LH* 148). She scours her stacks of *Cosmopolitan* and *Ladies Home Journal* for advice. She ponders their “unnatural” sexual relationship (*LH* 149), asking herself, “How could she tell him that she knew from the men before her marriage that it could be—should be—different from this?” (*LH* 148). In these patriarchal marriages, the men are the arbiters of the most intimate of exchanges.

Of the four so-called virtues woven into the novel, submission is the one most consistent with the Victorian ideal, at least at first glance. But Naylor twists and reconfigures the idea of submission so that it is far beyond the pale of what any Victorian would espouse. It morphs into a grotesque form of oppression that is pathological in its roots. Luwana Packerville, the slave-wife who was legally owned by her husband, begins
her married life shrouded and confined in the dress her husband had chosen: “[a] heavy satin . . . that hid her breasts and the outline of her waist and hips; the cloudy veil so dense and folded she could barely see out” (LH 118). Right from the start, then, the voice of the patriarchy is absolute. Luwana has no control over the way her body will be presented. Remarking on her strange wedding ring which seems to dissolve against her skin in the sunlight, she is informed by Luther that “nothing welds our bond but his will” (LH 118). Evelyn Creton bows to Luther’s strange customs because, as he explains, “[That’s] [t]he way it’s always been done here” (LH 148). Believing that his indifference is her fault and suffering from unsatisfied sexual and emotional needs, she concocts a plethora of cosmetic preparations for hair and skin, hoping to entice Luther to her bed. She is desperate to overcome “his coldness and his distance” (LH 148). The next wife is Priscilla McGuire, whose family photos reveal the progression of her erasure. K.A. Standiford, in an essay about the gothic elements embedded in Linden Hills, states, “With her marriage into the Nedeed family . . . Priscilla’s photo-history begins to chronicle a gradual suppression of those vital spirits [evident in photos of her in single womanhood] and native will to self-determination” (133). Luther’s heavy hand on her shoulder signifies possession, and later photographs reveal incremental shadowing until she seems all but obliterated. The last photograph shows her face completely rubbed out.

Willa Prescott willingly exchanges the life of a spinster for the status promised by her new title, Mrs. Luther Nedeed. But like Priscilla McGuire, Willa is transformed into a faceless non entity by her intimidating husband, a husband like the first Luther, who even though black, cowed any white man who considered challenging him. Writes Naylor: “No one admitted that they lacked the courage just to walk over and demand to know what he was doing. There was something in Luther Nedeed’s short, squat body that stopped those men from treating him like a nigger—and something in his eyes that soon stopped them from even thinking the word” (3). While not a demonic character like Luther, Hurston’s Joe Starks possesses a similar command of power: “There was something about Joe Starks that cowed the town. It was not because of physical fear. He was no fist fighter. His bulk was not even imposing as men go. . . . Something else made men give way before him. He had a bow-down command in his face, and every step he took made the thing more tangible” (TE 47). The dominant males of precursory
sentimental novels and of those in the previous three novels I have discussed in this
dissertation rely not on physical intimidation but on a type of mental and emotional
dominance to control the women in their households. With the fifth Luther Nedeed, the
abuse has escalated beyond the mental and emotional to the physical. Remembering how
the night before Luther “had taken on a whole room of people . . . –and won” (while
discussing the necessity of aligning with white racists to counter the threat of low-income
housing near Linden Hills), Willie comments to his friend Lester, “it would be a bit a
crazy to think of him chaining a woman to his bed. But he was definitely capable of it”
(LH 153). Imprisoning a woman (Willa) in the basement dungeon was his way of
“turn[ing] her into a wife” (LH 19).

Parroting his father, the current Luther Nedeed believes, “[B]reaking in a wife is
like breaking in a good pair of slippers. Once you’d gotten used to them, you’d wear
them until they fell apart, rather than go to the trouble of buying a new pair” (LH 67).
Equating Willa to a commodity or a recalcitrant animal, Luther seems incapable of
viewing her as anything other than a vessel to be shaped to his needs. He admits “she did
have some qualities worth saving” (LH 68), namely her diligence in cleaning the house
and her ability to cook a three-minute egg to his liking. During her incarceration in the
basement, Willa realizes her casual acquaintances know more about her than does her
husband. Her hairdresser knows “the shape of the mole behind her ear,” the grocer knows
“she hate[s] the taste of lamb, and the mailman could tell anyone that her favorite color of
stationery [is] coral” (LH 125). Luther married her not because of any individual
qualities, but because she was over thirty, unmarried, unattractive, and with dim hopes
for marriage and a family. He expected her to be malleable.

The fourth tenet of the cult of true womanhood, domesticity, is part of a complex
signifying which marks the incremental disintegration of the Nedeed women. Luwana
Packerville loses control over what was considered a woman’s sphere, the house and all
things domestic, when Luther hires a housekeeper “to cook . . . and do the washing”
even though his wife does “not wish a strange woman preparing [the] meals and handling
[her] things” (LH 119). In desperation, she saves her garden from outsiders by “flinging
[herself] on the ground in the yard and refusing to be moved. . . . scream[ing] like a
banshee” (LH 121). Her identity and usefulness are being systematically erased.
Likewise, Evelyn Creton is driven to desperate measures. To outsiders, she is the perfect hostess, a “vision of quiet dignity and immaculate grooming,” a woman with “never a curl out of place, a ribbon knotted loosely, a stick of furniture not glowing with lemon oil.” This Mrs. Nedeed “gave the right parties at the right time for the right people. There were two sets of china and silverplate, a suit for each occasion, a set of boots for each season—and a porcelain exterior that accented whatever room it was placed in” (LH 187). But a cold, lifeless marriage drives her to desperation as she furtively mixes aphrodisiacs. She finally turns her despair inward, becoming bulimic, consuming huge quantities of food and then purging herself with laxatives. The kitchen is transformed from the nurturing heart of the home to a laboratory of sickness. Overwhelmed with hopelessness, on December 24 she purchases prussic acid (hydrogen cyanide, a toxic compound), ostensibly for ending her life.4

For Willa, reclaiming domesticity is central to her salvation. The evidence of her competency in fulfilling the role of wife and mother is worth quoting at length:

The child was fed and bathed, and kept from harming himself before he understood the danger of sharp objects and hot stoves. He was clothed properly for the weather. He had toys and, later, books—alphabet books because he was just learning to read. She gave him her attention and her time, so he learned to speak and then form sentences. And he began to learn the difference between right and wrong. He was guided and corrected. (LH 279)

Continues Naylor:

And while she was doing all that, she was also being a wife. She cleaned his home, cooked his meals. His clothes were arranged, his social engagements organized. When he chose to talk about his work, she listened. And she was careful not to bring him petty household problems that might overburden him more than he already was. She accepted without complaining their separate bedrooms and the fact that she spent all those nights alone, that he couldn’t include her. (LH 279)

---

4 Hydrogen cyanide (under the brand name Zyklon B) was perhaps most infamously employed by the Nazi regime in the mid-twentieth century.
Willa’s stance on the dignity of housework mirrors the position taken by poet and prose writer Julia Alvarez in her collection of “housekeeping poems” published a few years after Naylor’s *Linden Hills*. In response to the question about the apparent contradiction of a feminist writing a series of poems about housekeeping, Alvarez contends that sewing, embroidering, cooking, sweeping, and “even the lowly dusting” are crafts of women. She asks, “Isn’t it already thinking from the point of view of the oppressor to say to ourselves, what we did was nothing?” (1203). Her view of the necessity of using what one has, of working the structure “to create what [one] need[s]” is apropos to Willa’s resolution (Alvarez 1203-1204). Because she has done nothing wrong, because she likes being a wife and mother, Willa is determined to reclaim herself and let events lead where they may.

Through most of the novel, 277 pages in fact, she is referred to only as “Luther’s wife” or “Mrs. Nedeed.” Interestingly, Willie (a deliberate variation of Willa) has an inspiration for a poem which will try to make sense of the strange events of the past few days. The first two lines come into his consciousness just before sleep: “There is a man in a house at the bottom of a hill. And his wife has no name” (*LH* 277). Only in the last 20 pages when she resolves to escape from captivity does she regain her name, Willa Prescott Nedeed.

She transforms herself from someone who is faceless to someone with a powerful identity. She regains her face by making her own mirror with standing water reflected under a light. Reassured, Willa first asserts agency by meticulously cleaning the basement and the kitchen, tasks “inextricably tied to her continuing existence” (*LH* 297). She resembles “the wingless queen amidst a horde of army ants” marching “in defiance of falling rocks and rushing water” (*LH* 297, 300). This single-minded obsession is what Luther misinterprets and what leads to their fiery deaths. They fall into the lighted Christmas tree because he blocks her way to the piles of boxes and loose papers she is intent on cleaning up. Willa, believing Luther is heading toward the newly-cleaned basement and kitchen, punches him in the throat. She pushes him through the lighted tree because that is the only path to the clutter. Willa is not really “a rebel,” but instead simply wants “to resume her responsibilities as a housewife” (Wallinger 184). For Willa, her insistence on keeping house her way fulfills bell hooks’ description of home as “a site of
resistance and liberation struggle” (Yearning 45). Such a revisioning of the idea of home circles back to Frances E.W. Harper’s stance in Iola Leroy in which the reconfigured homes of emancipated slaves were tangible evidence of positive social changes.

In a 1991 interview, Naylor explains the closing scene this way: “There’s something so eerie about the fact that this woman is cleaning up. And her husband misunderstands. He thinks she’s going to run out and tell the world [that she’s been abused], and she’s just getting some dust in a corner” (qtd. in Perry 231). The ending, then, problematizes a feminist reading since Willa does not survive. Naylor herself admits that she wanted Willa to “[g]o up there and kick his [Luther’s] butt,” but, again, according to Naylor, Willa had a mind of her own. Naylor sees herself as a sort of “filter” through which her characters emerge, doing what they want to do (qtd. in Montgomery 90). Willa does win, however, in that she has gained control, even if means her own death. Symbolically, the bridal veil that trapped all the women in their marriages is what starts the fire. The conclusion, then, documents Willa’s resistance to Luther’s hegemony. She returns in a subversive way, destroying both him and the house in the process.

Naylor’s other female characters Roxanne Tillis, Ruth Anderson, and Laurel Johnson Dumont, add a diversity of textual voices to primary themes of the sentimental novel: sacrifice and survival. Roxanne perceives her survival in terms of marrying a black man of high status, and she knows the odds are stacked against her. She “groomed her life and body with a hawklike determination to marry black, marry well—or not at all” (LH 53). Many of the women’s advice books of the nineteenth century stressed the importance of marrying well, devoting pages to how to assess character flaws, determine economic viability, and spot telltale signs of dissipation. Young women were urged to marry wisely, and if they couldn’t find a suitable husband, to remain single. Roxanne, however, doesn’t care much about character, only about the material success and status implicit in a Linden Hills address.

Ruth Anderson has already experienced the life Roxanne longs for. A foil to the other women in the novel, Ruth, like the Biblical Ruth, is a virtuous and faithful servant-wife. She willingly sacrifices dreams of “accumulated things: good brocade chairs, linens, a set of company silverplate” (LH 35) for a life where, as her husband Norman says, “Love rules . . .” (LH 38). She prefers living in a sparse apartment with a man who
succumbs to a sort of schizophrenic hysteria every two years, rather than endure a soul-sucking existence in Linden Hills. With the creation of Ruth Anderson, Naylor has imagined a third space for the black woman: not as a pathetic victim of male patriarchy, not as the stereotypical emasculating matriarch, but as a woman who has built her own world, a world chosen freely and joyfully. Here the conceptualization of self is found in the context of family and friends. Patricia Collins notes that “Black women’s journeys, though at times embracing politics and social issues, basically take personal and psychological forms . . .” (105).

Ruth has rejected the crescent-shaped streets where connections to family, heritage, religion, and community have been replaced by a hollow corruption of the American Dream. She creates a new family with Norman and with other outcasts like Willie and Lester. According to Carol Allen, a conventional definition of domesticity in the nineteenth century was “‘the physical home as well as the sentimental and emotional energies which made that home comfortable’” (4). Nancy Cott points out the changing connotations of the word “home” as it emerged in the early nineteenth century: “In an intriguing development in language usage . . . ‘home’ became synonymous with ‘retirement’ or ‘retreat’ from the world at large” (Bonds 57). Both of these insights relate to Ruth’s ability to weave a magical happiness out of nothing. Writes Naylor: “The Anderson poverty was a standing joke on Wayne Avenue. People said that if Norman brought home air, Ruth would make gravy, pour it over it, and tell him not bring so much the next time” (LH 32). The apartment was almost bare, yet “[v]isitors found themselves thinking, What a nice feeling to be allowed into a home. And it was a home with its bare wood floors, dusted and polished, and with the three pieces of furniture that sat in three large rooms” (LH 33). The sparse cleanliness is consistent with the view of the Victorians that the tangible space in which one lives literally reflects the self.

As Ruth serves coffee from Styrofoam cups, Lester and Willie marvel at the elegance of the presentation as she sets the cups in front of them “as carefully as she would china” (LH 33) and places near each a plastic spoon with a paper napkin folded underneath. In such an atmosphere of ease and acceptance, the cheap blackberry brandy added to the coffee tastes like “a rare cognac” (LH 33). Naylor’s depiction of the values inherent in the Anderson home is consistent with the nineteenth century view of “home”
as not a space but a system of human relations. Nina Baym points out that sentimental fiction (or, her preferred term, “woman’s fiction”) promotes the idea of a woman’s influence in the home transcending the boundaries of those walls: “When accepting, as one’s basic relation to another, obligation rather than exploitation, doing another good rather than doing him in; when books and conversation and simple comfort seem superior to ostentation and feverish pleasure—then, our authors believed, a true social revolution will have taken place” (*Woman’s* 49). Although Ruth doesn’t have social revolution as her agenda, Willie and Lester recognize the superiority of the Anderson’s home as they compare it to those in Linden Hills with its residents who “eat, sleep, and breathe for one thing—making it” while at the same time “scraping and clawing to move closer to that weirdo, Nedeed” (*LH* 39).

Ruth also shares similarities with a female heroine a modern Susanna Rowson might have created. Rowson’s solution to the evil in the world was not to change that world, but develop in women the strength, wisdom, and common sense they would need to deal with it as it was. Ruth cannot change the people in Linden Hills, but she can escape from it and resolve never to return. She recognizes “[t]hose folks just aren’t real” (*LH* 39).

Laurel Johnson Dumont, self-absorbed and chasing an empty success, asks others (primarily her grandmother Roberta) to sacrifice for her, but with nothing to sustain her, Laurel eventually loses the battle for survival. Laurel might be termed a “Sapphire,” a name used to describe a caricature of a domineering, emasculating Black woman. With her light skin, stunning looks, and successful IBM career, she is the perfect wife for Howard, the first black D.A in Wayne County, hand-picked to be the next state attorney general. They live on Tupelo Drive, the last street down in Linden Hills, in the center of the Nedeed-orchestrated “hell.” Laurel is the antithesis of the Victorian ideal of womanhood who “had to lack the competitive desires and worldly ambitions that consequently belonged—as if by some natural principle—to the male” (Cott, *Bonds* 59). But Laurel ends her life not because she is successful, but because, unlike Ruth, she has forgotten what makes a home. Captivated by images of her own success, “when she finally took a good look around she found herself imprisoned within a chain of photographs and a life that had no point” (*LH* 228). Her actual home in Linden Hills is
already complete when she moves in. There is nothing to buy, nothing to create, no personal investment. In an interview with Donna Perry, Naylor talks about Laurel losing her sense of self. By the time her grandmother comes to stay with her at Laurel’s house on Tupelo Drive, “[i]t’s too late. . . . She was an empty shell.” Continues Naylor, “[T]hat can happen when you live so much in what you do [that] you forget about where home is” (qtd. in Montgomery 91). Laurel is literally rendered faceless in her 30-foot dive into the pool, an outcome which mirrors her spiritual state.

The isolation and alienation experienced by the women of Linden Hills can be traced to several sources. First, like the heroines of sentimental novels, few have living mothers. In the precursory sentimental novels, the mothers are either already dead or are shortly to die, leaving their young daughters adrift. Hope Leslie, Ellen Montgomery, Gertrude Flint, Capitola Black, Hagar Withers, Rosalie Churchill, and Anstiss Dolbeare (of A.D. T. Whitney’s Hitherto) —all protagonists of best-selling novels—fall into this category. Plots center on their success at exploiting their inner resources to carve out a life without the support of the traditional family. Except for the most recent Mrs. Needed, Willa Prescott, all the Nedeed wives married young, when they were teenagers, really. Their writings reveal the absence of family. Luwana Packerville, whom Luther bought when she was a slave, notes in her Bible “the sorrows of never knowing her own mother” (LH 118). Like Laurel, who dismisses the wisdom of her grandmother Roberta, Willa remembers dismissing her Great-Aunt Miranda (the title character of Naylor’s 1989 novel Mama Day) when Miranda came visiting with “her cardboard suitcases, loose-fitting shoes, and sticky jars of canned whatever” (LH 146). The young Willa believes Miranda can teach her nothing of value. And in adulthood it is too late. Willa’s neighbors don’t believe she (Willa) has “any living relatives” (LH 243). Sandiford posits, “By virtue of their total identity as Nedeed property, all these women are entrapped in the Nedeed patriarchy and cut off by marriage from nurturing female support systems” (Sandiford 129). Their narratives “refer slightly or never to their mothers” (Sandiford 129). They are motherless or appear to be so. Each wives’ narrative-within-a narrative reveals limited contact with a wider family, “placing [these women] in a condition of total dependency on the Nedeed power structure” for not only their material wants but for self-validation (Sandiford 129). Laurel’s mother dies when Laurel is very young, and Laurel spends the
rest of her life yearning for her. Unlike the Nedeed women who transform isolation into opportunities for discovery and re-defining the self, Laurel escapes the pain by eradicating the self.

The second contributing factor to the isolation of the Nedeed women, though connected to the first, is the line of all-male progeny stretching through four generations, progeny conceived by passionless rites of copulation. Astrological charts and careful attention to the phases of the moon are part of the rigid protocol guaranteed to produce the same result, generation after generation: a dark-skinned, bow-legged son with protruding eyes, in other words, a clone of the father. These dehumanized rituals of sexual intercourse insure that no female children are produced, thereby reinforcing patriarchal values. The current Luther refuses to recognize the matriarchal image in his son’s face. Light-skinned, Sinclair resembles his grandmothers; entombment in the basement is Luther’s attempt to negate any vestige of the matriarchal line. To all the Luthers, their women are only incubators to produce a clone of the father. Acclaimed writer and critic Alice Walker observes a thread connecting white patriarchy of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to the internalization of the master role by men in the twentieth-century black community:

[At the root of our denial of sexist brutality] is our deep, painful refusal to accept the fact that we are not only descendants of slaves, but we are also the descendants of slave owners. And that just as we have had to struggle to rid ourselves of slavish behaviors we must as ruthlessly eradicate any desire to be mistress or “master.” (Living 80)

Naylor advocates neither a materially rich life in Linden Hills nor a life of poverty in Putney Wayne, but a middle space. Here she mimes the attitudes of most women novelists of the previous century, many who had experienced precarious financial times themselves. They “abhorred and feared poverty” (Baym, Woman’s 48), keenly aware that many women were destitute because of irresponsible or injured husbands. Widows and other women with children toiled at below subsistence wages. This reality explains why haunting scenes of poverty are so ubiquitous in their novels. On the other hand, they reserved special scorn for the idle rich, believing chasing after ostentation to be the worst of offenses. Typical is Maria Cummins’ rendering of the Graham household after Mr.
Graham remarries. Mrs. Graham and her daughter Belle act “without restraint . . . wink[ing] at the many open and flagrant violations of the law of politeness” (248), while the heroine Gert and the blind, saintly Emily retreat to the plain parlor upstairs to converse and read. Novelists desired to carve a third space inhabited by a stable middle-class which could act as an antidote to the social turmoil of the nineteenth century. Ellen Montgomery, Gertrude Flint, Hagar Withers, Anstiss Dolbeare, and countless other heroines seek such a space.

Willie Mason comes to much the same conclusion about the necessity of “a middle ground somewhere” (LH 283). He has lived the poverty of Putney Wayne with his family of eight crammed into four rooms, his bed a third of a studio couch, and a drunken dad who beat Willie’s mom every night after payday. He has seen the wealth and emptiness of Linden Hills as showcased by the Winston Alcott wedding, the Parker funeral, the Dumont’s twelve-room stone Tudor with the Olympic-sized diving pool, and the impressive facades of the other houses winding their way to the dead-end of Tupelo Drive. Willie comes to the realization that “it doesn’t have to be Linden Hills and it doesn’t have to be nothing. . . . there are other places to live” (LH 283).

The end of the novel renders Linden Hills an inferno. Even before Willa emerges from the basement and before the old bridal veil ignites from the fireplace embers, Luther watches “the lights smolder and glow up the top of Linden Hills . . . the bright lights forming intricate patterns in the naked branches” (LH 284). Linden Hills indeed has become what his father had intended: “a waking nightmare . . . that . . . [is] nothing but light from a hill of carbon paper dolls” (LH 10).

Naylor’s debt to Dante’s Inferno has been well-documented. What has not been explored is the intertextuality with nineteenth-century American women’s novels and with captivity narratives of an even earlier time. According to Christine Berg, “an African American writer’s use of intertextuality is essentially appreciated as a signal of empowerment for the writer” (16). Gloria Naylor’s reconfiguration of precursory texts widens the American literature canon; she includes the past but forges a new vision of richly layered literary expression.
CONCLUSION

Both the precursory sentimental novels by white women and later novels by black women reached an audience previously thought unimportant. These works reflect a tangle of the political and rhetorical cultures of their time and will certainly shift meaning as new generations of readers evaluate the appropriateness of these novels to their time.

As I’ve demonstrated, it is tempting to denigrate these works of sentimental fiction: the characters are often exasperating, the dialogue overwrought, and the plot lacking in the psychological depth and nuances we value in today’s fiction. But these works were astoundingly popular and enormously influential. Jane Tompkins points out that when present-day critics denounce the novels of Stowe and Warner and other sentimental novelists as being out of touch with reality, they do so because the reality they perceive is organized according a different set of conventions for constituting experience. Argues Tompkins:

The popular fiction of the American Renaissance has been dismissed primarily because it follows from assumptions about the shape and meaning of existence that we no longer hold. But once one has a grasp of the problems these writers were trying to solve, their solutions do not seem hypocritical or shallow, unrealistic or naïve; on the contrary, given the social circumstances within which they had to work, their prescriptions for living seem at least as heroic as those put forward by the writers who said, “No, in thunder.” (160)

In other words, the sentimental novelists crossed the presumed boundaries of the genre and raised large issues.

Early African American women writers struggled with the double bind of being black and female. What reality were they to portray? What were their social circumstances, and what solutions were possible for the problems which circumscribed their world? Perhaps the answer comes from Alice Walker who said, “In my own work I write not only what I want to read—understanding fully and indelibly that if I don’t do it
now no one else is so vitally interested, or capable of doing it to my satisfaction—I write all the things I should have been able to read” (In Search 13).

Frances E.W. Harper in *Iola Leroy* used the conventions of the sentimental novel as an overlay, but she displayed both deliberate and inadvertent undercutting of these conventions to provide a challenge to the racist views propagated by the hegemonic culture. Similarly, Jesse Fauset and Zora Neale Hurston wove stories which addressed the gaps in the political and social landscape. In *Linden Hills*, I believe Naylor had similar goals to those of the nineteenth-century writers, writers who recognized that females were from the start less powerful. These nineteenth-century novelists created women who were neither realistic nor role models. Rather they were designed to spur, provoke, and inspire their audience (Baym, Introduction xi). In *Linden Hills*, Naylor wanted to provoke her modern readers, to jar them into recognizing the value of memory—and the danger in relinquishing it to hollow dreams. To Naylor, memory is what holds a people together; it is the belief that something transcends the self.

The canon of American literature is both recursive and malleable. Many of the wildly-popular sentimental novels of the nineteenth century are just beginning to be available again. Three of the four novels discussed in this dissertation have had checkered publishing histories. In her introduction to the Schomburg Library edition of *Iola Leroy*, Frances Foster points out that “*Iola Leroy* was probably the best-selling novel by an Afro-American writer prior to the twentieth century” (xxvii). But by 1911, the year Harper died, the novel had fallen into critical disfavor. P. Gabrielle Foreman reports that it was “unavailable from 1895 until 1971, and then again until Hazel Carby’s edition in 1987” (662). W.E.B. DuBois in his eulogy commemorating Harper wrote that she “should be remembered more for her good intentions than for the success of their execution.” His highest compliment to her was that she was “‘sincere’” (qtd. in Foster xxxv). Now, however, with new printings, the novel is again considered by many scholars to be of significant interest.

Today many critics still recognize Jessie Fauset’s ability as an editor (she masterfully guided the *Crisis* from 1919 to 1926) but disparage her talents as a novelist. She is grouped with minor writers of the Harlem Renaissance classified as the “Rear Guard,” “the traditional,” or “imitative.” As was the case with *Iola Leroy*, *Plum Bun* was
out of print for decades. Yet contemporary readers are assessing Fauset’s novels anew for their progressiveness and verve.

The reversal of critical opinion is most stunning in the case of Their Eyes Were Watching God. Now a staple in many high school and college English classes, the novel was—for nearly thirty years after its first publication—out of print, “largely unknown and unread” (Washington, Foreword ix). By 1971 the novel was an underground phenomenon (old copies were available in second-hand bookstores), but no new copies were being published. According to Washington, “[b]y 1975 Their Eyes . . . was in such demand that a petition was circulated at the December 1975 convention of the Modern Language Association to get the novel back into print” (Foreword xii). The result has been decades of serious Hurston scholarship. The novel is perhaps the most widely known and privileged text in the African American canon. As a contemporary writer, Gloria Naylor has a different history from her three African American foremothers. After the success of The Women of Brewster Place, Gloria Naylor had an eager audience for Linden Hills, and now she is a major figure in the American literature and the African American literary canon. Perhaps her reputation will not experience the vicissitudes of her precursors.

Novels by a younger cadre of African American women are ripe for an analysis of how they might also be signifying on nineteenth-century sentimental novels and on the novels of Harper, Fauset, Hurston, and Naylor. What riffs come from the pens of these new writers? Tina McElroy Ansa, A.J. Verdelle, Edwidge Danticat, and Terry McMillan are part of this new generation of black women writers who continue to wrestle with empowerment, love relationships, and the complexities of family. Ansa, who grew up in Middle Georgia “hearing her grandfather’s stories on the porch of her family home and strangers’ stories downtown in her father’s juke joint” (“Tina”), reminds us of Hurston’s background of listening to the “lying” sessions on Joe Clarke’s porch in Eatonville. Ansa’s bestselling and award-winning novels, including Ugly Ways (pub. 1993), explore issues and ethos central to today’s black youth.

A. J. Verdelle in her novel The Good Negress (pub. 1995) continues the Bildungsroman theme but with the emphasis on the conflicts that education might set in motion in the life of a brilliant but uneducated African American woman (Manheim).
Another young writer, Haitian-born Edwidge Danticat, published her first novel *Breath, Eyes, Memory* in 1994. (As did Gloria Naylor’s *Linden Hills*, *Breath* served as the author’s master’s degree thesis at an Ivy League school.) Four years later *Breath, Eyes, Memory* became an Oprah’s Book Club selection. Terry McMillan published her first novel in 1987, but her third novel, *Waiting to Exhale* (pub. 1992), is her best known. It spent months on *The New York Times* bestseller list and has sold nearly four million copies. According to her on-line biography, the novel, which explores the frustrations of romantic relationships, “touched something in the African-American community; not since *The Color Purple* had there been so much discussion about the state of relations between African-American men and women. . . . ‘[H]er protagonists tackle sexual issues that most women can relate to’” (“Terry”). Her most recent novel, *How Stella Got Her Groove Back*, is an upbeat novel focusing on the rediscovery of self. The protagonist travels to Jamaica and falls in love with a much younger man (shades of Jane and Tea Cake?). A *Newsweek* article quotes McMillan as saying, “I don’t write about victims. They just bore me to death. I prefer to write about somebody who can pick themselves back up and get on with their lives. Because all of us are victims to some extent” (Sawhill 76). McMillan’s home page begins with this quote: “Everything I write is about empowerment” (“Terry” Home page).

Black feminist criticism is a useful lens through which to view the interrelationships of these four novels. Rather than succumbing to Bloom’s “anxiety of influence,” which proposes that the male author is not really the creator of his own works but instead is constantly remaking the works of his superior forefathers, or to Gilbert and Gubar’s “anxiety of authorship,” which posits that white foremothers wrote under such despair and alienation that the atmosphere resembled a disease, black women writers freely engage in a dialogue of affirmation with other black women writers—women who wrote centuries ago as well as those writing today. The pattern of literary influences reflects central paradigms about character, race, gender, and narrative voice, and in the process of engaging with each other, writers who are both black and female enter by the “intimate gate” (to borrow a phrase from Hurston), creating a new female aesthetic.

But to come full circle, how are these four novels by Harper, Fauset, Hurston, and Naylor linked to the novels written by white women in an earlier time period? Perhaps
they take as their mantra lines from another woman, a nineteenth-century writer who wrote in a different genre:

Tell all the Truth but tell it slant—
Success in Circuit lies

The truth must dazzle gradually
Or every man be blind—(Dickinson 1129).

And if the writers of the sentimental novels I have studied express a common hope, it is perhaps this: All groups embedded in systems of domination need to move towards a place where as Toni Morrison’s Paul D expresses it, “to get to a place where you could love anything you chose—not to need permission for desire—well now, that was freedom” (162).
REFERENCES


Bethel, Lorraine. “This Infinity of Conscious Pain: Zora Neale Hurston and the Black Female Literary Tradition.” *All the women are White, all the Blacks are men, but some of us are brave: Black Women’s Studies*. Ed. Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith. Old Westbury, NY: Feminist P, 1982. 176-188.


Williams, Fannie Barrier. “The Woman’s Part in a Man’s Business” The Voice of the Negro (Nov. 1904).


An Ohio native, Beverly Holmes earned her undergraduate degree from Bowling Green State University and her M.A. from the University of Denver. She is currently a full time faculty member and English Department Chair at Northwest Florida State College, Niceville, Florida, where she teaches freshman composition, literature survey, and American literature courses. She likes to read historical fiction, especially of the Elizabethan era.

Her hobbies include cooking, snow skiing, and hiking. She is most proud of her family: her husband and two sons, Scott and Mark.