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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Tamara Jenelle Williamson entitled "Renaissance Woman: The Works and Critical Reception of Dorothy West." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

Miriam Thaggert, Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

Mary E. Papke, Nancy Goslee

Accepted for the Council:
Carolyn R. Hodges

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

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Major Professor

We have read this thesis
and recommend its acceptance:

Mary E. Papke

Nancy Goslee

Accepted for the Council:

Anne Mayhew
Vice Chancellor and Dean of Graduate Studies

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

RENAISSANCE WOMAN: THE WORKS AND CRITICAL RECEPTION OF DOROTHY WEST

A Thesis Presented for the
Master of Arts
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Tamara Jenelle Williamson
August 2005

Dedication

I dedicate this project to the memory of Dorothy West, whose career and life have been an inspiration to me.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank those who have helped me to pursue my Master's Degree, especially my committee. Dr. Miriam Thaggert has been a helpful and supportive in guiding me through this process. Dr. Mary E. Papke and Dr. Nancy Goslee have aided me in the writing process and have helped me to become a better writer and critical thinker. I wish to thank my committee for being so encouraging and for helping me to find my own voice.

I would also like to thank my family and friends, especially Jennifer Vanden Heuvel, who has served as a sounding board and a de facto therapist. Her support throughout this process has meant a great deal to me.

Abstract

Dorothy West's literary career spanned seven decades, beginning with the publication of "The Typewriter" in 1926. West published her second novel, *The Wedding*, in 1995. The following year, the author published a collection of short stories and non-fiction, entitled *The Richer, the Poorer*. However, in discussions of American modernism and African-American women's literature, Dorothy West is excluded.

The focus of this project will be to explore the themes in West's two novels, *The Living Is Easy* and *The Wedding*. I also analyze several of her short stories and a non-fiction piece. In the last chapter of this thesis, I analyze and critique West's critical reception. As mentioned before, West is almost completely excluded from discussions on American modernism and often from discussions of African American women's literature. I reveal how West's unique vision of race, class, and gender brings a distinctive voice to black women's literature. Also, I reveal how West's literature can be compared favorably to that of other modernist authors.

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Introduction

> When I was a child of four or five, listening to the conversation of my mother and her sisters, I would sometimes intrude on their territory with a solemnly stated opinion that would jerk their heads in my direction, then send them into roars of uncontrollable laughter [;] the first adult who caught her breath would speak for them all and say, "That's no child. That's a sawed-off woman."—Dorothy West, "Remembrance"

In the early 1990s, former First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, who was working as a book editor at Doubleday, encountered Dorothy West on Martha's Vineyard. Mrs. Onassis vacationed there; West made the island a permanent residence. Onassis, who admired West's articles in the *Vineyard Gazette*, discovered that West had an unfinished manuscript. West had begun the manuscript, set among the world of middle- and upper-class blacks, in the 1960s but shelved it because she felt that it was not socially relevant. In an interview with Deborah McDowell, West claims that her writing the novel "coincided with the Black Revolution, when many Blacks believed that middle-class blacks were Uncle Toms" (278). West did not want to write a book that would not have an audience, so the project was shelved. Onassis encouraged West to finish the text, *The Wedding*, and became the book's editor. And as the book was finished and neared publication, Onassis died on May 19, 1994. The following year, *The Wedding* was published, with a dedication to West's editor: "To the memory of my editor, Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis. Though there was never such a mismatched pair in appearance, we were perfect partners." Dorothy West's career is part of a tradition of African American female authors. Like Onassis, who symbolized the seemingly idyllic days of Camelot with the Kennedy administration, West was a symbol of another time.

Dorothy West's career began during the Harlem Renaissance, which featured opportunities for black Americans to express themselves creatively. In her essay "Reflections on Black Women Writers: Revising the Literary Canon," Nellie McKay notes the legacy of black women authors in America. According to McKay, the "history of the creative efforts of black women in America began with the beginnings of literacy, in 1746 with Lucy Terry's 'Bars Fight'…and continued with Phyllis Wheatley's *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral in 1733*" (152-153). Even before the United States was a nation, black women found ways to express themselves through the written word.

The nineteenth century also saw the outpouring of creativity by black female authors. According to McKay, "the earliest known novel by a black woman [is] *Our Nig or Sketches from the Life of a Free Black* (1859) by Harriet Wilson, in which the abused heroine, Frado, is a hardworking, honest child of mixed racial parentage who is caught in a web of white hatred and cruelty" (153). McKay stresses the importance of the fact that Frado is "neither an immoral woman nor a mammy," which were the "most frequent of the stereotypes of black women in that time" (153). It was an important contribution of black female authors to present characters that defied the stereotype of black women. They gave a voice to the countless black women in America subject to these stereotypes.

McKay states, "the slave narrative, not fiction, was the mode that dominated the earliest Afro-American attempts at literature, which through its existence revised the nature of the American 'Self'" (154). The main example of this was Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, which was published under the name Linda Brent. Jacobs' tale "told the story that brilliantly deconstructs the meaning of the female slave experience in relationship to that of her male counterpart and the white world around her" (154). Jacobs knew her

status as a female slave was different from that of a male slave. It is important, then, to get the perspective of a female slave because it is different from a male slave. In addition to their bodies being physically exploited through labor, female slaves, like Jacobs, were at the risk of being raped by their masters and forced to bear their children. McKay states that the "poetry, fiction, and nonfiction prose of black women to come out of the latter part of the nineteenth century wage open warfare against racism and gender oppression, on the one hand, and on the other, encourage and castigate blacks in an effort to promote the 'uplift' of the race" (156). One of these women was Frances Watkins Harper. Harper published *Iola Leroy, Shadows Uplifted* in 1892, a novel which featured a mulatto heroine who is presented with the opportunity to cross the color line but decides to "stay black." The black female authors of the nineteenth century carved a path for those who would follow them in the next century.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, W.E.B. Du Bois published *The Souls of Black Folk*, in which he stated that the "problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line" (10). This was something that black women faced as well. At the dawn of the twentieth century, the failures of Reconstruction from the previous century were showing themselves. African Americans were disenfranchised from American life in many ways. Jim Crow laws, which had been validated with the Supreme Court case *Plessy vs. Ferguson* (1898), were the law of the land and decades away from being overturned by *Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* (1954). The Fifteenth Amendment, giving black men the right to vote, existed merely on paper in several states. The Nineteenth Amendment, giving women the rights of suffrage, was ratified in 1920. In 1910, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, NAACP, was

formed. In 1915, the film *Birth of a Nation* was released. Produced by D.W. Griffith, the film related a wildly distorted version of the Reconstruction Era and portrayed blacks, particularly black men, as lazy, and, most importantly, eager to sexually assault white women. In 1919, there was the Red Summer, a rash of deadly race riots across the country.

A new wave of immigrants and the end of World War I brought about new xenophobia in America. The end of World War I also impacted black soldiers who fought for democracy abroad but were dismayed and angered when they came to their native country and could not enjoy the freedoms for which they had risked life and limb. After the end of World War I, the Ku Klux Klan also experienced a rise in membership and terrorist activities.

Around the early twentieth century, there also emerged a black middle class. In her novel *The Wedding*, West notes the beginning of this class:

> In this heyday of the railroad's prosperity, with motorcars and airplanes scarcely dreamed of, the parlor cars were the mobile drawing rooms of the rich, and the black men who served them as waiters or porters or redcaps received extravagant tips for their coldly calculated services. All of their bowing and scraping was directed toward an end that justified the means. They saved their tips, and sent their sons to high school […] and started little businesses. Though generations to come might gloss over these beginnings, this was the beginning of the colored middle class. (*The Wedding* 149)

Education was a key factor in the rise of the middle class; W.E.B. Du Bois famously promoted his idea of the "Talented Tenth," which focused responsibility for

racial uplift on the top ten percent of blacks who were educated and somewhat economically secure. Dorothy West notes that the early black middle class “came out of slavery with a fierce will to make up for lost time” (*The Richer, the Poorer* 242).

Also during the early twentieth century, many Southern black Americans migrated north in search of better employment in the more industrialized North and a better way of life. In *African American Experience*, Joseph William Trotter estimates that because of World War 1, 700,000 to 1 million blacks left the South for northern and western cities (378). He notes, “Another 800,000 to 1 million departed during the 1920s” (378). This led to blacks being not just concentrated in the South. In the South, many people still relied on agricultural endeavors as a means of income. Sharecropping, a system that was eerily similar to slavery, existed in several Southern states. Hoping for better opportunities (and mirroring their enslaved ancestors who decided to run away), people migrated north in order to work in factories or other means of urban employment.

Trotter notes, “As the Great Migration accelerated, racial hostility intensified and undercut the upward mobility of African Americans” (374). The migration “was fraught with a variety of inter- and intraracial class, cultural, and gender conflicts and forms of inequality” (374). In large Northern cities, tension arose between blacks and white immigrants, as well as other whites. The blacks that came to the cities to find work were sometimes used to break strikes of white workers. Northern blacks, some of whom were middle-class, resented their southern counterparts invading Northern cities. As seen in West’s novel *The Living Is Easy*, which is set in Boston during the 1910s, Northern middle-class blacks thought of Southern blacks as lazy and boisterous—mirroring the opinions of white America. These blacks, like their immigrant counterparts, crowded the

slums of urban cities. This migration coincided with and is wed to the flowering of black literature known as the Harlem Renaissance.

When the Harlem Renaissance came about, it presented one of the first opportunities for black Americans, including several black women, to produce literature. Literary magazines, *Crisis* and *Opportunity*, arose. The National Urban League funded *Opportunity*, while the NAACP founded *Crisis*. The magazines sponsored literary contests, offered prizes to a variety of artists for their achievements, and arranged social events that brought artists, publishers, and white patrons together (Trotter 415-416). One of the first significant authors of the Harlem Renaissance was Claude McKay, author of the poem "If We Must Die," which was written in response to the Harlem Riots of 1919:

> If we must die, let it not be like hogs
>
> Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,
>
> While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,
>
> Making their mock at our accursed lot. (1-4)

This quote reflects the resolve of African Americans who were tired of being treated like second-class citizens. This resolve pre-dated the Civil Rights Movement, and one of the means to express this resolve was through literature. The Harlem Renaissance presented an opportunity for African Americans to present this frustration, disenchantment, and rage with life in America through the written word.

Alain Locke published *The New Negro* in 1925, which was a seminal event in the Harlem Renaissance. The "New Negro" was presented as a break with the "Old Negro," the stereotypical lazy, shiftless, sexually deviant black man. The "Old Negro" also encompassed the "Jezebel" and "Mammy" stereotypes held in regards to black women.

The "New Negro" mentality was also in response to racist literature published at the beginning of the century. This includes Charles Carroll's *The Negro, A Beast* (1900), Robert W. Shufeldt's *The Negro, A Menace to American Civilization*, and Thomas Dixon's *The Leopard's Spots* (1902) and *The Clansman: An Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan* (1905). This latter book was the basis for D.W. Griffith's film.

According to Trotter, "New Negro literary societies spread widely across the country: the Writer's Guild in New York; Black Opals in Philadelphia; the Saturday Evening Quill Club in Boston; the Ink and Slingers in Los Angeles; and the Book and Bench in Topeka, Kansas" (415). Like the literary magazines, these literary groups sought to promote the literature of blacks in America. White patrons also played a role in the flowering of this literature. Carl Van Vechten, author of *Nigger Heaven* (1926), is an example of someone who promoted black literature (although he praised the "primitive" aspects of black life). Other patrons were Charlotte Osgood Mason, who supported Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes (Osgood Mason was also interested in "primitive" aspects of black life).

Women were heavily involved in constructing and promoting the Harlem Renaissance. McKay states that "Jessie Fauset, black woman poet and novelist, in her role as W.E.B. Du Bois's assistant at the *Crisis*…was instrumental in bringing all of the important writers of the period in public view" (157). Fauset's novels and critical reception will be discussed in Chapter 3. Other female authors who were associated with the movement are short story writer and novelist Zora Neale Hurston, novelist Nella Larsen, and playwright and poet Georgia Douglas Johnson. It was a short story contest in *Opportunity* in 1926 that brought Dorothy West to the attention of the Harlem Renaissance artists and the literary world.

Dorothy West was born in 1907, the only child of Isaac Christopher West, a former slave, and Rachel West. She was raised in Boston in a house that included extended family members. In an essay called "Rachel," West notes:

> The house that I grew up in was four-storied, but we were an extended family, continually adding new members, and the perpetual joke was, if we lived in the Boston Museum, we'd still need one more room. Surrounded by all these different personalities, each one wanting to be first among equals, I knew I wanted to be a writer. Living with them was like living inside a story. (*The Richer, the Poorer* 167)

West's upbringing, then, seems to have been an impetus for her career as a writer. She was raised in a house with several aunts and their children, providing a cast of characters from which to draw inspiration. West's father, Bart, owned a successful wholesale fruit business and was known as the "Black Banana King." West's mother, Rachel, was very class and color conscious. According to Mary Helen Washington, West's "light-skinned, beautiful mother was never quite able to accept having a plain, dark-skinned child like Dorothy" (*The Richer, the Poorer* 13). Rachel West was determined to raise her daughter to be a proper Boston lady and sent her to the tony Girls Latin School. In 1926, West tied for second place, with Zora Neale Hurston, in *Opportunity*'s short story contest. West's short story was entitled "The Typewriter;" Hurston's was "Muttsy." West traveled to New York and was in the thick of the Harlem Renaissance, mingling with the heavyweights of the period, such as Hurston, Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, and Countee Cullen.

According to Sharon Jones, author of *Rereading the Harlem Renaissance*, West traveled to London in 1929 to perform in *Porgy* (written by DuBose Hayward), and in 1932 she went with Langston Hughes and others to the Soviet Union to make a film called *Black and White*. The film was to be about the condition of blacks in America. The film was never made; one reason is "pressure from an American who threatened to withdraw funding for a dam in Russia if the film were actually made" (122). However, the project shows West's desire to express herself through methods other than her writing.

West returned to the United States after her Soviet trip after the death of her father in 1933. When she came back, she felt that "she needed to make up for the lost opportunities of [the Harlem Renaissance]," according to Mary Helen Washington ("Remembering" 12). Consequently, she decided to start a magazine to renew the intellectual promise shown by the Harlem Renaissance. West started *Challenge* in 1934 and asked some of her Harlem Renaissance friends for their contributions. In a letter from Zora Neale Hurston to West, the author responds to West's request for materials for the magazine. Hurston writes, "I'm too delighted at your nerve in running a magazine not to help all I can. I love your audacity. You have learned at last the glorious lesson of living dangerously" (296). The magazine folded in 1937 because of lack of funds and worthy submissions. The same year, West began *New Challenge*. Marian Minus and Richard Wright were on her editorial staff. The magazine only had one issue, but it is notable for including Wright's essay "Blueprint for Negro Writing," in which the author denounces authors of the previous era who had patrons and who, Wright felt, "went a-begging to white America" (45). Wright called for novels of social protest.

Social issues were on West's mind as well. Sharon Jones notes, "West worked as a welfare investigator for a year and a half and later became employed with the Works Progress Administration Federal Writer's Project" (123). In 1999 *A Renaissance in Harlem*, a collection of little-known essays from the Federal Writers Project, was published. The book includes essays by West and Ralph Ellison. During this period, West continued to publish short stories, some of them in the *New York Daily News*.

West published her first novel, *The Living is Easy*, in 1948. The book, based on her family's experiences, was originally going to be serialized by the magazine *Ladies' Home Journal*. However, the magazine reneged on its offer, fearing that it would lose subscribers from the South if it were to serialize a novel written by a black woman. Then she moved to Martha's Vineyard, where her family had vacationed as a child, and worked for the *Vineyard Gazette*. Initially, West had a "modest job, consisting of filing and billing, no doubt left begging by some young student apprentice returning to college" (*The Richer, the Poorer* 5). Eventually, she became a regular columnist for the newspaper. Her column "The Cottager's Corner" contained news about the "comings and goings of African Americans who summered on the Vineyard" ("Remembering" 12). It was her articles for the *Gazette* that first attracted the attention of Mrs. Onassis.

The next novel she published was *The Wedding*, over four decades after her first. The following year in 1996, Doubleday published a collection of short stories and non-fiction of West's, *The Richer, the Poorer* and West experienced a new critical reception. West died on August 16, 1998, the last surviving member of the Harlem Renaissance. The year that West died, Oprah Winfrey produced a television film version of *The Wedding*, starring Halle Berry.

Although West experienced a renewed public interest in the years before she died, she has not received a great deal of scholarly attention. Recently, there has been a celebration of female Harlem Renaissance authors: Zora Neale Hurston, Nella Larsen, and Jessie Fauset. However, West, whose career began during this period, is still on the fringes of the literary canon.

This thesis explores West's literature, which spanned several decades of the twentieth century and attempts to understand the causes of her being overlooked by critics. In Chapter 1, I discuss West's novels, *The Living Is Easy* and *The Wedding*, in terms of race, class, and gender. The novels are set among groups of middle and upper class blacks. *The Living Is Easy*, as stated before, is set in 1910s Boston and is based on West's family life and childhood. The novel features the character of Cleo Judson, an intriguing and incredibly complex protagonist. Cleo is a proto-feminist. *The Living Is Easy* is a satire of Boston's black middle class. *The Wedding*, arguably the better of the two novels, is set on Martha's Vineyard and is centered around the wedding of Shelby Coles, scion of the Northern black elite. The novel shows the history and mores of this group.

Chapter 2 documents West's short stories and non-fiction, in which she also explores themes concerning race and gender. The short stories I will be looking at are "Mammy," "An Unimportant Man," "The Penny," and "The Richer, the Poorer." I also analyze her essay "Fond Memories of a Black Childhood." The short stories demonstrate that West was not just capable of writing about the middle and upper class blacks. She explores blacks who are in the process of bettering themselves and those who do not have the material wealth with

which those in the middle class are familiar. “Fond Memories” is a sharp and insightful essay exploring issues concerning race, identity, and space.

Finally, in Chapter 3, I plan to explore West in relation to the women who have become a “triumvirate” of Harlem Renaissance female authors—Zora Neale Hurston, Nella Larsen, and Jessie Fauset. I make an argument for a greater appreciation of Dorothy West in discussions of twentieth-century literature. This chapter also explores reasons why West is not included in the canon and why she should be. Finally, I will explore what West brings to the literary conversation. Dorothy West provides a unique voice in literature that is worthy of being included in discussions of American twentieth century literature.

Chapter 1: West's Novels—*The Living Is Easy* and *The Wedding*

As a member of the black middle class, Dorothy West had an insider's view of the workings of that society. West reveals the inner lives of those in the society of middle and upper-class black Americans in her novels *The Wedding* and *The Living is Easy*. In both novels, West both praises and criticizes members of the black elite. *The Living Is Easy* is a semi-autobiographical satire of middle-class black society; *The Wedding* is a deconstruction of the history and mores of the black elite, which is embodied through the Coles family. As with much black women's literature, West's novels can be analyzed in terms of race, class, and gender. She analyzes intraracial conflicts on the basis of skin color and class. She also looks at the role of women in this society through distinctive female characters.

The Living Is Easy

The Living is Easy, a roman à clef, presents the ambitious figure of Cleo Judson, who is a member of Boston's black middle-class society. Cleo, some critics (including Sharon Jones) speculate, is based on West's mother. Mary Helen Washington, in "Remembering a Proper Black Bostonian," notes that Rachel West, a light-skinned woman was "a woman who was extremely class- and color-conscious" (1). This description fits Cleo Judson as well. *The Living Is Easy* is set in the World War I era. Bart, Cleo's husband, has a successful fruit business and is known as the Black Banana King (a title that West's father, Isaac West, also held). Cleo wants her husband Bart and daughter Judy to serve as tools to represent a typical black Boston family. In her quest to recreate her original family, Cleo schemes to have her three sisters, Lily, Charity, and

Serena, come to live with her—which requires them to leave their working-class husbands. The brood is able to live in general economic comfort until the financial strain on Bart Judson proves to be too much. The novel ends with Bart leaving Cleo to find income in New York City. Aside from relaying the story of the Judson family, West's novel relates the story of the Binney family, another black middle-class family. West's secondary narrative focuses on siblings Thea Binney, Judy's tutor, and her brother Simeon, who runs a newspaper.

The Living Is Easy focuses on both intraracial and interracial issues and conflicts. Many intraracial issues in the novel hinge on the basis of skin color. Some members of Boston's black middle-class society, like Cleo, are wary of dark-skinned people, such as her daughter, Judy, a character reminiscent of West herself. Washington notes that West's "light-skinned, beautiful mother was never quite able to accept having a plain, dark-skinned child like Dorothy" ("Remembering" 2). Similarly, Cleo cannot accept her daughter's looks. West expands on a description of Judy:

> She was dark. She had Papa's cocoa-brown skin, his soft dark eyes, and his generous nose in miniature. Cleo worked hard on her nose. She had tried clothespins, but Judy had not known what to do about breathing. Now Cleo was teaching her to keep the bridge pinched, but Judy pinched too hard, and the rush of dark blood made her nose look larger than ever. (*Living* 39)

This passage reflects the desire of black people in this society to have features that are not stereotypically black. "Judy, what do I tell you about making your nose flat?" Cleo exclaims after watching her daughter press her nose to a window (38). Cleo does not want Judy to have "black features." In addition, Cleo also thinks Judy has "pickaninny"

hair (137). She laments the fact that her daughter does not have curly, smooth hair, but instead has "kinky" hair. Those in this society want "white" features," such as pointy noses, which are socially acceptable. They are adhering to white America's standards of beauty and acceptance. This type of intraracial prejudice mirrors the prejudices of whites.

Interracial conflicts arise with Simeon, who fights three young white men who antagonize him when he is walking his sister Thea home. Because of her fair complexion, the young men think that Thea is a white girl and thus are stirred by the idea of a black man being alone with a white woman. Simeon, who has begun to doubt the mores of his bourgeois upbringing, is proud of the fight, and proud that he can stand up for his race. When Simeon is thrown in jail, his father comes to retrieve him and smooth over the situation. His father tells Simeon not to make a "mountain out of a molehill" when Simeon tells his father the basis of the fistfight (133). As shown by this incident, when the black middle class runs into racism, they do not take it seriously. They perceive speaking out against discrimination as bad manners. West notes how they want so desperately to believe that because they are middle class, they are exempt from racism.

Another element of the race issue in the novel involves immigrants, especially the Irish. Early in the novel, Cleo visits the home of a Mr. Van Ryper, which she wants to rent. Cleo assumes the house in Cambridge, but later, much to her chagrin, discovers it is in Roxbury. She wants her family to be the first black family in Cambridge, and there are already a few blacks living in Roxbury. When Cleo asks Mr. Van Ryper if he is prejudiced against blacks, he reacts with incredulity. However, he later confesses to being prejudiced against the Irish, stating, "The Irish present a threat to us entrenched

Bostonians. They did not come here in chains or by special invitation. So I disclaim any responsibility for them, and reserve the right to reject them. I do reject them, and refuse to live in a neighborhood they are rapidly overrunning" (47). This reflects the position of blacks and immigrants in Boston society. The prejudice of the WASPy Mr. Van Ryper against Irish immigrants mirrors the prejudices of middle-class blacks against their lower-class counterparts. In Chapter 30, Vicky, Charity's daughter, uses the Irish in order to stir Cleo's pride. When the girls want new Easter dresses but there is not enough money, Vicky says, "The Irish children are going to get everything new…They brag and we have to brag back. If we don't get everything we told them we were going to get, they'll make fun of us" (306). As mentioned in the Introduction, tension existed between blacks and immigrants in the workplace. Here, we see this same tension occurring among children. Northern blacks and the Irish were both viewed with skepticism, as both met with the scorn of the WASPs.

Being in the black middle class meant that education was a priority. West notes, Simeon "ranked among the top ten in all his classes, because colored men must be among the first in any field if they are not to be forever lost among the mediocre millions" (128). Simeon, like Du Bois, attended Harvard. One mark of the black middle class was the opportunity for education. But education is not completely tension-free. Blacks have to work twice as hard in order to get ahead. They face the attitudes of whites, who think they are going to be lazy and not work hard. Those in the Du Boisian Talented Tenth must be head and shoulders above their white counterparts in order to be reasonably successful.

The novel's gender issues center around Cleo Judson. Cleo has a very wooden relationship with her husband, since she does not marry her husband for love; she marries him because he can give her economic stability and entrée into the black middle class. Like Edith Wharton's heroines, Cleo uses her marriage to achieve a social position.

As stated before, Cleo Judson is an ambitious woman, who effortlessly lies to anyone she can in order to get what she wants; her worst fear is that she "would run out of ways to skin the cat" (54-55). She seeks relationships with her sisters, although she does this through lies and manipulations, and in the process she ruins her sisters' marriages. Cleo's ambition stems from her desire to establish herself and her family in the society of the black middle class. In an article entitled "Rachel," West writes of her mother, "My mother was the dominant figure by the force of her vitality and by the indisputable fact that she had the right to rule the roof that my father provided" (168). This further alludes to comparisons between Cleo Judson and Rachel West. Cleo rules the roost of the Judson household, dominating her husband and her sisters.

In a feminist critique of the novel, "The Feminism of Dorothy West's *The Living Is Easy*: A Critique of the Limitations of the Female Sphere through Performative Gender Roles," Pamela Peden Sanders analyzes the non-traditional gender roles seen in West's novel. One passage merits quoting at length.

> Through the character of Cleo, West offers a critique of the American patriarchal society with its long-established dichotomy: an unlimited public/business sphere for men and a limited private/domestic sphere for women. West subversively pursues the feminist critique by allowing her female protagonist deliberately to cast off limiting feminizing gender traits (passivity, domestic interests, and

cooperation) and to instead 'perform' masculine gender traits (aggressiveness, competitiveness, and business/economic interests). (345)

Cleo does not perform gender roles typically attributed to women at this time, one of which is embracing motherhood. She does not seem to possess a "maternal instinct." Cleo prefers to finagle her way into polite society and mold her loved ones into what she wants them to be. She shows interest in business arenas, as seen in when she visits the apartment her family intends to rent and then conning her husband out of money. Sanders also notes that Cleo defies the stereotypical roles ascribed to black women in literature at this time: the doting "Mammy" figure or the highly sexed "Jezebel" (346). Another stereotype is the "tragic mulatto" trope, mentioned later in this chapter. While she is not the adoring, cooperative, and maternal "Mammy" figure, she is also not the highly sexual stereotype seen in some novels, like Carl Van Vechten's *Nigger Heaven* (1926). She represents a "third" space for black women in literature—a woman who is unbound by stereotype and convention. For all her faults, Cleo, in many ways, is a maverick in terms of black female characters. She has the kind of ambition that is usually admired in men, although she at times uses it for the wrong purposes. However, she uses her tools in the only arena that she can. Instead of seeing Cleo as a broken character at the end of the novel, Peden Sanders claims "she will be able to rebuild her life as a woman and as a human who has reached a new level of self definition, beyond limiting, binary gender definitions" (346). Peden Sanders, then, does not see Cleo as a character that has gotten her comeuppance. She sees the ending as a hopeful one.

Peden Sanders further claims, "By showing Cleo's resentment of her limited domestic sphere, West is showing how urban middle- and upper-class blacks who are

modeling themselves after the dominant class—upper-class whites—make the same mistake in their treatment of women that upper-class white men do" (346). Once again, West offers a commentary on how black middle-class society seeks to emulate the customs and mores of white society—and the downsides to this behavior. As a result, black women not only face racism from white society but sexism from within their own community. Therefore, Cleo has to exhibit her "masculine" behaviors in another arena. One of Cleo's motives for wanting to have her sisters and their children living with her is that she has the need to be the boss. Since she cannot do this in a public arena, as her husband can, she has to do it in a private one.

According to Mary Helen Washington, "Cleo connects sexuality to women's repression and refuses any kind of sexual life, preferring instead emotional intimacy with her sisters and their children" ("Darkened Eye" 37). Cleo sees sexual intimacy as submission to her husband—and Cleo does not want to submit. She sees "normal" marriage behaviors as limiting—and she is correct, considering the time period. At the time that the novel is set, the Nineteenth Amendment, giving women the right to vote, has not yet been ratified.

Although she uses her marriage as a means of obtaining a better class position, she does not subscribe to the "typical" marriage activities, which include having sex with one's spouse. We are led to believe that the only time Cleo has sex with Bart is when the two conceive Judy. Again, Cleo subverts stereotypes of black female characters. She is a bit of a cold fish, the antithesis of the Jezebel.

West, then, critiques gender roles in early twentieth century society and in the black middle class. Cleo Judson is a unique heroine—she subverts the many, whore, and

the tragic mulatto tropes seen in portrayals of black women in literature. West critiques Cleo's behavior but is reluctant to outright condemn her protagonist. Cleo's behavior and her never-say-die attitude would serve her well in the business arena. However, because of limitations on women, she cannot participate in this area.

As with some of the race issues in the novel, the class issues are intraracial. West writes about the unique position of middle-class blacks in Cleo's society, who tried to emulate the society of upper-middle-class whites:

> Cleo's friends who could afford maids had never been able to get colored help. The experienced domestics from the South could not be induced to work for people of color, feeling a natural embarrassment at the scorn to be found in their own stratum that they would use the back doors of a social group who could not use the front doors of their former employers. (*Living* 100)

This passage reveals the curiousness of the situation of the black elite. Those in this society desire maids, although there is the peculiarity of black maids employed by black people. Many black women in the early twentieth century were employed as maids. West, thus, presents an alternate view than, for example, Ann Petry's *The Street*. Petry's heroine, Lutie Johnson, works as a domestic for an upper-class white couple.

Cleo, like many of her class, discriminates against lower-class blacks, which sometimes includes Southern blacks who recently emigrated to the North with the Great Migration, as noted in the Introduction. When she goes to look at the house of Mr. Van Ryper, she regards the man's black maid coolly and talks down to her. West writes, "The maid's face froze. She knew these stuck-up northern niggers. Thought they were better than southern niggers. Well, all of them looked alike to the white man. Let this high-

yaller woman go down South and she'd find out" (42). Cleo believes she is better than the maid because she is of a higher economic class. This kind of intraracial prejudice on the basis of class undermines equality among blacks that was necessary at this time in America. Mr. Van Ryper's maid realizes that, to some white people (namely Southern ones), it does not matter that one is a member of the black middle class and therefore seemingly well behaved. Below the Mason-Dixon line, class differences that existed in the North are erased, and all that is seen is color. To some white people (Northern and Southern), a nigger is a nigger.

Several lines later, Cleo tells Judy within earshot of the maid, "Always remember…that good manners put you in the parlor and poor manners keep you in the kitchen" (43). When an embarrassed Judy tells her mother that the maid heard her, Cleo tells her daughter, "Well I expected her to hear….I certainly wasn't talking to you." (43). Cleo feels that she needs to remind the maid of her "place." This attitude is similar to that of whites who feel they must remind "uppity" blacks of their "subordinate" position. Cleo's attitude is consistent with that of blacks in middle-class society. She puts emphasis on manners, believing that good manners are the key to uplift. However, she neglects to realize that the maid is working hard, arguably harder than Cleo, to achieve her goals.

As stated before, West's novel tells the story of the Binney family, other members of the black middle class. The opinions of Mr. Binney, the father, also reflect those of this Bostonian society:

> Mr. Binney was completely outraged by the ever-increasing concourse of dark faces within the sacred precincts of his street….In his wildest nightmare he had never imagined that his house would be a mecca for lower-class Negroes. They

> were ruining the character of the street. They were making it a big road. The worst of all was that Simeon, who was being so carefully brought up, who scarcely knew the difference between white and colored, whose closest friends had always been white, was making friends with the little black urchins who boldly hung around the back door in the hope of enticing him away from his playmates on the front stoop. (126)

The concerns of Mr. Binney reflect the concerns of this society. They resent black Southerners and other "lower class" blacks that "invade" their neighborhoods because they feel that the lower-class blacks bring down the quality of the community. As a result, they perform their version of "white flight" and leave the neighborhoods. In their pursuit of not living around other blacks, the "Binneys moved to Cambridge. They were the first on their street to move away because of the rapid encroachment of Negroes. They began the general exodus. Mr. Binney could say with pride, right up to the day of his death, that he had never lived on a street where other colored people resided" (128). To Mr. Binney, his goals of keeping his position in the black elite are attained by not living among other blacks. Thus, he is alienating himself from his community in order to achieve social status. Mr. Binney's actions represent the ways in which class differences and discrimination based on these differences undermine racial unity. Mr. Binney also bad-mouths Southern blacks to his son, saying that since "that riffraff has come up from the South, their men have run after white women" (133). Mr. Binney's scorn reflects the scorn of white America and shows how members of the black elite sought to recreate some of the customs of white America.

Simeon Binney, unlike his father, has a social conscience and is concerned with the plight of blacks in America. He struggles to keep his pro-black newspaper in circulation and feels that "if he could not keep the six-page sheet alive, at least he had established the need for a Negro newspaper. It passed around from hand to hand in the South End" (134). Simeon's newspaper is more proletariat than bourgeois; the young man wants the black middle class to "face the facts of their second-class citizenship" (134). He understands that all blacks, no matter what class, are subject to discrimination in America. The majority of middle-class blacks, however, only read Simeon's paper for the society column, and they disapprove of Simeon's habit of writing about the "race problem" and what was going on below the Mason-Dixon Line—which includes lynching, de jure segregation, and complete disenfranchisement from American life. They feel that the problems "could be resolved quite easily" by having the "nice colored people…come North" (135). Here, West reveals the delusions of Northern middle-class blacks. She shows how Northern blacks were not interested in hearing the problems of their less-fortunate Southern counterparts. They are seemingly too busy securing their place in their own elite society to care about what is happening to those who are not as lucky. Simeon wants those in this group to realize that, should these light-skinned blacks travel past the Mason-Dixon Line, their money, light skin color, and good manners would not matter to an angry white mob. His character demonstrates that this society was capable of producing people with a social conscience. Here, West shows her empathic feelings about the importance and impact of newspapers and magazines on the black community, drawing upon her experience with *Challenge* and *New Challenge*.

According to Mary Helen Washington, in “Remembering a Proper Black Bostonian,” West based the figure of Simeon Binney on Monroe Trotter, “whose militant journalism and outspokenness got him jailed for opposing the politics of Booker T. Washington” (13). Washington calls Simeon the “most admirable character” in the novel and notes that “African Americans who worked nobly on behalf of civil rights earned Dorothy’s greatest respect” (13). West shows that some individuals in this society are concerned with more than an address in the right neighborhood. Thus, while she points out the benefits of being in the Northern black middle class, she sees how this can cloud the judgment of some in this class.

The Living Is Easy is one of the few novels published by black women in 1940s. West presents one of the most memorable black female characters in literature. Cleo is not a likeable character but West does not completely condemn her behavior. She does, however, show the negative aspects of some of Cleo’s and the black middle class’s ideals. *The Wedding* also presents a unique view of race, class, and gender.

The Wedding

Although *The Living Is Easy* has not exactly been given a wealth of scholarly attention, it has received more than *The Wedding*, published in 1995. *The Wedding* is ostensibly about the union of Shelby Coles and Meade Howell. Shelby comes from a light skinned, upper-class black family that vacations on Martha’s Vineyard in a black community called the Oval. Meade is a white jazz musician. During the course of *The Wedding*, Shelby and Meade never actually get married. But as the novel unfolds, the reader learns the complex inner lives and history of the Coles family. The novel ranges

chronologically from the end of the Civil War to the 1950s. We see the ancestors of the family, which includes former slaves, the daughter of a Confederate general, and a mulatto preacher. On the eve of Shelby's wedding, she is tempted by Lute McNeil, a man of new money that is viewed with skepticism by the Oval.

The Wedding is set in 1953, a year before *Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, which outlawed segregation in public schools, was passed by the Supreme Court, and two years before the Montgomery Bus Boycott, considered to be the inaugural event of the Civil Rights Movement. At a time in American history when many blacks did not have either racial or economic equality, those in *The Wedding* know no such misfortune. However, West shows how the black "American Dream," economic comfort along with racial equality, is not as simple as it appears. The novel demonstrates that money and a home on the Vineyard do not guarantee a stress-free life. West presents a complicated vision of what blacks considered to be the "American Dream:" she admires the black elite but also looks at them with a jaundiced eye. By examining the inner lives of the Coles family, West shows a three-dimensional portrait of a family and a society. As with *The Living Is Easy*, West's treatment of race, class, and gender reveals the unique position of the black upper classes.

As with *The Living Is Easy*, West focuses on intraracial prejudices in *The Wedding*. She details Corinne Coles's fear of dark skin "polluting" her family, which is the reason why she does not have another child after the births of Liz and Shelby. West notes, "Chance had smiled…and given her two daughters in her likeness, but Hannibal's [Corinne's dark-skinned father] half of her makeup still had to be heard from, and the chance of that pattern continuing unbroken was too slight for her to risk a third try at

bearing Clark a son" (66). Corinne is afraid of bearing a dark-skinned child and ruining the façade of this nearly white family. This shows the fear of dark skin in the society of the black elite. The black elite wants to be similar to white society, and prejudice against darker-skinned people is one dubious characteristic from white America they seek to emulate.

West further highlights the tricky world of shade politics in the society of the black elite in an episode from Shelby's childhood, the moment when she "discovered" that she was "colored." Shelby gets lost in the community, and alerts go out for a "missing colored child," although Shelby has blonde hair and looks Caucasian. West writes, "The sickness of the search was that so many people saw Shelby, but they were not looking for such a child. They were looking for a colored child, which meant they were looking for what they knew to be a colored child—dark skin, dark hair, and Negroid feature" (62). This highlights the fluidity of the category of "race." Shelby looks like a white girl, but because of racial laws in America, she is considered to be black.

In "The Hawaiian Alternative to the One-Drop Rule" from *American Mixed Race*, F. James Davis comments on the racial laws that arose after Reconstruction, which are important to consider when analyzing race in the novel. He states, "During the Reconstruction years in the devastated South, the legislatures and courts of South Carolina, Louisiana, and some other states limited the definition of black persons to those with one-fourth, one-eighth, or some other fraction of black ancestry. In cases of doubt, however, the one-drop rule increasingly prevailed" (121). It is critical to remember that the plaintiff in *Plessy vs. Ferguson* (which affirmed "separate but equal"), Homer Plessy, was an "octoroon," or someone with one-eighth black ancestry. These laws were created

in order to protect ideas of whiteness. The "mulatto" population that arose during slavery clouded white America's notions of "black" and "white." In order to preserve whiteness and prevent the "sullying" of white America, those of mixed race were said to be black. West's novel, however, shows what a slippery term "race" is. If someone looks "white," like Shelby does, should he or she be considered white? And how much "black" blood does a person need to have in order to be considered "black?" And what about Shelby's children, who Gram thinks will be white? Will they be considered white or black, because their mother is considered to be black? West raises intriguing questions about race. The fact that the novel was published in 1995 makes these questions even more relevant. Even in this post-Civil Rights Movement and multicultural society, we still grapple with the terms "black" and "white" and what they mean. Liz even comments on these race laws to Gram, who refuses to touch Liz's brown daughter Laurie: "No matter how white the rest of us are, we're just as colored as Laurie. It's your race that says so" (54). Seemingly, the only person who is happy about Shelby's marriage is her great-grandmother, Gram, who reasons that, because Shelby has so little "black" blood, any children she and Meade have will be white.

The history of the Coles family reflects interracial issues. Corinne is the product of an interracial marriage—her father Hannibal, the son of an ex-slave, was married to Josephine, the daughter of Gram. Also, Preacher Coles, Clark's grandfather, was the product of the all-too-familiar scenario—he was a product of the rape of his mother by her white master. This is essential because these interracial couplings, although they were often not consensual, introduced issues of skin shade into American society. From

these sorts of unions, which originated during slavery, came the color consciousness that still is present and a factor in the lives of the Coles family.

Furthermore, the novel centers around an interracial marriage—between Shelby and Meade. Not only are Shelby's parents upset at her choice of groom, Meade's parents are also upset that their son is marrying a black woman, no matter how light-skinned she is. They refuse to come to their son's wedding because of this. Although Shelby looks white, she is apparently not "white" enough to appease her future in-laws. Again, the one-drop rule comes into play.

Unlike some black female characters in literature, such as Fanny Hurst's *Imitation of Life* (1933), Shelby is not a tragic mulatto, nor is her mother or her sister. She does not attempt to pass in order to marry Meade. At one point in the novel, Liz suggests that Shelby pass if she is really worried about any discrimination her children with Meade would face. Shelby reacts with incredulity. "You have to be kidding," she says to her sister (212). Shelby is proud of her blackness (what little she has) and seems willing to face any opposition to her union. Unlike Helga Crane, Nella Larsen's heroine from *Quicksand* (1928), Shelby Coles is not a tragic mulatto. Helga Crane is torn between white and black worlds, never sure of where she fits.

The Wedding does not feature a strong character such as Cleo Judson, but the novel does highlight gender issues facing women in the black elite. Only through their unexpected unions can Liz and Shelby show that they have some individuality. The men whom they marry are not the kinds of men that they were groomed to marry.

Also, gender issues arise in Lute McNeil's view of Shelby. Lute is on his third marriage to a white woman and is the father of three daughters. Lute thinks of Shelby as a

prize, as a token of this elite society. This is reminiscent of Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* (1904), in which the main character Lily Bart is seen only as a beautiful object. Lute gazes upon Shelby several times before he actually talks to her. By subjecting her to the male gaze, he establishes her as an object in his mind. Not only does Lute McNeil see Shelby as a sexual object, he also sees his white wives as sexual objects.

Shelby's marriage is upsetting to her father, Clark, who feels that Shelby may be marrying Meade because she is afraid of black men. Clark does not want his daughter to get married for the wrong reasons, as he feels he did. Clark states:

> But I've never seen you give your trust to a colored man, and I can't help but think that maybe that's because you saw in the one you know best a man who can't be trusted. And I've never seen you give your love to a colored man, and I can't help but think that maybe that's because the man who should be the most important man in your life never found time to show you the love he felt. (201)

Shelby's father believes that his lack of a loving relationship with Shelby's mother is the reason that she does not give her attention to black men and chooses not to marry one. To Shelby, her father represents some of the bad qualities about men in the black elite, who marry women not for love but for social status and think nothing of committing adultery. Shelby has seen how her father treats women and connects this behavior with upper-class black men. Shelby knows that her father has been unfaithful to her mother, that their marriage is one of convenience, and Clark is afraid that his behavior towards women has caused his daughter to distrust black men.

The position of Corinne, Liz, and Shelby is similar to that of their white counterparts at this time. They do not have to worry about getting a job. The main issues

they deal with are as wives and mothers. Corinne was groomed to be a beautiful object and to marry a respectable man. Her daughters are also groomed to do this. This does not allow the women many chances for expression. Liz intends to be a doctor but does not finish med school and marries Linc and has his child:

> Liz was just beginning her internship at the hospital where Linc was in heart research. That Liz had entered medicine was indeed in keeping with the Coles tradition. Since Clark and Corinne had no son to propagate the faith, Liz had always known that she, the elder daughter, could follow no other course. After her marriage to Linc, however, Liz had given up medicine, choosing the more traditional roles of wife and mother instead. (91)

Liz eschews a career as a doctor in favor of "traditional" roles for women at this time, although she feels that it is her duty to be the doctor that a son would have been. This differs slightly from Cleo Judson's view of marriage and motherhood. Shelby, too, does not seem to have a job. In analyzing the roles of these characters, it is important to remember what many black women were doing in 1953. Many black women did not have a choice about whether or not to work—they had to. Also, in this society, there were not many avenues for women to professionalize. The only respectable career choices for women in this society were to be a teacher or a nurse. The gender issues these women deal with are more comparable to those that 1950s white women cope with—their only means of value is to be a good wife and mother. The contemporary female characters in *The Wedding* are locked into the sexism that exists in this society—another result of how upper-class blacks seek to replicate the customs of white America. The women in this society would probably relate to Betty Friedan's *The Feminine*

Mystique (1963), about how women are groomed only to be wives and mothers and to find fulfillment solely in these roles.

Gender roles are also key in analyzing the position of Isaac Coles's wife, known only as "Schoolteacher." She is almost a slumlord (or lady), owning buildings populated with Southern transplants who arrived in New York due to the Great Migration. She does this because she needs some sort of outlet. Melisse, Hannibal's mother, also is able to resist gender roles. She does this by having a business at a time when women did not normally do that sort of thing. The women who laid the foundation for the black elite did so by subverting gender roles.

Because the plot centers around the black elite, class plays a significant role in the novel. West writes about the privileged position of the well-off Coles family from the beginning:

> The Clark Coles came closest to being as real as their [white] counterparts. They had money, enough not to only spend but to save. They were college-bred, of good background. They lived graciously. Two respectful maids had served them for years, living proof that they were used to servants. If Clark and Corinne had not slept together for years, even their daughters could not have demanded more discretion in their outward behavior. (4)

Early on, we learn about the marriage of Clark and Corinne, who do not illustrate the term "happily married." Clark is not in love with his wife, but marries her because she seems like a good match for someone of his high social class and light skin complexion. Clark actually prefers darker women (like his mistress Rachel), and Corinne, although she is a snob towards darker skinned people in her public life, prefers darker men and has

affairs with them in her private life. Although the Coles family is wealthy and is able to "live graciously," there is a serious problem in the marriage between Clark and Corinne.

As stated before, the Coles family is wealthy. Liz tells Shelby, "Just because it's 1953, not 1853, doesn't mean it's that much less dangerous to be colored, and when we take the new car out I get more looks from our own kind than from whites. It's easier to hate your own kind for what they have than to hate somebody far away for what you don't" (99). Liz knows that she is the envy of lower-class blacks. But with this envy comes resentment. Whereas in *The Living Is Easy* middle-class blacks were resentful of their lower-class counterparts, in *The Wedding,* we see the opposite, showing further separation between the rich and the working-class.

As previously stated, the marriage decisions of the two Coles daughters, Liz, the older one, and her younger sister Shelby, defy the standards of the Ovalites: "That Liz had married a dark man and given birth to a daughter who was tinged with her father's darkness had raised the eyebrows of the Oval. But at least she had married a man in medicine, in keeping with the family tradition that all men were created to be doctors, whose titles made introductions so easy and self-explanatory" (4). The light-skinned Coles family and the society that they move in adhere to a strict code of skin color. Those who are darker-skinned than the people in the Oval's social circle are ostracized, unless they can make up with money what they lack in the "proper skin shade." Therefore, the fact that Liz's husband is a doctor makes him redeemable in the eyes of the Ovalites. Liz's sister, Shelby, also faces criticism at her choice of mate.

Of Shelby's impending marriage, West writes, "But how Shelby, who could have had her pick of the best of breed in her own race, could marry outside her race, outside

her father's profession, and throw her life away on a nameless, faceless white man who wrote jazz, a frivolous occupation without office, title, or foreseeable future, was beyond the Oval's understanding" (4). The black Coles family is upset that their daughter is marrying an undistinguished white man. Since Meade is not a lawyer or a doctor, but a jazz musician, the Coles family is skeptical of the young man and wonders how Shelby's marriage will reflect on them in society. Making one's career as a jazz musician is not a respectable career. Shelby was groomed to marry a man like her father—well educated and professional.

The issues of race, class, and gender merge in the final pages of the novel, where we see the disastrous consequences of Lute's pursuit of Shelby. Lute's (third) white wife Della visits him on the Vineyard, much to his chagrin, as her presence blows his cover—he had omitted the fact that he was still married in his attempt at seducing Shelby. Lute, who sees women as expendable, slaps his wife during an argument. Lute angrily drives away with Della and does not see his daughter Tina run in front of the car. She was "unseen on one side of Lute's moving car just as Lute suddenly saw [a] dog on the other side. Lute swerved to avoid the dog, and at the same time he heard Tina's wrenching scream, a sound he would hear forever" (238). Here, West reveals how scheming and lies in order to be a part of this society can have horrible effects. West's criticism comes at Lute's expense and at the society he wants to be a part of. The author seems to wonder if his envy of the black elite and deceit in order to be a part of it are worth it.

When Shelby comes upon the scene, she sees the results of Lute's lies, which is Tina's death:

> In a single glance, she absorbed the scene in front of her—Lute's white wife huddled inside the car, Lute with his daughters, two alive and one dead. A roiling fireball of rage and grief engulfed her, and she sank to her knees, hands drawn involuntarily to her mouth. The scales had fallen from her eyes. All of Lute's words about remaining true to one's race, all his subtle slurs, his sly digs, all were lies, pretexts. All of his deception and envy had led to this: the death of an innocent. (239-240)

Shelby learns an important lesson: "Color was a false distinction; love was not" (240). Lute had told Shelby that interracial marriages were impossible. Shelby sees how this society's (and indeed America's) obsession with color can lead people to make decisions that are unhealthy. She also sees how class aspirations can become perverted into ruthless ambition (of course, this is reminiscent of Cleo Judson) and the effects of this ambition. Any second thoughts she had about not marrying Meade just because he is white are erased. Meade, although he is not wealthy, loves Shelby Coles for who she is, not because she has a rich father. Shelby is not the only person who learns that color is a false distinction—Gram, who is full of contempt for blacks, does as well. The novel ends with her holding Liz's baby Laurie, who she had previously refused to hold because the child is dark-skinned.

The Wedding, then, reveals the complex past and present of the black elite. Gram, the daughter of a Confederate general and a matriarch of sorts in the family, is a reminder that history is always present. West believes it is important for a group of people to remember where they came from. She shows how the black elite came from humble beginnings: Hannibal, Corinne's father, was the son of a slave; Isaac's parents were a

preacher and a washerwoman. A people, West seems to believe, must not forget their roots. West's use of history also reflects the history of black America—miscegenation, emancipation, the Great Migration, and the effect of education on the black community. In analyzing the literature of black women, the issues of race, class, and gender arise.

In her two novels, West presents a complicated view of the black middle class and proves that having the American Dream is not as simple as one may think. *The Wedding* was published forty-seven years after *The Living Is Easy.* During this time, West's style greatly improved. *The Wedding* highlights more themes concerning the black community than does *The Living Is Easy*, but West's first novel is still noteworthy. Both novels provide a glimpse into the society of a privileged group of black Americans and the two novels show West's keen eye at analyzing the human condition.

Chapter 2: West's Short Stories and Non-Fiction

Aside from writing *The Living Is Easy* and *The Wedding,* Dorothy West also published many short stories and non-fiction pieces during the several decades of her career, beginning with "The Typewriter" in 1926. There has not been a wealth of scholarly attention given to these short stories. In 1996, a collection of West's short stories was published, entitled *The Richer, The Poorer: Stories, Sketches, and Reminiscences*. In this chapter, I will discuss "Mammy," "An Unimportant Man," "The Penny," and "The Richer, The Poorer." In these short stories, the reader can see West's predilection for writing about the complexities of race and economics, which she also explored at length in her two novels, although her short stories do not just concern the black middle and upper classes. West also wrote creative non-fiction, one example of which is "Fond Memories of a Black Childhood," in which the author again discusses issues concerning race and class.

"Mammy"

West published the 1940 short story "Mammy" in *Opportunity*. The story's main character is a New York City welfare investigator in the 1930s Depression Era (West at one point worked as a welfare investigator and was part of the Works Progress Administration, a program that arose during the Depression). The fictional investigator is sent to investigate the situation of a Mrs. Mason to determine if Mrs. Mason qualifies for relief. Mrs. Mason is called "Mammy" by the woman she works for, Mrs. Coleman. On her way to Mrs. Coleman's apartment, the welfare worker encounters a black elevator boy who tells her, in the presence of a white woman who is also on the elevator, that she must take the service entrance. The investigator is surprised because she "had almost never run into Negroes who

did not treat her with respect" (*The Richer, The Poorer* 45). When she encounters him again, he tells her that he must play a certain "role" in which he has to treat other blacks as second-class citizens in order to keep his job (in reference to the white woman who was in the elevator with them before, the boys says, "I was just puttin' on to please her") (48). He looks for empathy, telling her, "You're colored like me. You ought to understand. I was only doing my job. I got to eat same as white folks, same as you" (49). The boy does not want to lose his job because there are not many opportunities for good employment for blacks at this time.

The investigator, who remains nameless throughout the story, is originally led to believe that Mrs. Mason was relieved of her job because she was unable to perform her usual duties. However, she learns from Mrs. Coleman that Mammy quit her position after Mrs. Coleman's grandchild was stillborn. Mrs. Coleman states, "She is just like one of the family; You do not know how dear a mammy is to a southerner. I nursed at Mammy's breast. I cannot remember a day in my life without her" (46). Mrs. Coleman then asks the investigator to demand that Mammy return to her household.

When she visits Mrs. Mason, the investigator attempts to persuade the woman to return to her position, although the investigator is turned off by Mrs. Coleman's treatment of Mrs. Mason—Mrs. Coleman views Mrs. Mason as an object and not as a person. Mrs. Mason, to the shock of the investigator, claims that the stillborn baby was murdered. While in Mrs. Mason's apartment, the welfare investigator notices a picture of a woman who she thinks is Mrs. Coleman; Mrs. Mason states that the woman in the picture is her daughter. With this information, we are led to believe that Mrs. Coleman is Mrs. Mason's daughter, that Mrs. Coleman and her daughter are passing, and that she had the baby killed because the

baby was dark-skinned. Despite this information, the investigator still intends to send Mrs. Mason back to the family. She asks Mrs. Mason to understand, "This is [her] job" (52).

The black social worker is middle-class and unable to empathize with the working-class Mrs. Mason. As in *The Living Is Easy*, middle-class blacks are unable to relate to the trials and situations of lower-class blacks. Mrs. Mason, for her part, is betrayed by her people in two instances—by Mrs. Coleman, if the woman is her daughter, and by the social worker, who is supposed to look out for her best interests. The social worker is unable to see comparisons between herself and the elevator boy who snubs her early in the story. The boy tells her that by treating her in a condescending manner, he is "just doing his job," to which she takes exception. This, however, is the same excuse that the social worker uses with Mrs. Mason when she intends to make her return to her old job. However, both these jobs come at a cost, as they perpetuate the discrimination of white America against blacks. Sharon Jones claims, "The story…refutes assessments of West as a writer only devoted to exploring the black bourgeoisie or Talented Tenth […] in 'Mammy,' she draws a compelling portrait of a working-class black woman" (129). Mammy does not have the wealth and privilege of her upper-class counterparts, but West nevertheless portrays her as a character with feelings and opinions. She thus stands in opposition to the jovial Mammy figures in literature. The story, set during the Depression, shows how difficult it was for African Americans to be financially stable and to support themselves. West is aware of blacks, then, other than those in the middle and upper classes, and shows the complexity of Mrs. Mason's situation, both racially and economically, during the Depression.

Although West highlights certain economic/class issues, she provides a provocative portrayal of race as well. The ending of "Mammy" is ambiguous. We are led to believe that

Mrs. Mason is Mrs. Coleman's mother, but this is not absolutely clear or confirmed. In this way, West offers a commentary on the ambiguous nature of race. Race, no pun intended, is not a black and white issue. As seen in *The Wedding*, there are many degrees of skin shade that make the separation between "blacks" and "whites" a difficult one. The ambiguity in the story's ending shows that West is not as simplistic as some might think. It is also possible that Mrs. Coleman's son-in-law could have "black blood" as well. Also ambiguous is the title of "Mammy." The term could be either a colloquial name for someone's mother or an actual nursemaid/servant. "Mammy" is reminiscent of Kate Chopin's short story "Désirée's Baby" in which a man accuses his wife, the titular character, of having black blood because their baby is dark-skinned. He makes his wife leave and she later commits suicide. He he discovers that he is the one who belongs to "the race that is cursed with the brand of slavery" (Chopin 247). West's story is also reminiscent of Charles Chestnutt's "Her Virginia Mammy." In this work, a white dance instructor named Clara meets a woman who was on the ship on which Clara's birth parents died. Eventually, it is revealed that the black woman is Clara's mother—unbeknownst to Clara. These stories highlight the ambiguity of race and of racial recognition and self-affiliation. Those who dismiss West as solely a portrayer of a simple and one dimensional side of black life learn from "Mammy" that they are mistaken.

"An Unimportant Man"

Like "Mammy," "An Unimportant Man" reveals issues concerning a lower-class individuals. First published in 1928, "An Unimportant Man" is the story of Zeb Jenkins, a native southerner who travels north with his family. He is strongly encouraged by his mother to be a lawyer, but despite his mother's ambition, Zeb feels torn. On the one hand, he has a

vision of himself "in oratorical pose—a Darrow for his race, eloquently pleading a black man's cause" (*The Richer, The Poorer* 139). However, he knows that his desire to be a lawyer is not truly his own—he is only doing what his mother wants him to do. It is really her ambition that fuels him and not his own. Zeb also cannot stand his wife Minnie (who is reminiscent of his mother) and thinks back to his younger days in the South when his only ambition was to marry a young woman named Wanda. He has, it seems, not enough of the dream or the drive to achieve the goal of becoming a lawyer.

In the course of the story, Zeb meets a young man named Parker, who represents Zeb's unfulfilled potential. Zeb helps Parker complete his education, and the young man passes the bar exam. Zeb himself at first fails, but passes on the third try. He is then faced with another quandary: his bright daughter Essie tells him that she wants to be a dancer. Once again, Zeb is torn. He feels that "no one must ever…shape the course of Esther's life" (140). He was a victim of his mother's shaping his life, and he was not completely happy. He does not want his daughter to have the same fate. However, Zeb tells his daughter, "It's hard…for colored girls to do things that are beautiful, like acting in plays, or singing in op'ra, or dancing in ballets" (150). Zeb knows that, as a black woman, Essie, when she grows up, will have "two strikes" against her in the world, confronting both racism and sexism. Parker, Zeb's protégé, also has aspirations. He plans to "go just as high as a white man—and then just a little higher" (155). Parker, too, seems to want to be a "Darrow for his race" and is in more of a position to realize his dreams than is Zeb. Parker represents the black Americans who sought their success in professional fields—and who viewed this success in terms of white America.

At the end of the story, Zeb receives a letter that informs him that he has to retake his bar exams. To Zeb, this is the ultimate failure because he knows that if he takes the test again, he will probably fail. Being thirty-nine, he also feels that his best days are behind him. He then forces his own failed ambitions onto his daughter. She cannot be a dancer, he reasons, because "the race was too young, its achievements too few, for whimsical indulgence. It must not matter…what you desired…if sacrifice meant a forward step toward the freedom of [black] people" (160). The story ends with Zeb's prayer that he will live long enough and be able to work hard enough to make sufficient money to send his daughter to college—even if it is against her wishes. His mother's ambition is thus repeated with Zeb's ambition for his daughter.

Zeb's education and his belief in education as a means of uplift are reminiscent of the experiences of Hannibal and Isaac Coles in *The Wedding*. Education is viewed as a tool used to separate lower-class individuals from the middle class. Education equals respectability and is seen as a means of obtaining a better economic position. Zeb's chagrin at the thought that his daughter wants to be a dancer comes partly from the fact that he did not see this career choice as economically viable and respectable. His possible career as a lawyer equals financial security, which is synonymous with success.

Like Cleo Judson from *The Living Is Easy*, Zeb and his mother see their children as a means to an end. The middle-class ambitions of Cleo and Zeb (and Zeb's mother) are thrust upon their children. Zeb feels that his daughter must go to college in order to contribute toward the uplift of the race and to enable her to achieve middle-class status—an ambition that was inherited from his mother. Similarly, Cleo sees her daughter Judy as a future proper Boston lady and a potential representative of middle-class black womanhood, and she does

everything she can to make her daughter fit into this mold. Both Essie Jenkins and Judy Judson represent middle-class futures for their race. Also, both are intelligent young girls, showing West's affinity for self-aware children. Essie's desire to be a dancer and her father's reluctance show the emerging black middle class's skepticism at making one's career in the arts. A "respectable" black woman in black middle-class society does not become a dancer since this career was seen as vulgar. Pursuing education was seen as a more respectable endeavor than following the arts.

As seen in "Mammy," West highlights issues concerning race. Zeb feels that Essie "owed it to her race" not to become a dancer but, instead, should become educated and gain some form of useful employment. This attitude reflects the "New Negro" philosophy that was prevalent during the early twentieth century. The "New Negro" must be a credit to and a respectable representative of his/her race. In essence, there is no room for what one wants to do; one must somehow be a credit to one's race.

"The Penny"

In "The Penny," West once again returns to themes of money that she explored in *The Living Is Easy* ("The Penny" was published in 1941 in the *Daily News*). Like the family in "An Unimportant Man," and Mrs. Mason from "Mammy," the family in "The Penny" is lower class. The story, first published in 1941, features as its main character a six-year-old boy. West writes, "His father had brought home his piddling pay for his part-time job and dropped it into his mother's lap. His mother had counted it carefully with her customary sigh. As usual, there was never enough to last the week. Midway through the week there would not be food enough or fuel enough to carry them until next payday" (77). The family

clearly is among the working poor. The father is employed but is unable to provide fully for his family. The burden of not having enough money is felt explicitly. The boy, who like the welfare investigator from "Mammy" remains nameless throughout the story, knows all too well the oppression of being poor. West writes, "The little boy's stomach would growl in school. His face and faded shirt would show the scarcity of hot water and soap" (77). His father's job cannot pay enough to support completely the needs of his wife and son. Not surprisingly, the boy's mother and father seek refuge from their lives in the heated homes of others and in bars, respectively. One day, the boy is given a penny by his father, who hates to see his son go without while "other boys had baseball bats and boxing gloves, and milk and butter in their bellies" (78). On the way to the candy store, the little boy dreams of all the things he can buy with his penny. Unfortunately, before he gets there, he trips over a curb, and his precious penny rolls into the drain. As he is sitting on the curb wallowing in misery, Miss Hester Halsey, a middle-class woman who "had no patience with people who were poor" and considered them to be "shiftless," happens by (78). Seeing the bruise on the boy's face that was caused when he fell, Halsey mistakenly assumes that the boy's parents are abusing him. She knows the boy is from a lower-class family, a class which she associates with brutish behavior. The woman tries to get the six-year-old to admit to this supposed abuse. "Who hit you?" she asks (79). She offers him a penny if he will tell her the "truth" about his parents' supposed abuse. Responding only to the lure of money, the little boy tells the woman that his parents are abusing him. Miss Halsey is satisfied that her suspicions about lower-class people are confirmed, and she intends to report this supposed abuse. The boy, for his part, is temporarily satisfied because he once more has the coveted

penny. It is telling that the boy and his family remain nameless during the story—Miss Halsey is the person who winds up having the most impact in the story.

Sharon Jones notes, "The penny represents candy, money, and the economics of exchange, for the boy feels his penchant for candy and Miss Halsey satisfies her stereotypical notion of the poor as violent and abusive" (129). To the boy's father, the penny represents all the things that he feels his son is missing out on. For Miss Halsey, the penny represents a trade-off through which her opinions are confirmed. Miss Halsey is reminiscent of Simeon Binney's father's attitude of lower class blacks from *The Living Is Easy*. He believes that poor blacks are lazy and dirty. She is also similar to the welfare investigator in "Mammy." Both women allow class distinctions to cloud their judgments and are misguided in their actions. The victims are lower class people. Again, West does not limit herself to just writing about middle class black life or showing a sympathetic middle class character. Instead, she focuses on how little black middle class know of the hardships of their lower-class counterparts. She thus, as with her two novels, explores intraracism on the basis of class. This is significant because West has often been dismissed as just writing in the genteel tradition.

"The Richer, the Poorer"

"The Richer, the Poorer" takes a departure from themes of interracial and intraracial conflicts. The story, published in 1966, focuses on the lives of two sisters, Lottie and Bess, who come from a lower-class background. Lottie, from an early age, understands the importance of money. As a child, she observes her "parents' skimping and scraping" as they try to make ends meet (*The Richer, The Poorer* 53). She works as soon as she is old enough

to do so and saves what she earns. Her sister Bess is less concerned with wealth. She learns to enjoy life without having money; she "learned to skate on borrowed skates" and "rode a borrowed bicycle" (53). As an adult Bess marries a musician and travels with him all over the United States and Europe, staying in second-rate motels. West notes that the couple was "often in rags and never in riches" (54). Lottie originally intends to use the money she earns at a cashier's job to pay for college. Yet she eventually declines to do so, thinking that a steady income is worth more than the gamble of success or failure in college. Also, Sharon Jones claims that "Lottie eschews marriage in favor of working because she views housekeeping as a thankless job emotionally, spiritually, and financially" (129).

When the sisters are in their sixties, Bess's husband dies, and she moves in with Lottie. Lottie, for her part, spruces up her apartment and her appearance in preparation for Bess's arrival. Bess fails to notice these things but is just happy to see her sister and tells Lottie about her adventures in Europe. Her sister's stories were "*rich* with places and people, most of them lovely, all of them magnificent" (56 emphasis mine). Bess's "face reflected her telling, the joys and sorrows of her remembering, and above all, the love she lived by that enhanced the *poorest* peace, the humblest person" (56 emphasis mine). Lottie then realizes that her sister, who barely had two nickels to rub together, has had amazing experiences in her life without having a great deal of money. This is reflected in Bess's lack of attention to the money that Lottie has spent in making her apartment look presentable. Only at that point does Lottie begin to understand that wealth is not limited to money and realizes that she has what Sharon Jones calls a "spiritual, emotional, and psychological bankruptcy" (129). She, who hoarded her money, arrives at old age having shared her life with no one. The story

ends hopefully, however, with Lottie pondering the possibility of enjoying her remaining years.

Ostensibly, Lottie would be the "richer" sister and Bess the "poorer" one. From reading the story, it becomes plain that it is the other way around. West shows that true wealth can be found in sharing experiences and one's life with other people. West seems to believe that this mode of thinking would be useful to those in the black middle class, who equate money with happiness and security. West shows that economic issues are complicated. In this story, money is not seen as appealing. Whereas in other stories, West shows the characters' aspirations to have money, in "The Richer, the Poorer," she shows the other side of the issue. Sometimes, money does not equal happiness. West may have admired certain lower-class attributes toward life more than those of the middle-class.

In an interview with Deborah McDowell, West claimed that she based the characters of Lottie and Bess "on the relationship between [her] mother and one of her sisters" (276). She also notes that she does not ever describe the characters as black. "The Richer, the Poorer" thus differs sharply from other West stories in this manner—race does not play an obvious role. The author's main concern seems to be to show the dangers of being obsessed with material wealth. She proves that "poor" is only a state of mind—one can be lower-class and still have a good quality of life. As much as she is a product of the black middle class, West understands the simple dictum that money does not equal happiness. This attitude seems to be scarce, West implies, in the world of the black middle class. This story can be compared to *The Living Is Easy*, wherein Cleo Judson's attitude toward money is similar to Lottie's.

Lottie is also similar to the little boy from “The Penny” as far as her attitudes toward money. As a child, Lottie falls prey to the seductive power of money and what it represents. In the figure of Bess’s husband, West once again shows her respect and admiration for people who go into artistic fields. West’s story is similar to Gwendolyn Brooks’ poem “Sadie and Maud,” featuring two sisters who take divergent paths in their lives.

“Fond Memories of a Black Childhood”

The essential non-fiction piece of West’s Harlem Renaissance counterpart Zora Neale Hurston is “How it Feels to Be Colored Me,” in which she discusses her opinions of race and identity. For Dorothy West, “Fond Memories of a Black Childhood” serves the purpose of being a stellar addition to the Dorothy West literature collection. The essay is published in *The Richer, the Poorer*. West begins the essay with a humorous and significant statement: “We were always stared at. Whenever we went outside the neighborhood that knew us, we were inspected like specimens under glass. My mother prepared us. As she marched us down our front stairs, she would say what our smiles were on tiptoe to hear, ‘Come on children, let’s go out and drive the white folks crazy’” (171). The little black children, well dressed and groomed, would then proceed to do just that. These children disproved white people’s notion of black children in that they were not dirty and slovenly and prone to theft. West believed that her mother was “easing [their] entry into a world that out-ranked us and outnumbered us” (171). She wants the children to have pride in themselves, and “would never have forgiven herself for letting [their] spirits be crushed before [they] had learned to sheathe them with pride” (171). This pride that West’s mother instilled in the children was a powerful defense mechanism against the sometimes harsh world of white America that

would prefer the children to think of themselves as inferior. In this sense, the children used the gaze of white America to their advantage. They showed white people that it is difficult, if not impossible, to stereotype African Americans. West's mother differs from black mothers in other places in the country who no doubt told their children, upon leaving the house, to be careful not to upset any white people or not to look them in the eye.

West goes on to note her family's vacations on Martha's Vineyard in the community of Oak Bluffs. She recalls picking berries with her cousins, playing in the sand, listening to band concerts, and inviting people to have lemonade and cookies. She also notes that the groups of blacks who went to the beach "made a point of not bunching together" because "they did not want the whites to think they knew their place" (173). This behavior is similar to West's mother's attitude about pride, and both are admirable considering the approximate time period, the 1910s and 1920s. The blacks on the island were determined not to engage in the "bowing and scraping" that other blacks at this time were more or less forced to do. They were not going to grovel to white people. Their Southern counterparts probably would have found their behavior unthinkable. Southern blacks and no doubt many Northern ones were too often the victims of violence for not "knowing their place."

The first blacks on the island, West notes, were Bostonians. Later, New Yorkers came (the Coles family from *The Wedding* was from New York). She notes, "the children who came after us would take for granted a style of living that we were learning in stages" (173). West's generation knew how lucky and privileged they were to be able to go on vacation. The black middle class was, at this time, learning how to be the black middle class. One of West's childhood playmates on the Vineyard was Adam Clayton Powell who would grow up to be a member of Congress.

As stated in the Introduction, West had a lifelong connection with Martha's Vineyard. She lived there for the last half of her life and worked as a journalist for the *Vineyard Gazette*. What is unique about West's essay is that it shows a different experience of black life in the early twentieth century. These children are blessed with ambitious parents. They are different from their lower-class counterparts. This lifestyle was the kind that was envied by the family in "An Unimportant Man." West and her counterparts have families that did not have to suffer from a horribly poor education in a segregated school. They come from families that can afford to vacation on Martha's Vineyard—or that take vacations at all. The children also shatter white America's notion of black children. West's essay is reminiscent of *The Wedding* in that it explores a world of black leisure space. West features a black experience that does not involve poverty, blatant racism, lynching, or rape. Her black experiences is different from, for example, Richard Wright's in "The Ethics of Living Jim Crow," a work in which the author details harsh experiences living in the South. However, West's experience is no less important or authentic. In "Fond Memories," West recalls her childhood with nostalgia but is aware of her privileged position. She also applauds the mentality of her mother and others in this society, their insistence that they were not going to consider themselves as inferior to white people. In the essay, she highlights issues of race and class, and does so in her typically skillful manner. The essay could be profitably read as a companion piece to *The Wedding*. Also, as stated before, it is comparable in many ways to Hurston's "How It Feels to Be Colored Me," in which Hurston details her opinions about being black in America. Hurston writes, "Among the thousand white persons, I am a dark rock surged upon, overswept by a creamy sea. I am surged upon and overswept, but through

it all, I remain myself" (154). Like West, Hurston is able to resist the definitions of blackness that white America has designated for her.

As with previous short stories, this non-fiction piece again addresses the theme of economics. The economic position of West's family allows them a great deal of privilege. It allows them, for instance, to "drive the white folks crazy." Being middle class is considered to be a good thing here, unlike in "Mammy" and the social worker, "The Penny," and Miss Halsey, and "The Richer, the Poorer" and Lottie. The people are not haughty about money (perhaps they are trying to imitate Boston Brahmins in this regard). They appreciate their position, although West notes that the next generation of Martha's Vineyard blacks took for granted what her generation was just getting used to. Also, as in "Mammy" and "An Unimportant Man," West addresses the subject of race. The welfare investigator from "Mammy" perpetuates the oppression of white people by sending Mrs. Mason back to Mrs. Coleman's house. Miss Halsey's attitude toward the little boy from "The Penny" is similar to the stereotypical attitudes of white America in regards to black children. In sharp contrast, in "Fond Memories," the goal of West's mother is to subvert the attitudes of white America. Also, West portrays an idyllic childhood experience, which greatly contrasts with the boy's life from "The Penny."

West's short stories and non-fiction show her wide range of treatments concerning race and economics. "Mammy" reveals a complex portrait of a lower-class black woman faced with a difficult situation. "An Unimportant Man" portrays the desire for education as a means of "moving up" and shows the downside of having ambitious parents. "The Penny" reflects stereotypes that exist in the middle class. In "The Richer, the Poorer," West depicts material and emotional wealth and poverty. In "Fond Memories of a Black Childhood," the

author writes with fondness and admiration of the privilege she experienced and the racial pride that was instilled in her. In her short stories and non-fiction, West covers race, class, and gender, which she also discusses in her novels. Her literature is rich and complex. What is remarkable is how West sees both sides of an issue. She can see the benefits of belonging to the black middle class, which include economic freedom and leisure time. However, she also understands how some in the black middle class may think of themselves as superior to their lower-class counterparts and act accordingly. Some of the prevalent themes in her short stories and non-fiction are identity, education, and sibling relationships. She shows that the greatest power in literature is what remains unsaid.

Chapter 3: West's Critical Reception

Because Dorothy West is frequently omitted from discussions of American literature, it is necessary to mention three women from roughly the same time period as West who are canonized. In this chapter, I will discuss three authors who are held up as the "benchmark," of sorts, as three representative female figures of the Harlem Renaissance—Zora Neale Hurston, Jessie Fauset, and Nella Larsen. When black women have been given critical attention by white male critics, black male critics, and white female critics, their works often receive short shrift. When black women are looked at seriously, Dorothy West often gets left out of the discussion. In this chapter, I will analyze how critics see Hurston, Fauset, and Larsen as the three representative figures and I will examine their treatment by the demographic of critics mentioned above. By looking at the scholarly work centered on these women and the problems in such scholarship, I make an argument for a greater appreciation of West.

Zora Neale Hurston is arguably the most recognized female author from the Harlem Renaissance and the first half of the twentieth century. Her most well-known work is *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937). Her other works include *Jonah's Gourd Wine* (1934), *Mules and Men* (1935), *Moses Man of the Mountain* (1939), *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942), and *Seraph on the Suwannee* (1948). Hurston died in 1960 in Florida.

Jessie Fauset was W.E.B. Du Bois's secretary and wrote four novels: *There is Confusion* (1924), *Plum Bun* (1929), *The Chinaberry Tree* (1931), and *Comedy, American Style* (1933). Her novels are known for featuring the marriage plot. She also explores passing in *Plum Bun* and an interracial relationship in *The Chinaberry Tree*. She died in 1961. Nella Larsen wrote two novels: *Quicksand* (1928) *and Passing* (1929). *Quicksand*

relates the story of Helga Crane, a biracial Lily Bart (Edith Wharton's protagonist from *The House of Mirth*) who is unable to find her place in the world. Helga follows the "tragic mulatto" trope, fitting in with neither whites nor blacks. Larsen, who died in 1964, is a very elusive figure—for many years, the facts of her life were sketchy. In a discussion of black female authors, it is important to analyze their treatment in the hands of critics because the three authors were not always universally praised. First, I would like to look at Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's chapter on female Harlem Renaissance authors in *No Man's Land*, which perpetuates the notion that Hurston, Fauset, and Larsen are the only significant black female authors from the early twentieth century.

Gilbert and Gubar are well-known feminist theorists, whose reputation rests mainly on the seminal text *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), which explores nineteenth-century women's literature from a feminist perspective. In *No Man's Land*, Gilbert and Gubar bring their attention to twentieth- century literature and in Chapter 3, entitled "Ain't I a New Woman?: Feminism and the Harlem Renaissance," the critics discuss the works of Jessie Fauset, Nella Larsen, and Zora Neale Hurston. Gilbert and Gubar call Fauset, Larsen, and Hurston "the three major female novelists of the Harlem Renaissance" (125). While this is true, there were other female *authors* from this period that Gilbert and Gubar ignore. Although they quote from Marita Bonner and Georgia Douglas Johnson, two black female authors of the period, Gilbert and Gubar only mention them in passing and fail to discuss other authors such as Dorothy West in the chapter.

Moreover, Gilbert and Gubar label the three novelists with stereotypes. They posit Fauset to be the "prim, proper Victorian lady," Larsen "the mulatto as femme fatale," and Hurston as "the entertaining darky or royal princess," pigeonholing the women and

dismissing any other women writers who do not neatly fit these stereotypes (128). Gilbert and Gubar then give forced readings of the works of the respective women that make their works fit into these roles. It seems that any authors who do not fit these molds are overlooked.

As far as Larsen is concerned, Gilbert and Gubar see a "connection between writing and passing," which reflects the authors' opinions about the act of writing developed in *Madwoman in the Attic* (153). The authors, for instance, claim that Helga Crane, the protagonist from *Quicksand*, is a femme fatale. This is untrue—the only man that Helga has sex with during the novel is Reverend Pleasant Green, the man she eventually marries. Gilbert and Gubar also seek to find nineteenth century influences in the works of the Harlem Renaissance authors, stating that "from the beginning of *Quicksand* it is clear that the major white precursor for Larsen…is Charlotte Brontë" (151). Gilbert and Gubar draw a fuzzy link between a white 19th Century English author and a twentieth century biracial author—and run with it. To be sure, there are some possible points of comparison (the critics draw similarities between *Jane Eyre*'s St. John and *Quicksand*'s Dr. Anderson)—but they are not enough to prove Brontë, a nineteenth century British woman, was a precursor for a twentieth century biracial American. Gilbert and Gubar do not mention Frances Harper, author of *Iola Leroy*, which featured a mulatto heroine, as a possible precursor to Larsen. In another troubling critical move, the authors claim that the tradition of "the painful dilemma of black mothers" has "derived at least in part from Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "Runaway Slave at Pilgrim's Point" (131). It is peculiar that Gilbert and Gubar believe a tradition involving black mothers as having a foundation in a white woman's poem—or that they believe that Barrett Browning can write effectively about the life of a slave.

Gilbert and Gubar's readings are, then, misinterpretations. The women focus on sexism within the Harlem Renaissance and disregard the factor of racism in the novels and lives of the authors. Racism, along with sexism, plays an obvious role in the lives of twentieth century black women and in the literature of black female authors. By doing so, they do not take into account the fact that both sexism and racism play a dual role in the literature of black women. Their reading also cites Hurston, Larsen, and Fauset as the representative female authors of the Harlem Renaissance. There seems to be a mentality that having three black women from the Harlem Renaissance and the early twentieth century is enough for a collection or anthology and no others need be mentioned. Gilbert and Gubar not only perpetuate the myth that there are just three important black women from this period, but they also believe that their literature can be easily put into neat categories. This mentality leads to misreadings and omissions.

At one point in the chapter, Gilbert and Gubar reference Robert Bone's *The Negro Novel in America*, published in 1965. The subject of Robert Bone highlights the treatment of black female authors by white critics. In discussing Jessie Fauset in a chapter titled "The Rear Guard," Bone claims, "But in spite of an admirable persistence, [Fauset's] novels are uniformly sophomoric, trivial, and dull" (101). He treats her novels in a condescending manner. Ann duCille believes "the marriage plot has received little critical attention from critics of African American literature" because it is usually "thought of as a convention of the white middle class" (3). Because Fauset's novels featured this trope, she was originally not valued as a worthy author. In the same chapter, Bone mentions Nella Larsen. About *Passing*, the author states, "Unfortunately, a false and shoddy denouement prevents the novel from rising above mediocrity" (101). In an essay entitled "Toward a Black Feminist

Criticism," black feminist Barbara Smith claims *The Negro Novel in America* is "a book that Black critics recognize as one of the worst examples of white racist pseudoscholarship" (171). Bone seems to privilege male authors over female authors. At the end of the book, Bone rates novels by black Americans, separated into four periods—1890-1920, 1920-1930, 1930-1940, 1940-1952. He rates the novels as "Major," "Superior," "Good," "Mediocre," and "Poor." Of the seven novels in "Major" and "Superior," only two are written by women: Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Ann Petry's *Country Place*. All of the "Major" novels were written by men—Jean Toomer's *Cane*, Richard Wright's *Native Son*, and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*.

In his belittling review of Dorothy West's *The Living Is Easy,* which is ranked as "Good," in *The Negro Novel In America*, Robert Bone states that "[o]nly the trenchancy of its satire and the vividness of its characterization save the novel from oblivion" (191). Bone further states, "*The Living Is Easy*, in spite of occasional brilliance, is a diamond in the rough. There is little to distinguish its style, other than a certain neatness and economy. Serious difficulties on the narrative level prevent the novel from realizing its full potential" (190). Bone is unable to see the uniqueness of West's novel. He also does not know what to make of Cleo Judson, West's stereotype-shattering heroine. Although *The Wedding* is arguably the better of West's two novels, *The Living Is Easy* is a solid glimpse into the black middle-class society. Bone's comments make the novel seem trivial and unimportant—leading to it being labeled as unimportant by the scholars who would follow him.

Indeed, in traditional discussions on African American literature, West is often ignored. In *From the Dark Tower*, published in 1974, Arthur P. Davis mentions Hurston, Fauset, and Larsen. He also mentions Ann Petry in a section about transitional figures. By

the time of publication, West had published a novel and several short stories, not to mention her tenure as editor of two magazines. However, even this inclusion does not free Hurston, Fauset, and Larsen from undue criticism. Davis claims that the novels of Fauset and Larsen (along with Walter White) proclaim "that except for superficial differences of color we upper-class Negroes are just like the better-class whites" (90). In writing about Jessie Fauset, Davis claims that, while reading *There is Confusion*, "one would never know that there were millions of low-class-vulgar-loud-and-wrong-ghetto-type Negroes in New York, Washington, Boston, and Philadelphia. Miss Fauset never mentions them, and for that reason her novel is limited. She is really trying to make a very small group of Negroes represent all Negroes" (92-93). Davis seems to believe that he knows what Fauset's intentions are. Also, one must wonder why Davis feels that Fauset, who came from a middle-class background, is obligated to write about "low-class-vulgar" blacks. In his review of Richard Wright's *Native Son*, Davis never claims that this novel is limited because it only mentions disenchanted lower-class blacks and does not portray middle-class blacks. Again, we see a privileging of male authors over their female counterparts.

Hurston's section also contains some misreadings and dismissals. Davis feels that Hurston is important but cannot completely praise her work:

> Zora Neale Hurston has probably never received from Negro critics the credit she deserves, whereas white critics have occasionally overpraised her work. The reason for this, or at least part of it, is that she wrote counter to the prevailing attitude of protest and militancy which most Negro writers since 1925 have taken. Repelled by Zora Neale Hurston's unrealistic goodwill stance, whatever one may think of her

racial attitude, she had a real if uneven talent as a fiction writer and superb gifts as a collector and interpreter of folk materials. (120)

Even Davis's praise of Hurston is not free of barbs. He states that most Negro writers have taken an attitude of "protest and militancy" since 1925. He, like Richard Wright from "Blueprint for Negro Writing," sees merit only in novels of social protest. He seems to resent the fact the white critics have allegedly "overpraised" her work and also seems to view Hurston as a sort of female Uncle Tom. The effect of this sort of critical dismissal is that the works of black women are not taken as seriously as they should.

During the 1970s, black feminists responded to and along with white feminists about forgotten works. Although great strides have been recently made to revise the American literary canon and make it more diverse, it is still dominated by white men. Often, when a black female author is praised as a worthy addition to the canon, it is by another black woman. One important example of this is Alice Walker's praise of Zora Neale Hurston, which led to her being added to the canon, and Hazel Carby's praise of Nella Larsen in *Reconstructing Womanhood* (1987). It is black women who realize the gaps in the canon that includes large numbers of white male authors, a moderate amount of white women and black men, and a handful of black women. In American society, as well as in literature, black women have traditionally been marginalized.

In a chapter of *Reading Black, Reading Feminist* (1990) entitled "The Darkened Eye Restored': Toward a Literary History of Black Women," Mary Helen Washington notes, "[w]ithout exception Afro-American women writers have been dismissed by Afro-American literary critics until they were rediscovered and reevaluated by feminist critics" (34). Writing about Nella Larsen, Washington notes that she was "out of print for many years and was not

until recently considered a major Harlem Renaissance writer. Ann Petry is usually analyzed as a disciple of [Richard] Wright's school of protest fiction, and Dorothy West has not been written about seriously since Robert Bone's *The Negro Novel in America* in 1965" (35). And Bone's treatment of West's *The Living Is Easy*, as discussed before, was highly critical. There is both subtle and overt racism and sexism that comes into play, then, when critics deal with the literature of black women.

Washington claims that "What we have to recognize is that the creation of the fiction of tradition is a matter of power, not justice, and that that power has always been in the hands of men—mostly white but some black" (32). The literature is at the risk of being poorly analyzed by white male critics, and even white female and black male critics. White women critics are able to recognize the sexism in the novels but often ignore the racism. Black male critics highlight the racism but ignore the sexism. Therefore, the literature of many black women is often not critiqued in the manner it should be. This is not to say that white male, white female, and black male critics should not analyze the literature of black women. However, it is important for these groups to realize the uniqueness of their situation in reviewing the works of a group that is denigrated because of being both black and female.

In an essay entitled "Revising the Literary Canon," (1987) Nellie McKay traces the history of black American female authors. She mentions the contributions of Jessie Fauset, notes Fauset's contribution to the Harlem Renaissance, which went beyond just producing literature; she had a hand in promoting other authors. McKay believes that Fauset:

> along with Nella Larsen…have received less attention as writers than their male counterparts because of a perception that their works belong to the genteel tradition of the novel of manners. That condition is moving toward rapid change, however, as

> contemporary black women critics re-evaluate the writings of women before the 1960s; as cooperative publishers make out-of-print texts available for classroom use; and teachers and professors in Women's Studies and Afro-American and other literature courses make use of them. (158-159).

Arthur Davis was one such critic who pigeonholed Fauset and Larsen into this category of the "genteel" tradition, and that category—the novel of manners—is itself now no longer easily dismissed (Ann duCille, whom I quoted in Chapter 1, is the author of *The Coupling Convention*, about the genteel tradition in African-American literature). But because of the advent of black feminist theory in the 1970s, authors such as Larsen and Fauset and "feminized traditions or genres" have received serious consideration and, consequently, canonization.

McKay also acknowledges that "[n]ot all the women who came of age in the 1920s or who were associated with the Harlem Renaissance emerged then or did their best work in that period" (159). She mentions Zora Neale Hurston and Dorothy West in this group. On the subject of Hurston, McKay laments the fact that while she was alive:

> [S]he received only minor praise for her work, and long before her death in 1960 she was forgotten by most of the literary world and derided by those who remembered her. In the early 1970, her now-acclaimed novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), retrieved her name from oblivion and set the wheels rolling for the new black criticism of the 1970s and 1980s. (159)

McKay respects Hurston and her work, stating that "had she written nothing of importance other than *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, her place in history would still be fully assured. She did indeed change the nature of black female heroine in American literature" (159).

Because of the efforts of critics like McKay, Hurston began to get the respect she deserves as an author and an important voice in literature. While Arthur Davis thinks that Hurston has been overpraised and that she groveled to white society, McKay respects her contributions to literature. However, even in McKay's essay, certain authors take precedence over others. She mentions Dorothy West, but only in passing. As far as women in the first half of the twentieth century are concerned, McKay herself mentions Hurston, Fauset, and Larsen more than other authors. Thus, even among discussions of African American women's literature, some authors are privileged over others.

In 1976, Barbara Christian published *Black Women Novelists*, a seminal text on the subject. Christian covers Hurston, Fauset, and Larsen, as well as Frances Harper's *Iola Leroy* (1892), Ann Petry's *The Street* (1946), and Gwendolyn Brooks's *Maud Martha* (1953). West's The *Living Is Easy* is absent from the book. Christian's book is often looked to as a standard bearer on the subject of black women's literature. By not including West, the book creates the mindset of scholars who look to the book for research that West is not an important author in the tradition of black women's literature. Hazel Carby's *Reconstructing Womanhood* (1987), another well known and often cited text on black women's literary tradition, also leaves West out. Furthermore, as of this writing, there is no biography of West. She also does not have a collection of criticism, as do other authors.

It goes without saying that Zora Neale Hurston is now an established member of the literary canon. In 1977, Robert Hemenway wrote the first biography of Zora Neale Hurston. Alice Walker, Hurston's champion, provided the introduction. Walker notes the importance of remembering authors of the past: "We are a people. A people do not throw their geniuses away. If they do, it is our duty as witnesses for the future to collect them again for the sake

of our children. If necessary, bone by bone" (xviii). Another biography, entitled *Sorrow's Kitchen*, was written by Mary Lyons and published in 1991. In 2002, Carla Kaplan published a collection of Hurston's letters. The book includes letters to Dorothy West, Hurston's patron Charlotte Osgood Mason, anthropologists Franz Boas and Ruth Benedict, Langston Hughes, and Carl Van Vechten. Hurston's work has also been included in discussions about canonical twentieth century literature figures, such as Timothy P. Caron's *Struggles Over the Word: Race and Religion in O'Connor, Faulkner, Hurston, and Wright* (2001). In 2004, Hurston's niece Lucy Hurston published *Speak, So You Can Speak Again*, a collection of Hurston's works.

Fauset has also received recent scholarly attention. Carolyn W. Sylvander published *Jessie Redmon Fauset: Black American Writer*, a biography of Fauset. Discussion of her work is also included in *The Ironic Vision of Four Black Women Novelists: A Study of the Novels of Jessie Fauset, Nella Larsen, Zora Neale Hurston, and Ann Petry* by Beatrice Horn Royster. She is included as well in *Black Women Intellectuals: Strategies of Nation, Family, and Neighborhood in the Worlds of Pauline Hopkins, Jessie Fauset, and Marita Bonner* by Carol Allen.

Nella Larsen now has been accepted critically as an important writer as well. In 1994, Thadious M. Davis published a biography of Nella Larsen. The year before saw Charles P. Larson's *Invisible Darkness: Jean Toomer and Nella Larsen*. Also, Larsen was included in *Surviving the Crossing: (Im)migration, Ethnicity and Gender in Willa Cather, Gertrude Stein, and Nella Larsen* by Jessica G. Rabin. Larsen and Fauset have both been included in studies of twentieth century literature outside of the realm of African American

literature. Both women are mentioned in *Middlebrow Moderns*, which discusses female authors of the 1920s.

As the above discussion indicates, the works of Hurston, Fauset, and Larsen are not just discussed in the realm of black American female authors. Their works have become more "mainstream," added to that of authors in the twentieth-century canon. Hurston's works are mentioned alongside those of William Faulkner and Flannery O'Connor, Larsen's with Cather and Stein. The treatment of these three women, then, indicates the history of black women's contribution to African American, American, and Modernist canons.

I mention the critical reception of Hurston, Larsen, and Fauset to demonstrate how the three women have been adopted as the three representational figures when discussing female authors in the early to mid-twentieth Century. Thus, Hurston, Larsen, and Fauset are more likely to be included in discussions of twentieth century American literature than any other black women from the same time period, with the possible exception of Ann Petry. They are even more likely to be included in twentieth century African American literature. To be sure, each of the women discussed before was not readily accepted at first in literary canons. However, the act of maintaining focus on only these three women creates a sense that other authors are not as worthy of attention—authors like Dorothy West.

West's most noteworthy critical reception came with the publication of *The Wedding* in 1995 and the short story/non-fiction collection *The Richer, the Poorer* the following year. A 1995 *Time* magazine article offers an overview of West's life and brief reviews of the two books. The headline proclaims that West is "the pet of the literary world again" (Skow 67). One must wonder if the reader is supposed to take West seriously when she is referred to as a "pet"—or if the reviewer even takes her seriously. Skow notes that "racial ironies are the

substance of [*The Wedding*], and West sees them clearly" (67). Then, the author claims that, in the novel, the "half-white granddaughter of a prosperous colored clan can barely bring herself to hold a cute, brown granddaughter" (67). This seems to be a reference to Gram, who refuses to hold Laurie. However, Gram is not "half-white," and she is Laurie's great great granddaughter. Skow also claims that "an awkward ending mars the novel, and too easy plotting weakens the short stories of the new collection" (67). The reviewer does not reveal what precisely is awkward about the ending of *The Wedding*, nor does he discuss any particular short story from *The Richer, the Poorer*. This article thus both celebrates and trivializes West in a manner similar to that of Robert Bone.

In a review of *The Wedding* in *World Literature Today*, B.A. St. Andrews offers a better treatment of the novel. The writer states, "Like the novel's title, people and events only seem straightforward. Emotional desperation and tragedy surface as characters examine their tangled lives and complex responses to race, class, family history, lust, and love" (St. Andrews 799). St. Andrews notes that the novel "celebrates…how undeniably interrelated we all are, like it or not" (799). This is West's goal. She shows that separate worlds of black and white, rich and poor, Northern and Southern are inextricably tied together. St. Andrews believes that "West's highest achievement may be in recording the complexities of an American family that stretches across decades, across economic boundaries, across privilege and limitation, across the history of the nation itself" (799). Again, this is West's goal—showing the complexities of a family and a nation.

The fact that Dorothy West's career spanned seven decades perhaps is one reason why she has eluded canonization. Some authors are easy to "pigeonhole" because they create their best works during a certain period. An example of this is Langston Hughes, who

produced many of his well-known poems during the 1920s and the Harlem Renaissance period, but continued to write until his death in 1967. Although West's career began during this same period, it spanned almost seven decades. *The Living Is Easy,* published in 1948, would allow West to be grouped with Richard Wright and Lorraine Hansberry. Also, *The Wedding*, published in 1995, would allow West to be grouped with Toni Morrison and Alice Walker, in terms of chronology. It seems difficult, in other words, to pin down a period in which one could place her. For example, if she were discussed along with other Harlem Renaissance authors, would one discuss *The Wedding*? West's prosperous career has caused her works to exhibit a refusal to be wed to a particular moment in literature and is a reason that she has remained on the fringes of the literary canon. But West can be discussed in periods relevant to many branches of American literature.

In looking at authors' lives, there is a tendency to romanticize their lives if there is any hint of tragedy or sadness. For example, there is a certain amount of "sentimental appeal" involved in resurrecting the career of Zora Neale Hurston. Hurston died in a welfare home, broke, in 1960. This story is often repeated in discussions of the author, creating more of a desire to resurrect her literature. It is absolutely not my intention to say that Hurston does not belong in the canon, but I do question the appeal of tragedy in an author's critical standing. Nella Larsen also has a similar story. Being biracial, she felt that she did not fit anywhere—a trope that crept into her novel *Quicksand*. Dorothy West has no such "sob" story. Her name is not associated with scandal, nor did she die poor and alone in a seedy rest home. She lived a long and relatively pleasant life, the latter half on Martha's Vineyard. This, ironically, may be one reason that she has been ignored. Again, there is a tendency to romanticize the bad luck and hard lives of some authors (aside from Hurston and Larsen,

there is F. Scott Fitzgerald and his alcoholism, as well as Ernest Hemingway and depression).[1] Those who do not fit this plot suffer critical inattention.

West, it seems, is a victim of bad timing. In Harlem Renaissance discussions, she is overshadowed by such heavyweights as Hurston, Larsen, Fauset, and Langston Hughes. In 1940s literature, when she published short stories and her novel *The Living Is Easy*, she is overshadowed by Richard Wright's *Native Son*. In the 1990s, when *The Wedding* and *The Richer, the Poorer* were published, West was overshadowed by the literary juggernaut of Toni Morrison.

The question, then, is that if Dorothy West were to be added to the canon, what would we do with her? The truth is that West brings a unique vision to twentieth century American literature. Her works fit in several categories of discussion. One author that West can be discussed with profitably is Edith Wharton. West's two novels reveal aspects of an upper-class society, in which individuals do not marry for love but for social position. In *The Wedding*, for example, those in the Oval's society are shocked that Shelby is not marrying a lawyer or a doctor from within her ranks, but an "outsider." This kind of scenario is also seen in Wharton's novels. In *The Age of Innocence*, Newland Archer marries May Welland because she is a "good fit" for him, not necessarily because he loves her. Mr. Binney's attitude toward living around other blacks mirrors the attitudes of Wharton's characters about staying away from "new money." Furthermore, the character of Cleo Judson is very similar to the character of Undine Spragg, the heroine (or anti-herione) of Wharton's *The Custom of the Country*. Undine is a ruthless social climber who schemes her way to the top of upper

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[1] More information on Fitzgerald and Hemingway is available in *Scott Fitzgerald: A Biography* by Jeffrey Meyers and *Papa Hemingway* by A.E. Hotchner

class society. Similarly, Cleo uses ambition and manipulation to secure her family's place in Boston's black elite. Both women are beautiful on the outside but ruthless and calculating and present intriguing portrayals of female characters. Furthermore, the tension between established Northern blacks and migrating Southern blacks is similar to that of old money and new money in Wharton's novels.

West's treatment of race can also be compared to that in the literature of William Faulkner. In *Absalom, Absalom!*, Faulkner offers a unique treatment of race. There are characters that look white but are considered to be black by the United States's laws (as discussed in Chapter 1). This is mainly seen in the character of Charles Bon. Henry Sutpen kills Bon because he is black (or, rather, this is the conclusion that Quentin Compson and his friend Shreve come to). However, throughout the whole novel up to that point, everyone thinks Bon is white—because visually he appears to be so. This character and his situation are reminiscent of that of Shelby Coles from *The Wedding*. Shelby has little "black blood"—so little that she is mistaken for a white girl when she is younger. Both novels foreground themes concerning skin shade that reveal the complexities of race in America.

West also presents a remarkable treatment of race in other ways. Often in literature, black female characters fall under three categories—the doting mammy, the whore, and the tragic mulatto who may try to pass as white. In both of West's novels, there is no passing—although there is the hint of passing in the short story "Mammy." For the most part, the characters in her literature are not preoccupied with crossing the color line. As mentioned in Chapter 1, none of West's characters is a tragic mulatto, as in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*'s. In West's short story "Mammy," she offers a three-dimensional portrait and the depth of the title character. West's Mammy has a name, Mrs. Mason—the "Mrs." making clear that she

is not the sexless Mammy often seen in literature. She has opinions, feelings, and inner strength. She is not the one-dimensional Mammy character who seemingly has no other family except for the white family for whom she works—one example being the Mammy figure from Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind*. West brings a unique vision to not only the literature of African American women but to twentieth century literature as well. West's sometime exclusion from African American women's literature is a bit bewildering, as she presents characters that are different from those of other authors.

There is a wide range of themes covered in West's texts. She could be included in discussions on the Harlem Renaissance, mother/daughter relationships (Cleo-Judy; Corinne-Shelby), father/daughter relationships (Shelby-Clark; Zeb and Essie from "An Unimportant Man"), growing up black and female (Judy Judson and Essie Jenkins), interracial relationships in the early twentieth century (Hannibal-Josephine, Shelby-Meade), the black middle and upper classes (both of West's novels, "Fond Memories of a Black Childhood"), roles of women in early twentieth century life (Cleo Judson, Mammy), blacks during the Great Depression ("Mammy," "The Penny"), the role of education in the black community (Hannibal, Isaac, Zeb Jenkins), miscegenation (Preacher Coles from *The Wedding*, "Mammy"), and intraracial prejudice on the basis of skin color and class (both novels).

As of this writing, one of the only scholarly books about West is *Rereading the Harlem Renaissance: Race, Class, and Gender in the Fiction of Jessie Fauset, Zora Neale Hurston, and Dorothy West* by Sharon Jones (2002). Jones notes, "[*The Wedding*'s] composition and publication calls attention to the politics behind the production of African American texts" (139). As noted in the Introduction, West delayed finishing the novel because she feared it would not be well received. Furthermore, Jones claims, "Because of

the miscategorization of West, she, of the three authors under investigation here, remains the one least written about and least recognized for her contributions to the Harlem Renaissance and to the tradition of black women's writing in America" (123). West's contributions to the Harlem Renaissance prove that the movement was not only comprised of a handful of authors.

Also, as of this writing, West is beginning to be anthologized. She is included in Rita B. Dandridge's *Black Women's Blues* (1992) and *Harlem's Glory: Black Women's Writing* (1996), edited by Lorraine Elena Roses and Ruth Elizabeth Randolph. However, she is sometimes left out of anthologies that she would work well within. In 1999, Melvin Donalson edited *Cornerstones*, an anthology of African American poetry, fiction, music, and non-fiction. In the section titled "Fiction Selections," we see the usual suspects—Hurston, Fauset, and Larsen. We also see Pauline Hopkins, author of *Contending Forces*, and Ann Petry, author of *The Street*, as well as late twentieth-century figures like Toni Morrison and Gloria Naylor. But not Dorothy West. West's works are a good fit for anthologies, especially her short stories and non-fiction pieces. Also, there is no biography of West, nor she does not have an extensive collection of criticism, as do other authors.

As stated before, Dorothy West is beginning to be appreciated and included in literary discussions. However, she is still very much underappreciated. In many ways, she represents twentieth century literature. She does not portray the American dream of economic comfort as simple. Born in 1907, she mingled with the giants of the Harlem Renaissance. She edited magazines during the 1930s and published *The Living Is Easy* in the following decade. She published short stories and non-fiction during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, while keeping up her duties as chronicler of the Oak Bluff's residents' activities.

Finally, in the 1990s, West published her best work, *The Wedding*, which had been decades in the making.

As suggested earlier, black women traditionally have not been readily accepted into the canon of American literature. West's addition would provide a distinctive point of view on a wide range of subjects. She brings an extraordinary vision to not only African American women's literature but to twentieth century American literature as well.

Conclusion

> Because each had discovered years before that they were neither white nor male, and that all freedom and triumph was forbidden to them, they had set about creating something else to be.—Toni Morrison, *Sula*

Dorothy West's novels, *The Living Is Easy* and *The Wedding*, bring new insight into the issues of race, class, and gender in African American women's fiction. West's short stories and non-fiction also explore themes concerning race and gender and demonstrate that West was not just capable of writing about the middle- and upper-class blacks but was able to write effectively about lower-class blacks as well. "Fond Memories" is an intelligent essay exploring issues concerning race and identity at the beginning of the last century. As was argued in Chapter 3, West is often overlooked in discussions of twentieth century literature and even black women's literature from this period due to the fact that Zora Neale Hurston, Jessie Fauset, and Nella Larsen loom large and are often seen as the most representative figures of the early- to mid-twentieth century. However, West not only brings a new perspective to black women's literature but to American modernism in general.

In Chapter 3, I included a quote from Alice Walker taken from the introduction to Robert Hemenway's biography of Zora Neale Hurston about the benefits of recovering "lost" writers: "We are a people. A people do not throw their geniuses away. If they do, it is our duty as witnesses for the future to collect them again for the sake of our children. If necessary, bone by bone" (xviii). This same sentiment can be applied to West because her works deserve to receive more recognition.

Another underappreciated voice from the Harlem Renaissance is that of Helene Johnson, who was, coincidentally, Dorothy West's cousin. Johnson's mother, Ella Benson Johnson, was the sister of Rachel West. Johnson was part of the menagerie of family members

that West lived with in Boston. In *The Living Is Easy*, Helene Johnson is the basis for the character of Vicky, Charity's daughter. Johnson's reputation is that of a poet, and her poems appeared in *Crisis*, *Opportunity*, and her cousin's *Challenge*. In 2000, a collection of her poems, *This Waiting for Love*, appeared, edited by Verner D. Mitchell. In addition to Johnson's poems, the book contains selected letters sent among Johnson, Dorothy West, Zora Neale Hurston, and Wallace Thurman. Cheryl Wall, in the Introduction, notes, "Helene Johnson was a poet of great promise, who wrote only a handful of poems and who, like several other mysterious women, disappeared from the Harlem Renaissance leaving barely a trace" (x). Johnson published a poem entitled "My Race" originally in *Opportunity* in 1929, and the poem was reprinted in *This Waiting for Love*:

> Ah my race,
> Hungry race,
> Throbbing and young—
> Ah, my race,
> Wonder race,
> Sobbing with song—
> Ah, my race,
> Laughing race,
> Careless in mirth—
> Ah, my veiled race
> Unformed race,
> Fumbling in birth. (24)

Johnson's poem shows the complexity of black life. Blacks are at once full of potential and unfocused. They are struggling to make something of themselves. One of Johnson's other notable poems is entitled "A Southern Road," first published in *Fire!!* in 1926. The poem is about lynching that contains imagery predating Billie Holliday's "Strange Fruit." *This Waiting for Love* features letters written among Johnson, West, Hurston, and Wallace Thurman, showing an intimate creative community among the four artists. From this text, we see that creativity ran in West's family and learn more about West's enigmatic mother, Rachel.

Abigail McGrath, Johnson's daughter, wrote the afterword to her mother's poetry collection. She recalls her mother's stories about the figures Johnson encountered. McGrath recalls, "[B]y the time I was eight, she somehow expected me to know who Zora and Wally (Wallace Thurman) were […] she would tell me stories about Alain (Locke) and Langston (Hughes) without ever giving their last names. Somehow I grew up not having any idea at all that these people were legends. To me, they were characters in family stories" (Mitchell 128). Often, when people think of the Harlem Renaissance, they think of only a handful of people—Langston Hughes, Alain Locke, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Zora Neale Hurston. We can see, not only from West but also from Johnson, that the movement was much bigger than just a handful of people and a handful of poems and texts. Just limiting it to three or four "token" figures limits the greatness and splendor of the Harlem Renaissance. McGrath, at the end, writes, "Helen's work, like Zora's, is too vibrant, too funny, too political, and too right on to be buried in the back of my closet" (129-130). McGrath understands the importance of recovering work that has been overlooked and underappreciated. Johnson's is another voice that needs to be heard.

Dorothy West is fortunate in the fact that most of her works are still in print. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. is currently editor of a collection of books by African American women that

have previously fallen out of print. The collection is entitled *African-American Women Writers, 1910-1940* (published by G.K. Hall and Co.). Some volumes are those by Mary Etta Spencer, author of *Resentment* (1910), and Zara Wright, author of *Black and White Tangled Threads* (1920). Still, other black female authors have works that remain out of print. Two examples are Odella Phelps Wood's *Higher Ground*, published in 1945, and Dorothy Lee Dickens' *Black on the Rainbow*, published in 1953. It is not my intention to say that just because these women are black female authors, they must be a part of the canon. However, these works deserve a second look before they are permanently relegated to obscurity. It is important to remember that at one point Zora Neale Hurston's works, now considered to be paragons of the Harlem Renaissance and even of American literature, were at one point out of print. Sharon Jones, author of *Rereading the Harlem Renaissance*, mentions a statement of Frances Smith Foster, editor of *Minnie's Sacrifice*, *Sowing and Reaping*, *Trial and Triumphs*: *Three Rediscovered Novels by Frances E.W. Harper*. Foster notes that many novels by black Americans remain available only in newspapers and church periodicals where they were first serialized (Jones 17).

Dorothy West was something of a renaissance woman, no pun intended. She was a novelist, short story writer, journalist, and editor. She was also a piece of history, a living symbol of a special time in American literary history. West rubbed elbows with the giants of the Harlem Renaissance and lived to create literature at the end of the century. As noted in the introduction, West delayed finishing writing *The Wedding* because she was afraid that it would not be well-received. She feared that only protest novels, of the kind that Richard Wright promoted in "Blueprint for Negro Writing," would be welcomed. However, social protest novels are not the only relevant black experience. Having new voices added to literary discussions shows the richness of black life in America. Black life is not just about lynchings, beatings, and

horrid discrimination. While theses glimpses of life need to be told, they do not encompass the entire black experience. West's novels show another side of life.

In celebrating West's literature, we celebrate the tradition of black women's literature in America. This tradition begins with Phyllis Wheatley, who was first published in 1733. The greatest triumph for black women's literature was Toni Morrison, author of *Sula*, *The Bluest Eye*, and *Song of Solomon*, winning the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993, becoming the first black woman and only the eighth woman to do so. Authors like Morrison, Rita Dove, and Alice Walker stand on the shoulders of Hurston, Fauset, Larsen, and West. Likewise, these women stood on the shoulders of Phyllis Wheatley, Harriet Jacobs, and Frances Harper.

At a time when finding African Americans who are part of the middle and upper classes is more common than it was in West's time, her novels have a new relevance. West shows the good things about having money to support one's family and the benefits of being economically secure. However, as was noted in Chapter 1, West also demonstrates that the "American Dream," achieving economic security and being part of the middle/upper classes, is not as simple as it appears to be. She illustrates how class differences and differences in skin shade can cloud people's opinions of others. She shows how these issues can lead to intraracial discrimination that seriously undermines racial harmony. She proves the danger of forgetting where one comes from. West's literature, then, shows how black life is—rich, complicated, profound, and worthy of being recorded.

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