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THE BLACK NARRATOR AND THE TWO RIVERS:
SHORT FICTION

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

David Michael Nifong
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3063116

For

MICHAEL BRIAN HAWKINS

(1960-1976)

who would have turned up his nose and said,

"Who'd want to read this?"

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ABSTRACT

The importance of the narrator and narrative technique has long been ignored in the study of black literature. While many scholars have maintained a biographical or historical approach, few have focused primarily on the art itself. Critics have especially neglected the study of black short fiction; the short story is dwarfed by black novels and poetry. A study of the works of Langston Hughes, Alice Walker and Hal Bennett offers a representative picture of narrative posture in the genre.

The Ways of White Folks (1934) is the work of a young artist who enjoys experimenting with point of view. In this collection, Hughes utilizes seven different narrative postures, ranging from a simple first person retrospective point of view to a dramatic dialogue with an effaced narrator. Using formalistic critical theory, one discovers why Hughes's techniques are successful.

Alice Walker's desire for black women to achieve "spiritual wholeness" controls her narrators in In Love and Trouble (1973). Characters gain wholeness through an awakened racial awareness coupled with self-affirmation. In the stories, third person narrators relate the horrors of black women who either self destruct or are destroyed by others. First person narrators demonstrate the positive traits necessary for survival. Walker's characters evolve from a state of naive blindness, to a partial vision, and finally awareness.

Insanity Runs in Our Family (1977) by Hal Bennett is an extremely successful collection of short stories which draws its strength from the author's preoccupation with history and myth. Bennett creates an imaginary world consisting of southern-agrarian Burnside, Virginia, and northern-industrial Cousinsville, New Jersey. His narrators show the residents of these two cities as they wrestle with the injustices of the past and present. To escape from the forces of history and myth, one narrator steps outside of Bennett's fictional world and apocalyptically explores the future of the race.

The Negro Speaks of Rivers

I've known rivers:

I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow
of human blood in human veins.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.

I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.

I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.

I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln went
down to New Orleans, and I've seen its muddy bosom turn
all golden in the sunset.

I've known rivers:

Ancient, dusky rivers.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

Langston Hughes

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CHAPTER I

THE BLACK NARRATOR IN CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

In the hands of a skillful writer, a narrator can deftly shape raw experience into art. Carefully distanced from himself, the author finds the narrator a safe and acceptable outlet to vent thoughts and feelings. In most instances the fictional voice is not confused with the author's. Through the narrator, the author presents a story which is entirely patterned after the narrator's perception of the world. In the narrator's words, one finds naivete or omniscience, damnation or approval, ridicule or praise. The subtleties of irony and satire often lie hidden there. He can be a social commentator or a historian; a verbal photographer or an artist himself. The narrator's role primarily concerns the author since the narrative posture will affect the story's plot, characterization, setting, and conflict.

The black narrator deserves special consideration because he shapes his art from a unique cultural history. Experience dominates his every word, as his story reflects his African roots, years in slavery, oppression and suffering; assimilation of western Judeo-Christian thought, or rejection of the same, contentment to work the land, or escape to urban industrialism, constant singing of spirituals, jazz, and blues; hatred and love; fears and aspirations. Just as one gains a truer humanistic perspective through studying the literature of any ethnic group--Jewish, Irish, or Latin-American--a study of

black literature provides insight into the emotional complexities of black life in a "white" world.

In undertaking a study of the black narrator and narrative technique, one must determine which genre will afford a more complete picture. There are two reasons for choosing the short story over the novel. First, short fiction displays more versatility and variety of narrative techniques, since the author is freer to experiment with different forms and points of view. Second, short fiction in black literature is severely lacking critical study, although novelists such as Ellison, Wright, and Baldwin have been the subjects of numerous critical commentaries.

The majority of critical work dealing with black short fiction focuses mainly on the artist rather than on the art. Literary historians aptly discuss the development of the black artist in the twentieth century while biographical critics such as James Emanuel demonstrate how a work relates to its author.¹ Socio-political critics like Hugh Gloster point out cultural influences.² But no critic has yet analyzed the inherent strengths and weaknesses of short black fiction. The purpose of this study, therefore, is to examine the

¹Cf. Darwin Turner's In a Minor Chord: Three Afro-American Writers and Their Search for Identity (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1971); and Blyden Jackson's The Waiting Years (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1976). James Emanuel's Langston Hughes (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1967), offers a firm biographical approach.

²See Hugh Gloster's Negro Voices in American Fiction (New York: Russell and Russell, 1965).

narrator and narrative technique through close readings of the stories.

Short fiction by black authors ranges from the plantation tales of Paul Laurence Dunbar to the ghetto tales of Hal Bennett. The writers treated in this study come from the two great periods of black American literature. Although Langston Hughes had The Ways of White Folks (1934) published after the Harlem Renaissance, it still bears the imprint of that era. In Love and Trouble (1973), by Alice Walker, follows the climax of the Black Arts Movement of the 1960's but reflects the impetus of the period. Hal Bennett's Insanity Runs in Our Family (1978) carries on the same tradition. Even though over a half century passed between the writing of White Folk and Insanity, both works share similar characteristics. Without cliches and stereotypes, "the Negro as chicken thief, melon-stealer, incorrigible liar, . . . and yet withal laughable,"³ the works represent black experience. They offer a picture which includes the sublime, grotesque, real, surreal, innocent, and experienced. They represent both the high class and the "low down folks," who according to Hughes

. . . have their nip of gin on Saturday nights and are not too important to themselves or the community, or too well fed, or too learned to watch the lazy world go round. They live on Seventh Street in Washington or State Street in Chicago and they do not particularly care whether they are like white folks or anybody else. Their joy runs, bang! into ecstasy. Their religion soars to a shout. Work maybe a little today, rest a little tomorrow. Play awhile. Sing awhile. O, let's dance! These common people are not afraid

³J. Saunders Redding, "The Negro Author: His Publisher, His Public and His Purse," Publisher's Weekly, 24 March 1945, p. 1287.

of spirituals, as for a long time their more intellectual brethren were, and jazz is their child. They furnish a wealth of colorful, distinctive material for any artist because they still hold their own individuality in the face of American standardizations. And perhaps these common people will give to the world its truly great Negro artist, the one who is not afraid to be himself.⁴

None of the three artists makes the mistake of focusing on one extreme. Shades of grey separate them, giving the works viability and a prominent position in twentieth century fiction.

The choice of works to be considered in this study may appear arbitrary, but it is not necessarily so. Since the study does not purpose to be an all-inclusive overview of the narrator's role in black short fiction, it is important to select works which demonstrate the variety of forms and functions of the narrator. One may wonder why such a study does not begin with Paul Laurence Dunbar's Folks From Dixie (1898) which is the earliest collection of short stories by a black American author. Although Dunbar holds an important position in black literature, he nevertheless wrote when the artistic talents of the black authors were shaped by the interests of his basically white audience. One finds plantation tales full of characters who fit the white critics' expectations and who speak the dialect which tickled the white critics' ears. William Dean Howells, a patron of Dunbar, wrote in an introduction to Dunbar's first volume of poetry about

the only man of pure African blood and of American civilisation [sic] to feel the negro [sic] life aesthetically

⁴Langston Hughes, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," The Nation, 23 June 1926, p. 692.

and express it lyrically. . . . In nothing is his essentially refined and delicate art so well shown as in these dialect pieces . . . and it would be this which would most distinguish him, now and hereafter.⁵

The critic's desire for dialect pieces, for which Dunbar is best known, hampered Dunbar's creativity as he later pointed out in a remark to James Weldon Johnson: "dialect is what people want. They don't let me do anything else, no matter how much I try."⁶

It was not until the early 1920's that the black author dared to let his creativity have full reign. The decade marked the publication in 1921 of Countee Cullen's "I Have a Rendezvous With Life" and Langston Hughes's "The Negro Speaks of Rivers." During the rise in importance of Opportunity: A Journal of Negro Life--the organ of the National Urban League, and The Crisis--the organ of the NAACP, and the back-to-Africa movement of Marcus Garvey, the black writer soon discovered it was "okay" to be black and to write truthfully about his experience. Coupled with a new market for literature by and about black Americans, awakened pride set the stage for an outburst of creativity which was centered in Harlem. Traditionally critics have viewed the Harlem Renaissance as the beginning of the modern movement in black literature, for black writers had freed themselves from

⁵William Dean Howells, "Paul Laurence Dunbar," The Bookman, 23 (1906), p. 184, as quoted in Peter Bruck, The Black American Short Story in the 20th Century (Amsterdam: B. R. Gruner Publishing Co., 1977), p. 4.

⁶Bruck, p. 4.

plantation tales and dialectical trivialities required to appease a white audience.

The question of audience was of prime importance to them and to those who followed. Proud of their racial identity, they attempted to encourage both the acceptance of self and the acceptance of the literature by them. In his now famous literary manifesto "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" (1926), Langston Hughes discusses the forces which "urge within the race toward whiteness, the desire to pour racial identity into the mold of American standardization, and to be as little Negro and as much American as possible."⁷ In a powerful crescendo, Hughes concludes his essay:

We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too. The tom-tom cries and the tom-tom laughs. If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn't matter either. We build our temple for tomorrow, strong as we know how,⁸ and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves.

Hughes soon branched out from his writing of poetry and began experimenting with the short story. Although he wrote his first story, "Mary Winosky," to fulfill a high school English assignment in 1918, the years 1933 and 1934 were his most prolific period in this genre. More than thirty of his sixty-six short stories were written then.⁹

⁷Hughes, "Racial Mountain," p. 692.

⁸Hughes, "Racial Mountain," p. 694.

⁹Bruck, p. 8.

Living in Russia as a part of a black movie-making expedition, Hughes realized that he was now a professional writer:

. . . I determined to make my living writing. I did.
 Shortly poetry became bread; prose, shelter and raiment.
 Words turned into songs, plays, scenarios, articles, and
 stories.¹⁰

The stories proved to be the most profitable,¹¹ and Hughes recalls that "once started, I wrote almost nothing but short stories."¹² The quality was of prime importance:

I did not want to write for the pulps, or turn out fake "true" stories to sell under anonymous names as Wallace Thurman did. I did not want to bat out slick non-Negro short stories in competition with a thousand other commercial writers trying to make The Saturday Evening Post. I wanted to write seriously and as well as I knew how about the Negro people, and make that kind of writing earn for me a living.¹³

In 1934 Hughes collected the first nine stories written while he lived in Carmel, California, added them to the five which he had written in Russia, and published The Ways of White Folks. The stories deal with "some nuance of the race problem" and use situations which

¹⁰Langston Hughes, The Big Sea (New York: Hill and Wang, 1940), p. 335.

¹¹Hughes records in I Wonder As I Wander (New York: Hill and Wang, 1956), p. 214, that his agent sold all three Russian stories before his return to the United States. Several of the stories in The Ways of White Folks appeared in leading periodicals such as The American Mercury, Scribner's Fiction Parade, and Esquire.

¹²Hughes, I Wonder As I Wander, p. 214.

¹³Hughes, I Wonder As I Wander, p. 5.

Hughes had either heard or had actually experienced.¹⁴ James Emanuel, who has done more with Hughes's short stories than any other critic, writes about the critical reception:

Surveying ninety-one reviews, one finds their largest consensus in their approval of the easy, natural artistry, as well as the variety and comprehensiveness of the subject. . . . Some bit-terness of tone was noted, but so were the restraint and humor. Opinions varied as to the presence of propaganda, "sociological case work," and extremist characterization.¹⁵

Perhaps the most striking feature of The Ways of White Folks is the volume's workbook appearance. Here we find a young artist experimenting with a new genre and meeting a good measure of success. Few other collections of short stories provide such a wide variety of narrative techniques. Most points of view are found at least once in the volume as if the author were consciously attempting to try his hand at every available angle. Unifying this collection of stories--some of which are set in New York, Florida, Alabama, or Paris--is the narrator's same ironic laugh. Although there are actually fourteen different narrators, each joins with Milberry, the central character in "Berry" who puzzledly chuckles to himself, "Besides, . . . the ways of white folks, I mean some white folks, is too much for me."¹⁶

¹⁴Hughes, I Wonder As I Wander, p. 285.

¹⁵Emanuel, p. 31.

¹⁶Langston Hughes, The Ways of White Folk (1934; rpt. New York: Vintage Books, 1971), p. 175.

Mainly the narrator is a social commentator. Although he may comment on life in Greenwich Village or in a two-bit coastal town in Florida, he either consciously or subconsciously examines interracial relationships. Hughes is careful to balance his picture of "white folks" so that the whole race does not appear pathetically ridiculous. In a 1961 letter to Emanuel, he explains:

I feel as sorry for [whites] as I do for the Negroes usually involved in hurtful . . . situations. Through at least one (maybe only one) white character in each story, I try to indicate that "they are human, too." . . . What I try to indicate is that circumstances and conditioning make it very hard for whites, in interracial relationships, each to his "own self to be true."¹⁷

While the sympathetic white characters are sometimes hard to spot, they can, with close examination, be found in most stories. But as a whole, the "white folks" are a people who are "conditioned" to react predictably. This stereotyping lends a somewhat melodramatic, soap-operatic quality to the collection, but the shortcomings of the work can be overlooked when the fine technical abilities of this young artist's experimentation are taken into consideration.

Whereas Hughes's narrators function as social commentators, Alice Walker's serve as spiritual reformers. Writing almost forty years after The Ways of White Folks, Walker still echoes the theme of racial pride made popular during the Harlem Renaissance. She refines her focus, however, by addressing In Love and Trouble primarily to black women whom she exhorts to become "spiritually whole" individuals.

¹⁷Emanuel, p. 176.

Walker's narrators tell the gothic stories of black women who are destroyed by their lack of self-awareness or who survive because they have come to terms with their racial and personal identity. There is an obvious progression from naivete to spiritual wholeness, and the character's chance of survival depends on the story's narrator. Third person narrators mercilessly expose spiritual destruction, while first person narrators demonstrate the positive character traits of survival.

Critics have ignored In Love and Trouble although several of the stories have been widely anthologized. While no one would call the book a masterpiece, several reviewers detect the significance of subject matter. Barbara Smith claims, "This collection would be an extraordinary literary work, if its only virtue were the fact that the author sets out consciously to explore with honesty the textures and terrors of black women's lives."¹⁸ And Jerry H. Bryant offers this observation:

. . . what I like most about these stories is what Miss Walker seems to like most about her people, the ones who are themselves, naturally and un-self-consciously, She is best, therefore, not when she is depicting revolutionary consciousness or sophisticated awareness of the most recent rules of race relations, but when she is getting inside the minds of the confused, the ignorant, the inward-turning character, when she lets stand the mysterious and the ambiguous, and gives up explaining by doctrine the nature of her characters' lives.¹⁹

¹⁸Barbara Smith, "The Souls of Black Women," Ms., February, 1974, p. 43.

¹⁹Jerry H. Bryant, "The Outskirts of a New City," The Nation, 12 November 1973, p. 502.

Several reviewers object to the subtitle of the collection, "Stories of Black Women." Bryant alleges that the subtitle "is probably an attempt by the author to exploit not only black subjects but feminine ones. There is nothing feminist about these stories, however."²⁰ Admittedly Walker has a reason for writing about black women, but she does not "exploit" her subjects. June Goodwin, reviewing In Love and Trouble for the Christian Science Monitor, also attempts to expand Walker's vision: "Thirteen stories claiming to be about black women are only claiming. They are about much more. Round, whole people--aptly, quickly sketched--are yes, black, but they are of both sexes."²¹ And Carolyn Fowler offers what Alice Walker (and Langston Hughes) would consider the ultimate underhanded compliment:

In Love and Trouble . . . is a book . . . solid at the core, and one which leads us to expect truly significant work from this young black woman writer, as a woman, as a black woman and as a writer simply, but with the artist's eye, perceiving and portraying the soul of man.²²

Hal Bennett is perhaps the most neglected of all contemporary black writers. At fifty-one, he has authored a book of poetry, six novels, and a collection of short stories. Yet his critical exposure is

²⁰Bryant, p. 502.

²¹June Goodwin, rev. of In Love and Trouble, by Alice Walker, Christian Science Monitor, 19 September 1973, p. 11.

²²Carolyn Fowler, "Solid at the Core," rev. of In Love and Trouble, by Alice Walker, Freedomways, 14 (First Quarter, 1974), p. 62.

limited to a few reviews and one essay discussing his early novels. The early reviewers detect both the strong and weak points of Bennett's writing, but the reviewers of Insanity Runs in Our Family find only strengths to discuss. In a 1969 review of his first two novels, Irving Howe writes that "Given hard work, discipline, and luck [Bennett] could become a first-rate writer. A little encouragement wouldn't hurt, either."²³ The fruits of Bennett's "hard work" and "discipline" are evident in Insanity, but the critics certainly have not provided the encouragement that such a writer needs. Although he has been silent since Insanity, one hopes he will continue a prolific career.

Bennett's narrators surpass both Hughes's and Walker's in their awareness of black experience. Third and first person narrators serve as historians and interpreters of myth. They demonstrate the characters' racial awareness or lack of awareness and show how unspoken racial myths dominate black life. Bennett creates his own fictional world in order to emphasize modern black man's relationship to his cultural roots. Burnside, Virginia, represents the Southern agrarian life of post-Civil War blacks. An isolated community of blacks, Burnside becomes the Eden from which many residents flee. Cousinville, New Jersey, complements Burnside. Northern industrialization and integrated housing contrast sharply with the

²³Irving Howe, "New Black Writers," Harper's Magazine, December, 1969, p. 137.

Southern past. In a review of Insanity, R. Baxter Miller notes that the shift between Cousinville and Burnside "mirrors the tension between naturalism (city and machine) and romanticism (disappearing Nature)."²⁴

An anonymous reviewer for Publisher's Weekly claims that Bennett's

artistry enables him to probe the particulars of the black experience--its dislocations, pains, humor, sensitivities, roots--and through his probings [to] transform it into the universal, brush it onto a larger canvas.²⁵

Whatever the means, the narrators of Bennett stress awareness of past (Burnside) and present (Cousinville) in order to understand the future. They seek to liberate themselves from history and tradition to gain an apocalyptic view of their world.

Although the literary prominence of Langston Hughes is firmly established, critics have ignored the importance of his narrative technique. An analysis of his style offers further evidence of his excellence. His innovation continues to be exemplary, and his critical recognition can only encourage younger black writers such as Alice Walker and Hal Bennett. Although she lacks the narrative precision of Toni Morrison, Walker may yet share Morrison's acclaim if she can tighten her narrative focus. Bennett remains as obscure today as when his first novel was published fifteen years ago, and his mastery of

²⁴R. Baxter Miller, rev. of Insanity Runs in Our Family, by Hal Bennett, Choice, November 1977, p. 1208.

²⁵Rev. of Insanity Runs in Our Family, by Hal Bennett, Publisher's Weekly, 21 March 1977, p. 79.

narrative lies hidden in an out-of-print collection of short stories. Perhaps this study will aid in establishing the necessary dialogue between the critic and the aspiring black author.

CHAPTER II

NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE AND THEORY IN

THE WAYS OF WHITE FOLKS

"After all, I suppose, how anything is seen depends on whose eyes look at it."

Langston Hughes, I Wonder As I Wander

The young Langston Hughes, intent on making a living through his writing, ventured in 1933 into what was for him a relatively new genre, "and once started," Hughes recalls, "I wrote almost nothing but short stories."¹ The resulting collection, The Ways of White Folks, serves two important purposes for the critic of Black American literature. First, it offers stories which deal truthfully, ironically, and (oftentimes) humorously with "some nuance of the race relation."² Second, the collection offers a unique opportunity for the study of numerous different narrative points of view in a single volume. While the first purpose has intrigued readers for years, the second has been ignored. A close reading of the collection reveals the effectiveness of Hughes's conscious or subconscious experimentation with narrative perspective, and a review of formalistic critical theory further illuminates these techniques. Hughes's strategies include three first

¹Langston Hughes, I Wonder As I Wander (New York: Hill and Wang, 1956), p. 214.

²Hughes, p. 285.

person narratives: a well crafted oral monologue ("A Good Job Gone"), a disappointing epistle ("Passing"), and a beautifully constructed stream of consciousness/internal monologue ("Red-Headed Baby"). An omniscient narrator convincingly probes the minds of three main characters in the only story to use this difficult perspective ("Father and Son"). The more numerous third person narratives range from a straightforward character sketch ("Berry") to a psychological central intelligence study ("Little Dog"). The final strategy, one rarely attempted by authors, is a dramatic dialogue with an effaced narrator ("Mother and Child"). Here Hughes moves away from the egocentric and nosy narrators to one who seemingly does not exist. This incredible variety of perspectives makes the study of The Ways of White Folks both enjoyable and enlightening.

One can easily see the inseparability of form and content in the study of poetry where form controls and shapes the content just as the content determines the form. While there are some ideas which simply cannot be expressed in sonnet form, there are others which can be expressed in no other way. The close interrelationship between form and content of poetry has been widely discussed by the formalist critics, and it is only natural that the critical concepts which they developed should be carried into the study of fiction. As the formalistic critical theories have been applied to works of fiction, there has been born a renewed awareness of technique and of the importance which narrative point of view plays in shaping a work of fiction.

Mark Schorer is one of the most influential spokesmen of the formalist movement, and his essay, "Technique as Discovery," is one of the central essays in modern criticism of the novel because

it states most explicitly and emphatically the formalist attitude toward fiction, in which the unit is the word, the embodiment the technique, and the result an aesthetic whole that is valid on its own terms.³

The far-reaching effects of Schorer's essay, written in 1948, can be seen in the writings of Robert Scholes, Robert Kellogg, Norman Friedman, John E. Tilford, and Wayne C. Booth. These men acknowledge the importance of Schorer's concepts and base their theories on his premise that technique and subject matter are inseparable and that technique is something more crucial than mere embellishment.

According to Schorer, modern criticism has clearly demonstrated that "in art beauty and truth are indivisible and one."⁴ Revising this statement, Schorer substitutes "form" for "beauty" and "content" for "truth" and further narrows the distinction by saying that "in art technique and subject matter are indivisible and one." Content divorced from form is simply experience, while "achieved content" is a work of art. Therefore, "the difference between content, or experience,

³Robert Murray Davis, The Novel: Modern Essays in Criticism (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1969), p. 92.

⁴Mark Schorer, "Technique as Discovery," in The Novel: Modern Essays in Criticism, ed. Robert Murray Davis (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1969), p. 75.

and achieved content, or art, is technique."⁵ Schorer's widely quoted definition states that

Technique is the means by which the writer's experience, which is his subject matter, compels him to attend to it; technique is the only means he has of discovering, exploring, developing his subject, or conveying its meaning, and finally, of evaluating it.⁶

Furthermore, when applying the term "technique" to fiction, Schorer uses the term to signify two fundamentals of writing. First, technique refers to the manner in which language is used to express the experience which the author wishes to relate; secondly, technique refers to the use of point of view "not only as a mode of dramatic delineation, but more particularly of thematic definition."⁷

Wayne Booth, in The Rhetoric of Fiction echoes Schorer's emphasis:

We all agree that point of view is in some sense a technical matter, a means to larger ends; whether we say that technique is the artist's way of discovering his artistic meaning or that it is his way of working his will upon his audience, we can still judge it only in the light of the larger meaning or effects which it is designed to serve.⁸

The best way to judge the effectiveness of point of view as technique is to study the different narrative postures in several works of art

⁵Schorer, p. 75.

⁶Schorer, p. 75.

⁷Schorer, p. 77.

⁸Wayne C. Booth, "Distance and Point-of-View: An Essay in Classification," in Critical Approaches to Fiction, ed. Shiv K. Kumar and Keith McKean (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968), p. 317.

and decide whether or not the artist succeeds in reaching his desired audience response. The critic who has read widely will have no trouble in comparing various authors' approaches to narrative point of view. However, it is exciting to discover a collection of short stories which makes the study of point of view relatively simple. In The Ways of White Folks one discovers that Langston Hughes experiments with seven points of view and meets with varying degrees of success.

The first person narrator appears in three stories in The Ways of White Folks, yet each is slightly different. "A Good Job Gone," a story about a wealthy white man who goes crazy after his black mistress leaves him, is related as a historic monologue from the point of view of the black house-boy who finds himself without a job after Mr. Lloyd's breakdown. Scholes and Kellogg point out that there is a quite useful distinction between the first person speaker in empirical narrative and the first person speakers of fictional narrative.⁹ By the "telling" of this story, Hughes limits the reader to information which the protagonist shares. Everything appears through this unnamed protagonist's eyes, and the only picture of the protagonist available to the reader is a mirror's reflection. One must realize that the entire story is written in the historic past. By reporting what has already happened, the narrator further selects and limits

⁹Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg, The Nature of Narrative (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), pp. 245-6. In empirical narrative an eyewitness narrator or autobiographical confessor speaks; in fictional narrative the characters tell the primary author-narrator their stories.

what the reader perceives. This retrospective point of view also gives the story a folk tale quality, especially when one realizes by the last sentences ("Say boy, gimme a smoke will you? I hate to talk about it.")¹⁰ that the story has been presented orally and "overheard" by the reader. As John Tilford explains, by telling the story from the "inside"--that is, having one of the characters tell it--there is a certain tone, focus, conviction, meaning, and flavor of style which could not be retained if the story were told in the third person.¹¹

The short sketch entitled "Passing" is also written in the first person but is in the form of a letter. Jack, the son of a black mother and a white father, writes to thank his mother for pretending she did not know him when he and his white fiance passed her on the street. The narrative focus is so limited in the epistolary form that it is questionable as to whether or not "Passing" can be called a short story. The characterization, setting, and plot are so tied up in the implied author's choice of words that as a traditional short story, it simply does not suffice. Jack finds it necessary to tell his mother details which she would not need to be reminded of unless she is senile and blind. For instance, he writes that his brother Charlie is

¹⁰Langston Hughes, The Ways of White Folks (1934; rpt. New York: Vintage Books, 1971), p. 65. All future referneces to the text will be noted by parenthetical page numbers in the body of the essay.

¹¹John E. Tilford, Jr., "Point of View in the Novel" in Critical Approaches to Fiction, ed. Shiv K. Kumar and Keith McKean (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968), pp. 306-7.

"darker than you, even, Ma," (p. 51) and recalls the generosity of his white father who "did buy you a house and send all us kids through school" (p. 53). In case she has forgotten where he went to college, Jack adds, "I'm glad I finished college in Pittsburgh before he died" (p. 53). The structural irony of the piece is its sole redeeming quality. Jack has already passed but has not yet severed his last tie to the Black community--his relationship with his mother. The only thing which still holds them together is their correspondence through letters. In what Scholes and Kellogg term "empirical narration" through an autobiographical confessor, Jack lets his mother know that it was not the presence of his white girl friend that kept him from speaking to her, but that it was the whole concept of "crossing the color line" (p. 53). Early in the letter he states, "If I hadn't had the girl with me, Ma, we might have talked" (p. 49), and later he writes, "But I don't mind being 'white,' Ma" (p. 50). The pitiful closing of the letter pleads: "Even if we can't meet often, we can write, can't we, Ma?" (p. 53). Jack, who has definitely constructed his whole world and has determined his own future, knows that he and his mother can no longer write, that when he betrayed his heritage by passing his mother on the street he had completed the passing process and could now refer to himself as white--without the quotation marks.

Hughes creates a most effective story by combining the first person point of view with a poetic internal monologue in "Red-Headed Baby." This powerfully written piece, about a white sailor who returns to the house of his black lover and finds himself face to face

with his three year old, red-headed, deaf and dumb son, would easily fit between the covers of Jean Toomer's Cane. Poetry and fiction are successfully fused as Hughes allows his creativity full reign. One observes the futile life of Clarence, a poor white sailor whose existence is nothing but "Mosquitoes, sand, niggers" (p. 121). The stagnation of Clarence's life is made quite obvious through the restlessness of the narrative style. Short choppy sentences show a man wanting to run but with no place to go except back to Betsy. Once reunited with her, Clarence hopes to calm his mind, but Hughes presents the following passage which has a distinct Joycean aura:

Soft heavy hips. Hot and browner than the moon--good licker. Drinking it down in little nigger house Florida coast palm fronds scratching roof hum mosquitoes night bugs flies ain't loud enough to keep a man named Clarence girl named Betsy old woman named Auntie from talking and drinking in a little nigger house on Florida coast dead warm night with the licker browner and more firey than the moon. Yeah man! . . . and everybody drinking . . . when . . . the door . . . slowly . . . opens (p. 125).

This stream of consciousness technique is reminiscent of "Penelope" in *Ulysses*, a book with which Hughes probably became familiar in Paris even before it was allowed into the United States. Clarence's complete rejection of his son, and his need to prostitute the evening by paying for his drinks, brings this excellent story to a conclusion of complete pathos.

Perhaps the most difficult point of view to incorporate in one's writing is that of the omniscient narrator. Scholes and Kellogg deny the availability of omniscience as a method for the modern writer. Since omniscience includes the god-like attribute of omnipresence,

a narrator in fiction is imbedded in a time-bound artifact. He does not "know" simultaneously but consecutively. He is not everywhere at once but now here, now there, now looking into this mind or that, now moving to other vantage points.¹²

The range of the story is wide open since the narrator is often compelled to tell the reader everything about every character in every situation. The closest which Hughes comes to this approach in The Ways of White Folks is in the lengthy story entitled "Father and Son." The plot of this tale revolves around the homecoming of Bert, the twenty year old son of Cora, a black housekeeper, and Colonel Norwood, a white plantation owner. The conflict arises when Bert refuses to be a "white folks' nigger" (p. 221) and expects to be treated like the well educated man he is. Bert's pride and his father's obstinacy lead to patricide, Cora's mental breakdown, Bert's suicide, and the lynching of both Bert's dead body and the live body of his brother Willie--the perfect "white folks' nigger." The narrator does not exploit his omniscient capabilities but allows the reader to see behind the different characters at certain times. Therefore, one is able to see that Colonel Norwood is eagerly awaiting his son's return even though his actions around the other characters would never indicate this. The narrator, in the third paragraph, states: "Colonel Norwood never would have admitted, even to himself, that he was standing in his doorway waiting for his half-Negro son to come home. But in truth that is what he was doing" (p. 200, my italics). One quickly sees that the

¹²Scholes and Kellogg, p. 272.

narrator is separated from Norwood and is capable of observing the Colonel's mental state and motives when the Colonel cannot even do this himself. The narrator obviously has power. In section five he begins to set the tone of Bert's rebellion:

There are people (you've probably noted it also) who have the unconscious faculty of making the world spin around themselves, throb and expand, contract and go dizzy. Then, when they are gone away, you feel sick and lonesome and meaningless (p. 220).

Here the narrator foreshadows the forthcoming trouble caused by Bert's refusal to be a "white folks' nigger." Through the use of the parenthetical expression, the narrator steps out of the boundaries of the story and directly addresses the reader. Hughes enjoys making these parenthetical "asides"; there are seventy-three in the book. The ultimate result of the omniscient narrator in this story is the full characterization of Bert, Cora, and Colonel Norwood. Since the point of view is not limited to any one of these main characters, each is able to be developed to an extent not possible with any other narrative perspective.

The simple third person point of view is used in the majority of the selections in The Ways of White Folks. Hughes adds variety to this common narrative approach by giving the implied author or narrator a definite skin color. The reader readily understands that he is viewing the characters and situations through racial eyes, and this understanding adds an extra depth to the stories. "Berry" is a rather short sketch about the mistreatment of a young black man who works at a summer camp where crippled children receive care which is

far inferior to what their middle class white parents have paid for. Milberry, or Berry as the children call him, is uneducated but possesses "plenty of mother wit and lots of intuition about people and places" (p. 174). His insightfulness allows him to see through the scam of the children's home, but since jobs are scarce, Berry puts up with the inept white staff until he is mercilessly dismissed. The first sentence of the story ironically reveals the race of the narrator: "When the boy arrived on the four o'clock train, lo and behold, he turned out to be colored!" (p. 171). From this point, the narration proceeds in a matter-of-fact fashion, commenting on the characters and their relationships with this one black employee. The narrator realizes that Milberry is being overworked, but "Still he did everything and didn't look mad--jobs were hard to get, and he had been hungry too long in town" (p. 175). The naive young man then speaks the passage from which the title of the book is taken:

"Besides," Milberry said to himself, "the ways of white folks, I mean some white folks, is too much for me. I reckon they must be a few good ones, but most of 'em ain't good--leastwise they don't treat me good. And Lawd knows, I ain't never done nothin' to 'em, nothin' a-tall" (p. 175).

The reader is forced to respond with anger when he sees the injustice performed against Milberry. As Booth points out, the implied author can be more or less distant from other characters and can be inferred as approving of actions almost completely while the reader, as chief "reflector," definitely disapproves of the social injustices."¹³ Thus,

¹³Booth, p. 325.

the one good character of the story--a young man who shows love to the crippled children--is sent away without pay. Thereby, the world of the indifferent white narrator triumphs over the helpless black man.

In "Little Dog," Hughes follows the Jamesean technique of further developing the third person narrator into a central intelligence. In what Friedman terms "selective omniscience," the reader is limited to the mind of only one of the characters. "Instead, therefore, of being allowed a composite of viewing angles, he is at the fixed center."¹⁴ Here, the narrator focuses on the thoughts and actions of Miss Clara Briggs, a forty-five year old white spinster who fantasizes about the black janitor who brings meat and bones to her little white dog. The reader is not limited to the shadowing of Miss Briggs' actions by an outsider, but is able to get inside her mind. One sees a lonely, introverted lady who tries to share her life with her little white dog but who runs when she is faced with the possibility of sharing her life with her big black janitor. The strangely sexual imagery of this black man nightly bringing his meat to the lady is fully exploited by the narrator and is reflected in Miss Briggs' mind:

when the Negro really knocked on the door with the meat, she was trembling so that she could not go to the kitchen to get it. "Oh, Flips," she said, "I'm so hungry." She meant to say "You're so hungry." So she repeated it. "You're so hungry! Heh, Flipsy, dog?"

¹⁴Norman Friedman, "Point of View in Fiction: The Development of a Critical Concept" in *The Novel: Modern Essays in Criticism*, ed. Robert Murray Davis (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1969), p. 161.

And from the way the little dog barked, he must have been hungry. He loved meat (p. 167).

Through the use of the central intelligence point of view, one is fully acquainted with the strange thoughts and actions of Miss Clara Briggs. "The result is unity of focus, intensity, strong identification of the reader with one character, and a certain esthetic distance not possible in first person narration."¹⁵

One final point of view is found in "Mother and Child," a story about the birth of a black baby to a white family and the resulting turmoil in the small Ohio town. The baby's father, Douglass Carter, a twenty-six year old farmer, refuses to run as the black community advises; the resolute Carter stays in Boyd's Center waiting for his lover's husband to turn out both baby and mother. In this story Hughes employs the effaced narrator in a dramatic dialogue. Having eliminated the author and the narrator, Hughes is now ready to dispose of mental states altogether. A story with an effaced narrator, as Friedman suggests, is

in effect a stage play cast into the typographical mold of fiction. But there is some difference: fiction is meant to be read, drama to be seen and heard, and there will be a corresponding difference in scope, range, fluidity, and subtlety.¹⁶

This technique (also used by Hemingway in "The Killers") would seemingly be difficult to incorporate since all of the story's vital information must be presented in the conversation of the characters without the aid of Shavian stage directions. However, the technique works exceptionally well in this particular story since the characters

¹⁵Tilford, p. 311.

¹⁶Friedman, p. 162.

involved in the dialogue are a bunch of old ladies who doubtlessly like nothing better than spreading the latest gossip. An outside narrator probably couldn't get a word in edgewise! When the ladies are finally called to order by Madam President, the irony of the story is made apparent:

"The March meeting of the Salvation Rock Ladies Missionary Society for the Rescue o' the African Heathen is hereby called to order. . . . Sister Burns, raise a hymn. . . . Will you-all ladies please be quiet? What are you talking 'bout back there anyhow?" (p. 190).

Amidst the singing, the Sisters realize that there are heathens in need of rescue much closer than Africa. Once again, the narrative technique works for Langston Hughes in this interesting dramatic sketch.

Thus, as one studies narrative technique and applies the theories to a given work of art, he discovers the vast, controlling importance of point of view.

Once made, the author's choice of point of view and the mode of language appropriate to it will influence his presentation of a character, incident, and every other thing represented. For the reader, however, point of view is not an esthetic matter but a mode of perception. The point of view in a given work controls the reader's impression of everything else.¹⁷

As one reads The Ways of White Folks, it is easy to enjoy the well developed plots and the masterful character studies, but when the reader takes a closer look to analyze just what it is that makes this collection of short stories good, he discovers Hughes's excellent use of point of view. Whether he is creating the self-centered narrator of "A Good Job Gone" or the all-seeing narrator of "Father and Son,"

¹⁷Scholes and Kellogg, p. 275.

Hughes carefully molds the narrator to fulfill the function of shaping experience into art. The result is an exceptional assortment of narrative perspectives which do not appear as superfluous embellishment but prove to be integral parts of the aesthetic whole.

CHAPTER III

DESTRUCTION VERSUS SURVIVAL: ALICE WALKER'S NARRATIVE DICHOTOMY

"Without a vision the people perish." Proverbs 29:18

Alice Walker is a woman with a progressive vision which serves as a controlling force, drawing her into the historic past so that constructive change might take place now to assure a better future. She believes that through acceptance of the positive qualities of her past, the black woman will be able to function in the present and future as a spiritually whole individual. This extremely personal vision causes Walker to search her own thoughts and feelings and to reach out to all black women and to tell them repeatedly, "You are not alone." In a 1973 interview, she states,

I am preoccupied with the spiritual survival, the survival whole of my people. But beyond that, I am committed to exploring the oppressions, the insanities, the loyalties, and the triumphs of black women.¹

She feels that it is absolutely necessary that each black woman should share her vision and undertake a personal pilgrimage to discover her true self.

The search for identity, therefore, is a major theme in Walker's fiction. In her 1973 collection of short stories, In Love and Trouble:

¹Alice Walker, as quoted in John F. Callahan, "The Higher Ground of Alice Walker," The New Republic, 14 September 1974, p. 21.

Stories of Black Women, she creates narrators who echo her desire.

However, the degree of spiritual wholeness actually accomplished by Walker's characters depends on the point of view of the story. Through a particular viewpoint, the narrator usually interprets events and ideas. A first person narrator is often plagued with naivete which works well to create dramatic irony but which suggests that the narrator lacks perception. The third person narrator, on the other hand, appears truthful; readers who accept the story as fact rarely question the biases involved. Walker's narrators do not conform to the traditional roles. Instead, her third person narrators function mechanistically and insensitively, reporting grim details with realistic, painful precision. Almost inhumanely, truth appears. The desired effect pessimistically exemplifies what the lives of black women should not be. In her stories of the first person, however, Walker allows her narrators to speak with true human emotions without the hindrance of naivete. A tone of genuineness fosters believability. Insight is not sacrificed to personal touch; forcefulness does not lose out to sentimentality. The first person tales are the stories of real women who have faced countless situations of disparagement but who have realized that in order to survive they must cling to the three ingredients of spiritual wholeness: faith, hope, and love. Walker transposes these concepts from the traditional Christian interpretation and places them in a larger humanism. Through her first person narrators, she attempts to further her message of self-worth: the ability of black women to discover their life's goal in fulfilling their true identity. Whereas

the third person stories work for this same goal through negative impact, the first person tales are more effective since they demonstrate positively how black women can cope with their "oppressions and insanities" and still survive. Of the thirteen stories, seven are arranged to show the progression from the destruction of the spiritually naive to the survival of the spiritually aware. None of Walker's third person characters survives: only the first person narrator/characters achieve spiritual wholeness through their faith that change can occur, their hope that the change will be beneficial, and their love for who they used to be and for who they are now. One traces the evolution of the characters first in terms of blindness, then struggle for vision, and ultimately awareness.

Since Walker's philosophy permeates her stories, a closer examination of her vision reveals her narrators as mere proselytes. Self realization is a process, and the first step to fulfillment is to uncover the hidden beauty and reality of the past. In perhaps her most revealing essay to date, "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens," Walker urges all black women to discover in the lives of their mothers and grandmothers the qualities which made them so spiritually "intense, so deep, so unconscious, that they were themselves unaware of the richness they held."² One must locate the ways in which black ancestral mothers expressed their creativity in a world where they were denied

²Alice Walker, "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," Ms., May, 1974, p. 64

the traditional modes of expression, including literature, music composition, painting, and sculpture.

In searching her own past, Walker discovers that her mother--the wife of a Georgia sharecropper and the mother of eight children--had been able to feed the creative spirit through planting "ambitious gardens" composed of over fifty different varieties of plants.³ The gardens, she recalls, brightened the dreariness of a near-poverty existence and elicited praise and admiration from friends and complete strangers who stopped by and asked "to stand or walk among my mother's art."⁴ Sensing the artist at work, Walker observes:

I notice that it is only when my mother is working in her flowers that she is radiant, almost to the point of being invisible--except as Creator: hand and eye. She is involved in work her soul must have. Ordering the universe in the image of her personal conception of Beauty.

Her face, as she prepared the Art that is her gift, is a legacy of respect she leaves to me, for all that illuminates and cherishes life. She has handed down respect for the possibilities--and the will to grasp them.⁵

Although she encourages others to discover similar personal legacies, Walker fears that with the "rush to return to African values and traditions" there will be a

loss of traditions that are uniquely ours as Black Americans. . . . The loss of Black American traditions can be seen not only in terms of the loss of our literary and cultural heritage but, more insidiously, in terms of the loss of ourselves.⁶

³Walker, "Gardens," p. 70.

⁴Walker, "Gardens," p. 70.

⁵Walker, "Gardens," p. 105.

⁶Alice Walker, as quoted in Jessica Harris, "An Interview with Alice Walker," Essence, July 1976, p. 33.

So, the first step the black woman takes in the search for her identity marks her acceptance of the rich traditions handed down by mothers who created intricate quilt designs, cooked sumptuous though simple meals, and planted gardens.

The second and perhaps most important step in Walker's progressive vision involves self-examination and self-affirmation. Acknowledging the beauty and strengths of her mother, the black woman can accept the same pure qualities within herself while purging the impure ones. "What I very much want for us," Walker states,

is to internalize our strength, common sense, and love for our children--to not give up what has been handed down for centuries. . . . Part of our legacy is to maintain these values so that our children will be able to see the beauty of their ancestors' faces.⁷

In a symposium on the changing role of American women, held in 1972, Walker provides her insights:

I do think the direction many black women take will be different from that of white women because of our history, at least temporarily. The average black woman, who has been working very hard for centuries to survive, will be happy when a man comes along and offers her a chance to rest--or even a chance to work hard in her own home. . . . So for a while, taking care of her own home, children and husband will seem almost like a game. . . . But after the newness has worn off, the black woman will find that after the dishes have been done, repeatedly, and the clothes are whiter than white, and the husband has gone to his job and the children are in school, sewing does not always refresh the mind.

And that discovery is the point I yearn for. . . . For more than anyone the black woman deserves to be as free as she wants to be.⁸

⁷Walker, as quoted in Harris, p. 33.

⁸Alice Walker, as quoted in "Women on Women," American Scholar, 41 (Fall 1972), p. 620.

Through exercising her self will, the black woman can now choose the degree of her freedom and can reject the pretentiousness of imitating middle class white women. In the interview with Jessica Harris, Walker points out the danger of adopting "the more frivolous aimless ways of the average American white woman. . . . We should not replace our strong hands and fists with false fingernails and phony eye-lashes."⁹ According to Walker, "we have done some awful things to ourselves trying to please men."¹⁰ But no longer should the black woman be concerned with such trivialities. She must be able to look in the mirror, search through her self, and accept and affirm what she sees:

We must first of all really love ourselves--what we have done and what we have been. I don't mean pretend to love it 'cause pretend love is crappy; it will get you absolutely nowhere. But the things that we do love we really have to fight for. Whatever stems from true love of self, of what our ancestors have been, will be good for us and a fine legacy.¹¹

Walker very carefully transfers her vision to the narrative voices in her collection. There are in effect thirteen different narrative voices involved in this search for identity, ranging from ten year old Myop in "The Flowers" to the "old colored woman" in "The Welcome Table." Although only five of the characters are allowed to tell their stories in their own words, the others are provided narrators with

⁹Walker, as quoted in Harris, p. 33.

¹⁰Walker, as quoted in Harris, p. 33.

¹¹Walker, as quoted in Harris, p. 33.

varying levels of omniscience to relate their stories for them. One characteristic which all of the narrators have in common is that they are "insiders." They understand the character they are writing about in a way an outside observer could not. This leads to stories that are truthful to the point of ugliness. Pain and violence serve as a backdrop to the third person stories; the extent of this pain is questioned and ultimately accepted by Barbara Smith:

Even as a black woman, I found the cumulative impact of these stories devastating. I questioned the quantity of pain in these sisters' lives and . . . I soon realized . . . that the reason these stories saddened me so much was because of their truthfulness. . . . Harsh as these stories seem, they describe the kind of pain that can be described only by one who has shared it and has recognized its victims as real.¹²

The harsh truthfulness of the stories in In Love and Trouble can be traced to the characters' confrontations with those people and things which stand in the way of their self realization. The characters in the third person stories succumb to the pressure placed on them; they cannot withstand the baptism of fire. In their naivete they either self-destruct or stand idly by while outside forces destroy them. Only the first person narrator/characters develop the spiritual awareness which allows them to overcome the barriers which would hinder their survival.

The most naively innocent of Walker's victims is ten year old Myop in "The Flowers." The two page story tells of a young girl's

¹²Barbara Smith, "The Souls of Black Women," Ms., February 1974, p. 43.

exploration of a forest where she accidentally discovers the skeletal remains of a man who had been lynched. The third person narrator does not attempt to delve into Myop's thoughts; only twice in the story is there any hint of omniscience through the use of the phrase, "it seemed." In the remainder of the story the narrator focuses on Myop's actions with calculated and perhaps overwritten poignancy. Myop, "turning her back on the rusty boards of her family's sharecropper cabin . . . today [makes] her own path" until she finds herself in a gloomy little cove where "the air is damp, the silence close and deep."¹³ Before she can "circle back to the house, back to the peacefulness of the morning," Myop steps on the skull of the lynched man. The sight of the skeleton startles her, but she examines it without emotion until she reaches down to add a "wild pink rose" to her bouquet and discovers the remains of a noose. Looking up, Myop sees another piece of rope hanging from a tree limb. The narrative then abruptly concludes: "Myop laid down her flowers. And the summer was over" (p. 120).

The narrator effectively sketches a child whose world abruptly destructs. Even the child's name suggests her carefree nature; in true myopic fashion, she lacks the knowledge and foresight to be concerned with the presence of death. After stumbling blindly upon

¹³ Alice Walker, "The Flowers," in In Love and Trouble: Stories of Black Women (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973), pp. 119-120. All future references to this edition will be made parenthetically within the text.

the skeleton, Myop contentedly continues to gather her flowers until she comes face to face with the violent racial implications of the noose. Then in that epiphanous moment the child is flooded with the painful awareness of her ancestors' past and is forced to deal with the intrusion of death and violence into her idyllic world.

The poetic and fable-like quality of the tale gives it an air of universality. Through her matter-of-fact tone, the third person narrator suggests that even the most innocent must be shocked into an awareness of the painful reality of life. Presumably, Myop, who has "laid down her flowers"--a symbolic deflowering marking this rite of passage--will be able to incorporate this painful enlightenment into the development of a healthy self image. But this is mere conjecture; the narrator is satisfied to leave Myop standing there in her pain.

In "The Child Who Favored Daughter" the unnamed adolescent protagonist has moved from naivete into an awareness of her sexuality and faces devastating consequences. The story revolves around her father's discovery of a letter written by the girl to her white lover. In the jealous rage which ensues, the father first beats his daughter and then brutally slices off her breasts and tosses them to his waiting dogs. The story is related by a third person narrator whose omniscience allows the reader to see concurrently a picture of relative innocence and the controlling, destructive forces which will destroy that innocence. Walker accomplishes this feat by dividing the story into three distinct narrative sections.

In the first part of the story, the narrator's omniscience is

immediately established through her opening sentences: "She knows he has read the letter" (p. 35). What follows is a description of the girl's slow, mindless trek from the school bus to the front porch of her house where she sees her father waiting for her. In addition to the physical description, the narrator allows the reader to glimpse the internal turmoil of the girl as she sifts through the possible sources of her betrayal and faces the intuitive fears of her father's retribution. The narrative flow is intermittently interrupted by the recurring lines of poetry: "Fire of earth /Lure of flower smells / The sun." Here, and later in the third section of the story, the naturalness of the child's naive love is symbolized by "her simple way of looking at simple flowers" (p. 43). But as she stops to gaze intently at a small patch of black-eyed Susans," she gently caresses the "frail petals and stands a moment wondering" (p. 36, my emphasis). It is here that the girl accepts a thought which she had earlier dismissed: that it was her lover himself who had betrayed her. The first section concludes with the earlier lines of poetry and four additional lines which reflect the girl's mental completion of the childish rhyme "He loves me. He loves me NOT": "Softly the scent of--/ Softly the scent of flowers / And petals / Small, bright last wishes" (p. 36).

In the second section of the story, the narrator describes the same scene from the father's perspective: "he sees her look, . . . knows she knows he has the letter" (p. 37). As the father watches his daughter slowly approach, he notices wasps building their nests in the rafters overhead and realizes that

late in the summer, just as the babies are getting big enough to fly he will have to light paper torches and burn the paper houses down, singeing the wings of the young wasps before they get a chance to fly or to sting him as he sits in the cool of the evening reading his Bible (p. 37).

The symbolism involved is almost blatantly obvious; just as he plans to destroy the baby wasps before they can disturb his peaceful "Christian" existence, he will also destroy his own daughter to protect his pride.

Interspersed among the father's section of the story are the lines: "Memories of years / Unknowable women--/sisters / spouses / illusions of soul / Memories of once / like a mirror reflecting--/ all hope, all loss" (pp. 38, 40). Thanks to her omniscience, the narrator informs the reader of the memories which haunt this man. When he was a child his favorite sister, called "Daughter," had "chosen to give her love to the very man in whose cruel, hot, and lonely fields he, her brother, worked" (p. 38). The tritely melodramatic retelling of Daughter's affair with the white man is the weak link in the story, but there are some interesting parallels between Daughter's existence and that of Gregor Samsa in Kafka's "The Metamorphosis." Like the reaction of Gregor's family, Daughter's family,

threw her betrayal at her like sharp stones, until they satisfied themselves that she could no longer feel their ostracism or her own pain. Gradually, as it became apparent she was not going to die, they took to flinging her food to her as if she were an animal and at night when she howled at the shadows thrown over her bed by the moon [her] father rose up and lashed her into silence with his belt (p. 39).

And just as Grete Samsa's intense love for her brother changes to a hatred which eventually brings about his death, Daughter's brother's "love for her . . . turns into a dull ache of constant loathing"

(p. 39), and his desire to be rid of her leads to her suicide.

Psychoanalyzing the father, the narrator contends that the tragic events of Daughter's life

poisoned him. In a world where innocence and guilt became further complicated by questions of color and race, he felt hesitant and weary of living as though all the world were out to trick him. . . . He could not seem to help hating even the ones who loved him, and laughed loudest at the ones who cared for him (p. 40).

Sufficient groundwork is laid, therefore, to support the sick man's cruel beating of his daughter. During the beating, the father utters his only sentence of conversation of the entire story: "White man's slut!" (p. 41), and the second section concludes with the words of the daughter's letter running through her father's mind: "Jealousy is being nervous about something that has never, and probably won't ever, belong to you" (p. 42).

Section three opens with an expository shift; here the narrator leaves the immediacy of her tale and reflects on the outside forces which have attempted to "reform" the wayward child. The first paragraph of this section is one of the most beautiful in all of Walker's stories, and in it the reader can clearly hear Walker's cry for spiritual wholeness:

No amount of churchgoing changed her ways. Prayers offered nothing to quench her inner thirst. Silent and lovely, but barren of essential hope if not of the ability to love, hers was a world of double images, as if constantly seen through tears. . . . When asked to abandon her simple way of looking at simple flowers, she could only yearn the more to touch those glowing points of bloom that lived and died away among the foliage over there . . . always beyond her reach. Staring often and intently in the ivory hearts of fallen magnolia blossoms she sought the answer to the question that had never really been defined for her,

although she was expected to know it, but she only learned from this that it is the fallen flower most earnestly hated, most easily bruised (p. 43).

As the narrator shifts back to the action of the story, the reader discovers that changes have taken place in both father and daughter during the night which followed the beating. The father arises to a world "newly washed but the same" (p. 43), places his pocketknife "with gentleness and resignation, into his pocket" (p. 44), and "knows as one whose ultimate death must conform to an aged code of madness, resignation is a kind of dying" (p. 44). When the man reaches the shed where his daughter has spent the night, he finds that her eyes are not filled with hatred, "but neither is it passivity he reads in her face. Gone is the silent waiting of yesterday" (p. 44). The girl refuses to fulfill her father's request to deny the letter, and he senses "her slow tortured rising as a strong advance" (p. 44). With one final spark of hope, the narrator records the only word which the girl speaks in the story: "'Going,' she says as if already there" (p. 44). The determination in her voice infuriates the old man, and he ends her chance for escape by striking her to the ground. As the girl falls, her blouse slips off her shoulder and exposes her breasts. Excited by this sight, her father "gathers their fullness in his fingers and begins a slow twisting . . . and he is suddenly burning with an unnamable desire" (p. 45). The man unpockets his knife, and "in his agony," with "quick slashes . . . leaves two bleeding craters the size of grapefruits on her bronze chest and flings what he finds in his hands to the yelping dogs" (p. 45).

Following this grotesque murder, the narrator shifts once again to a reflective expository style and shows the man, at some point in the future, sitting on his porch staring down the road as the school bus pulls away. Lost in insane reverie, the man does not move, but

if he stirs it may be he will see his own child, a black-eyed Susan from the soil on which she walks. A slight, pretty flower that grows on any ground; and flowers pledge no allegiance to banners of any man. If he stirs he might see the perfection of an ancient dream, his own nightmare; the answer to the question still whispered about, undefined. If he stirs he might feel the energetic whirling of wasps about his head and think of ripe late summer days and time when scent makes a garden of the air (pp. 45-46).

Of the third person narratives in In Love and Trouble "Her Sweet Jerome" presents the most negative picture of a black woman's attempt at spiritual survival. The central character in this story is a pathetic, confused woman who lacks the awareness and racial/sexual identity Walker believes is necessary for wholeness. In her attempt to bring order to the chaos surrounding her, the woman literally backs herself into a corner and kills herself with her "enlightenment." She self-destructs. Walker's narrator points out the follies of the protagonist and, in true third person form, describes the actions and thoughts of the protagonist with ironic, stark reality.

The plot of "Her Sweet Jerome" is weaker than some of Walker's other stories. It revolves around the protagonist's jealous search for the "woman" who has stolen her husband's affections from her. The narrator begins in mid-stream, flashes back to the beginning of the relationship, then concludes with the woman's death. The ironic conclusion reveals that the husband had not been lured away by another

woman but had found new fulfillment in a philosophy of black revolution. While the plot is rather trite, an examination of the narrator's description of the events will reveal the spiritual sickness of the central character.

As in many of Walker's stories, the narrator leaves the main character of "Her Sweet Jerome" unnamed. But unlike the protagonist in "The Child Who Favored Daughter" who remains completely nameless, the protagonist in this story is identified through her marriage to a schoolteacher. The narrator quotes the protagonist as saying that "she just couldn't seem to get any rest until . . . 'I were Mr. and Mrs. Jerome Franklin Washington the third'" (p. 25). The narrator makes it clear that Mrs. Washington finds her total identity through her relationship with Jerome. She accepts his constant mistreatment: his beatings, his refusal to go out with her, his derision, and his refusal to make love with her. But in spite of the way Jerome treats her, Mrs. Jerome is actually more concerned about his happiness and welfare than she is about herself. She finds her only pleasure in doing things to please Jerome, and, later, when jealousy controls her actions, she totally neglects her appearance, loses her business, and forfeits her sanity.

The second major flaw in Mrs. Jerome's character is her ignorance. Although her father owned a funeral parlor, and "they were known as 'colored folks with money'" (p. 25), Mrs. Jerome is more concerned with material objects (new cars, umbrella hats, and flashy suits) than with ideas. The narrator tells us that "she was fond of

telling schoolteachers (women schoolteachers) that she didn't miss her 'eddicashion' as much as some did who had no learning and no money both together" (p. 26).

Unfortunately, Mrs. Jerome lacks common sense as well as formal training. Because of her ignorance, she cannot see that Jerome marries her only for her father's money. But beyond her inability to discern motives, she does not understand the people Jerome associates with or the language which they use. She is only remotely acquainted with the circle of men and women who call Jerome "brother" and call themselves "by what they term their 'African' names" (p. 31). When Jerome begins attending "workshops" for young blacks, Mrs. Jerome admits that "she had no idea what went on in these; however, she had long since stopped believing they had anything to do with cabinetmaking or any other kind of woodwork" (p. 36). During her jealous search for Jerome's "lover," she breaks into one of the meetings of Jerome's "comrades" and is jokingly "asked if she had come to 'join the revolution'" (p. 32). The narrator describes how she "stood shaking . . . trying so hard to understand" (p. 32).

In addition to her lack of personal identity and ignorance, Mrs. Jerome's spiritual blindness brings about her own death. When her search for the "other woman" turns up no one, Mrs. Jerome returns home to search for additional clues. Perceiving her own lack of perception, she looks under the bed: "It was dusty and cobwebby, the way the inside of her head felt" (p. 33). Finally, after probing the "intense blackness underneath the headboard," Mrs. Jerome uncovers a pile of

grit-covered books, and "in a rush it came to her: 'It ain't no woman.' . . . It had never occurred to her there could be anything more serious" (p. 33). When she dusted off the books, "fists and guns appeared everywhere" (p. 33) accompanied by titles which featured the words "Black" and "Revolution." With the same bewilderment she experienced at Jerome's meeting, "she realized she didn't even know what the word 'revolution' meant, unless it meant to go round and round, the way her head was going" (p. 34).

In a crescendo of insanity, the narrator concludes her story by showing Mrs. Jerome first stacking the books on the bed and with a knife stabbing them through. She then "hastens with kerosene to set the marriage bed aflame" (p. 34) and in "hopeless jubilation" watches the books, the bed, and finally, the room burn before her. Screaming at the books, "'I kill you! I kill you!'" Mrs. Jerome backs "enraged and trembling into a darkened corner of the room" where "the fire and the words rumbled against her together, overwhelming her with pain and enlightenment. And she hid her big wet face in her singed then sizzling arms and screamed and screamed" (p. 34). The fate of this character is painfully obvious, thanks to the graphic description of the third person narrator. Equally obvious is the voice of Alice Walker heard warning her readers to avoid the self-destructive ways of Mrs. Jerome Franklin Washington the third.

The narrator of the collection's opening story "Roselily" is a third person central intelligence narrator who relates to the reader the destructive thoughts and emotions of the story's main character

Roselily. The story is an innovative, impressionistic tale constructed around Roselily's mental responses to the opening sentences of the Protestant wedding ceremony. With what proves to be almost a Jungian psychological study of Roselily's conscious and subconscious responses to words and phrases, the narrator reveals the aspirations and fears of this mother of four who is getting married for the first time. Assuming the role of reporter rather than interpreter, the narrator presents a story which closely conforms to the dictionary definition of free association:

The non-purposefully linked course, trend or flow of thoughts, ideas and memories that arise in dreams (q.v.) day-dreaming, and free fantasy. . . . The subject or the observer . . . is said to be able to discern in free associations the motives and wishes which control these associations without his agency or volition.¹⁴

Roselily's mental state is quickly identified by the narrator who opens the story with the words "She dreams" (p. 3). While Roselily is more aware of her situation than some of Walker's other characters, she nevertheless allows herself to pass from one form of bondage to another. And as the other third person narratives end on pessimistic notes, "Roselily" concludes with little hope of the protagonist achieving the freedom and spiritual wholeness she desires.

Roselily's desire for change allows the narrator to present proof of Roselily's ultimate failure through paradox and irony. The

¹⁴"Free Association," in Encyclopedia of Psychology, ed. H. J. Eysenck, W. Arnold, and R. Meili (New York: The Seabury Press, 1972).

paradox of the story is two-fold: first, Roselily sees marriage as a route of escape. Through marrying a man from Chicago she hopes to escape from the rigors of the sewing factory, from the pressures of trying to raise three children on her own and from "reminders of the times she would just as soon forget" (p. 7) of her life in Mississippi. Second, Roselily hopes to escape the oppression of Christianity through adopting her husband's Moslem religion. But subconsciously, as the narrator's words reveal, Roselily sees both paradoxes involved. The phrase "to join this man and this woman" prompts Roselily to think of "ropes, chains, handcuffs, his religion" (p. 4), and the single word "together" causes her to speculate about her life in Chicago where

Her place will be in the home, he has said, repeatedly,
promising her the rest she has prayed for. But she wonders.
When she is rested, what will she do? They will make babies.
. . . Her hands will be full. . . . She is not comforted (p. 7).

Roselily's rebellion against the Christian religion which has shaped the lives of those around her comes partially in response to her husband's disdain for it. While "she can imagine God, a small black boy, timidly pulling the preacher's coattail" (p. 4), she can also see the drawbacks of "His religion. A lifetime of black and white. Of veils" (p. 5), "where she will be required to sit apart with covered head" (p. 4).

Although Roselily seems to at least subconsciously detect the paradox involved in her desire to escape her past, she does not discern the major flaw in her marital relationship. Roselily admits that "She does not even know if she loves him" (p. 7), but she is blinded to the cause of this uncertainty. Once again, however, Alice Walker's

words provide a clue to Roselily's perplexing condition: "But first of all we must love ourselves." Roselily has none of this self-love; consequently, she is unable to love others. What Roselily "loves" in this man who will be her husband is his potential to change her, to mold her into a person she can love. Ironically, Roselily does not comprehend why she wants to be changed as the narrator lets us see: "She loves his understanding of her condition. She thinks she loves the effort he will make to redo her into what he truly wants" (pp. 7-8). Notice that Roselily says "what he truly wants"; she does not yet realize that only she possesses the ability to change herself. This revelation would be a first step towards spiritual recovery.

The story concludes with images of Roselily's poor self concept and of the barriers which obstruct her desire for freedom:

Something strains upward behind her eyes. She thinks of the something as a rat trapped, cornered scurrying to and fro in her head, peering through the windows of her eyes. She wants to live for once. But doesn't know quite what that means. Wonders if she has ever done it. If she ever will (p. 8).

Standing between Roselily and her dream of experiencing life are the black preacher ("it seems to her he has always been standing in front of her, barring her way" [p. 8]) and her new husband, whose "hand is like the clasp of an iron gate" (p. 8). Amidst the pandemonium of the period following "his peace," Roselily feels anything but peaceful: "She feels ignorant, wrong, backward. She presses her worried fingers into his palm. He is standing in front of her" (p. 9). The narrator seals Roselily's fate by concluding, "In the crush of well-wishing people, he does not look back" (p. 9). The story ends, Roselily's

dreaming is over, and she must face a future devoid of the love and self-acceptance she has so desperately been seeking.

In "'Really, Doesn't Crime Pay?'" the first story in the collection which is related by a first person narrator, we can see a subtle change from the unbuffered pessimism of the third person tales. Although the narrator of the story is by no means "spiritually whole," she at least possesses the desire for change and to some extent controls the events of her own life. The story is composed of excerpts from the diary of Myrna, who, like Roselily, has been trapped in the bonds of matrimony. The story is somewhat cryptic since the dated and paginated excerpts do not follow a true chronological order. While the technique of the story is confusing at first (much like the beginning of a Virginia Wolfe novel), the reader soon realizes that Walker has simply included a flashback in her story. The diary technique is significant in several ways. Most importantly, Myrna, without fearing the judgment of an audience, can be completely truthful in her confessions. Since the journal is written in the present active voice, the action, in its immediacy, is free from the retrospective distance allowed a third person narrator. Everything we read comes directly from Myrna. An additional benefit of this innovative technique is that the reader is spared the unnecessary details of a continuous narrative; often a single sentence or a short paragraph sufficiently reveals Myrna's present condition.

In this story Walker answers the question posed by the narrator in "Roselily": "When she is rested, what will she do?" Myrna is a

thirty-two year old woman who already feels old and has lost the desire to discover her true identity. The reasons for her condition are three-fold: she is married to a man (Ruel) who encourages her to deny her racial identity; Ruel also discourages her creative writing abilities; and she is betrayed by the one man (Mordecai Rich) whom she thought truly understood her creative spirit. At no point in the story does Myrna experience true love; for one brief week she and Mordecai "deny each other nothing" (p. 18), but this passionate display turns out to be unwarranted trust on Myrna's part, and lustful manipulation on the part of Mordecai. The physical relationship between Ruel and Myrna, on the other hand, is cold and perfunctory. Myrna passively accepts Ruel's attempts to make the baby which he so desperately desires, but in the final irony of the story we discover that Myrna has been using the pill and denies her husband the child which would be a testimony to his masculinity. Myrna decides that if she cannot be a fulfilled person who is spiritually whole, that her husband will not be one either.

Perhaps one can best detect Myrna's negative self image in the words which she chooses to describe herself and her lifestyle. In the first entry of the diary, Myrna paints a picture of herself as the epitome of feminine, middle class "fluff." She is the total embodiment of all that Walker warns against: "We should not replace our strong hands and fists with false fingernails and phony eyelashes." All of the images she uses suggest whiteness and artificiality. She begins by writing:

I sit here . . . writing in this notebook, looking down at my Helena Rubenstein hands . . . and why not? Since I am not a serious writer my nails need not be bitten off, my cuticles need not have jagged edges (p. 10).

Pampered with all types of lotions and creams, the artificially "sweet-smelling, small, and soft" hands of Myrna caress the "white and frilly" shirt she is wearing and move up to her throat where the scent of gardenias (also white) "floats beneath [her] hairline" (p. 10). Myrna implies that she is the way she is because of her decision to conform to someone else's image of her. Her "surrogate whiteness" offends Myrna, but she has, as a result of her destroyed will, resigned herself to this condition: "If I should spread my arms and legs or whirl, . . . the sweet smell of my body would be more than I could bear. But I fit into my new surroundings perfectly" (pp. 10-11). It is not until much later in the story that the reader realizes that the Myrna speaking at the beginning of the story is only the empty shell of the vibrant, creative Myrna who once existed.

Although Myrna does not discuss in detail the beginnings of her relationship with Ruel, one comment suggests that love has never been a part of their marriage:

He married me because although my skin is brown he thinks I look like a Frenchwoman. . . . I console myself with this thought: My family tends to darken as we get older. One day he may wake up in bed with a complete stranger (p. 13).

Caught up in the pressures of a bourgeois existence, Ruel fails to offer any edification for his wife's creativity, and it is into this spiritual void that Mordecai Rich easily slithers. A vagabond writer who is "scribbling down impressions of the South" (p. 12), Mordecai

serves as a foil to the lifeless character of Ruel. Mordecai is young, carefree, and seductive; he is a threat to both Ruel and Myrna. Myrna seems to be unaware of the serpent-like picture she paints of Mordecai though she describes him as "mocking," "cruel," "skinny black," "cold-eyed," and even "snake-eyed" (pp. 12, 14, 15). Mordecai possesses the ability, however, to make Myrna laugh, and like the serpent with Eve, causes her to question the superiority of her Master (Ruel or "Rule").

One afternoon, as Myrna writes in the grape arbor--her Garden--Mordecai slips in unnoticed, snatches the notebook from her hand, and reads aloud:

"No wife of mine is going to embarrass me with a lot of foolish, vulgar stuff," (This is Ruel's opinion of my writing.) Every time he tells me how peculiar I am for wanting to write stories, he brings up having a baby or going shopping, as if these things are the same. . . . And all the while I was grieving over my last story. Outlined--which is as far as I take stories now--but dead in embryo. My hand stilled by cowardice, my heart the heart of a slave (pp. 15-16).

After coaxing Myrna into allowing him to read the rough sketch of her latest story which tells of a one-legged black woman who hangs herself because of her husband's inability to love her, Mordecai gives Myrna the impression that he is truly interested in her writing and convinces her to share her work with him. For perhaps the first time in her life, Myrna is able to appreciate her self-worth. In the light of Mordecai's flattery ("You could be another Zora Hurston" [p. 18]), Myrna slips from reality into fantasy:

Already I see myself as he sees me. A famous authoress, miles away from Ruel, miles away from anybody. I am dressed in dungarees, my hands are a mess. I smell of sweat. I glow with happiness (p. 18).

She senses that "the moment of [her] deliverance is at hand"--the moment that Ruel discovers that she "is not a womb without a brain that can be bought with Japanese bathtubs and shopping sprees" (p. 18).

Unfortunately Myrna's Jubilee never comes. Mordecai Rich skips town and Myrna suffers an emotional breakdown. In one excerpt, Myrna writes: "Ruel tells me I act like my mind's asleep. It is asleep, of course" (p. 19). However disillusioned she might be, Myrna still functions until the day she picks up a magazine which falls open to a story authored by Mordecai Rich. Although the main character of the story has been changed, Myrna recognizes the story as her own. The crowning blow to Myrna's pride is the editor's note that Mordecai's "next book will be called 'The Black Woman's Resistance to Creativity in the Arts'" (p. 21). (A little too much of Alice Walker here, perhaps.)

This ultimate betrayal by the only man she has ever trusted is more than Myrna can handle, and she writes, "while Ruel snored on his side of the bed, I washed the prints of his hands off my body. Then I plugged in one of his chain saws and tried to slice off his head" (p. 21). Unfortunately, the noise awakens Ruel, and Myrna is institutionalized where even the doctors and nurses "do not take [her] seriously" (p. 21).

The Myrna who returns from the asylum is spiritually dead, but there is a small seed of hope for a re-birth. Her life is now a travesty of pretense and consent. Myrna concludes the description of her empty existence:

I wait, beautiful and perfect in every limb, cooking supper

as if my life depended on it. Lying unresisting on his bed like a drowned body washed to shore. But he is not happy. For he knows now that I intend to do nothing but say yes until he is completely exhausted . . .

When he is quite, quite tired of me I will tell him how long I've relied on the security of the Pill. When I am quite, quite tired of the sweet, sweet smell of my body and the softness of these Helena Rubenstein hands I will leave him and this house. Leave them forever without once looking back.

Myrna discovers the truth which Alice Walker writes about in the essay "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens": "To be an artist and a Black woman, even today, lowers our status in many respects, rather than raises it."¹⁵ One can only hope that Myrna will walk away from her oppressions. Her chances of survival are good since she still has her notebooks, still has a sense of humor, and still possesses the ability to resist Ruel's creative urge. We can be sure that her identity, if ever truly regained, will contain deep scars from her past. Perhaps someday Myrna will find the courage to escape and live out her fantasy: "my hands are a mess. I smell of sweat, I glow with happiness" (p. 18).

Walker displays one of her most insightful analyses of the spiritual condition of black women in "Everyday Use." This story, which is widely anthologized, tells of a "successful" black lady who pays a visit to her mother and sister to claim several of her family's antiques and is disgruntled when her mother refuses to give her a "priceless" quilt. Mrs. Johnson, the mother of Maggie and Dee, serves as the narrator of the story and provides full characterization of her

¹⁵ Walker, "Gardens," p. 68.

two daughters and of herself. None of the three is perfect, but the narrator's perceptive and honest words allow the reader to see the positive qualities Walker idealizes. Through examining the narrator's impression of herself and her daughters, we can focus on those character traits which are either healthful or detrimental to the spiritual survival of modern black women.

Mrs. Johnson tells of herself in a folksy, down-to-earth fashion, often addressing the audience directly ("you've no doubt seen" and "Have you ever seen" [pp. 47, 49]). Through her narration we discover that she is a hard working, "big-boned" (p. 48) woman who can kill a hog or a calf as well as any man. But more important than her physical attributes, we discover that this middle-aged woman possesses common sense, a sense of humor, an awareness of the past, and the ability to enjoy life. While waiting for Dee to arrive, she recounts a dream about appearing on a "This is Your Life"-type TV show honoring her "famous" daughter. Rather than being herself, Mrs. Johnson muses, "I am the way my daughter would want me to be: a hundred pounds lighter, my skin like an uncooked barley pancake" (p. 48). She is not afraid to admit that Dee intimidates even her, but in the climactic moment of the story when Dee demands that her mother give the handmade quilts to her rather than to Maggie, Mrs. Johnson finds an inner strength--"Just like when I'm in church and the spirit of God touches me and I get happy and shout" (p. 58)--and for the first time in her life she says no to Dee while lovingly affirming Maggie.

Maggie has rarely had anything go right for her. Scarred badly

by a fire which destroyed their house twelve years earlier (but which surprisingly did not destroy the church, the kitchen benches, or Grandma Dee's quilts), Maggie walks like a lame dog struck by a car. According to her mother, "Like good looks and money, quickness passed Maggie by. She will marry John Thomas (who has mossy teeth in an earnest face)" (p. 50). Although Maggie envies and stands in awe of her sister, she also disdains Dee's pretentiousness and her lack of knowledge about her own family. When Dee is unable to answer her boyfriend's question about who made the dasher of the churn, which she plans to display on an alcove table, Maggie replies, "Aunt Dee's first husband whittled the dash. . . . His name was Henry, but they called him Stash" (p. 55). And Dee laughingly responds, "Maggie's brain is like an elephant" (p. 56). Her mother, aware of the value of knowing family history, sees Maggie's memory as an asset. As if a model from Walker's essay, Maggie already knows how her grandmothers expressed their creativity, and more importantly, she learned their craft from them. When Dee rages "[Maggie]'d probably be backward enough to put [the quilts] to everyday use" (p. 57), her mother replies "She can always make some more. . . . Maggie knows how to quilt" (p. 58). Maggie interrupts the argument to tell her mother that Dee can have the quilts, adding, "I can 'member Grandma Dee without the quilts" (p. 58). Her unassuming attitude stands in sharp contrast to the selfish nature of her sister.

Dee proves to be a foil to her mother and sister. She is everything that Maggie is not: well-educated, lighter complected, "with

nicer hair and a fuller figure" (p. 49). But she also is insensitive and condescending. Her mother recalls how Dee stood by watching the house burn down: "Why don't you do a dance around the ashes? I'd wanted to ask her. She had hated the house that much" (pp. 49-50). And her mother also remembers how Dee would read to them "without pity . . . pressing us to her with the serious way she read, to shove us away at the moment, like dimwits, we seemed about to understand" (p. 50). Dee is also guilty of looking in the wrong places for her personal identity. Instead of learning of her Grandma Dee or her Uncle Stash, Dee has adopted African traditions, changed her name to Wangero Leewanika Kemanja, and urges Maggie to discover her "heritage": "It's really a new day for us. But from the way you and Mama still live you'd never know it" (p. 59).

After putting on a pair of sunglasses "that hid everything above the tip of her nose and her chin" (p. 59) Dee/Wangero and her boyfriend depart, and "Maggie smiled . . . a real smile, not scared," and after sending Maggie for a dip of snuff, Mrs. Johnson concludes, "then the two of us sat there just enjoying" (p. 59). This positive ending shows two black women with a lot to enjoy since they both have many of the requirements for a healthy spiritual life.

The first person narrator in "To Hell With Dying" is one of the healthiest characters in Walker's stories. Although she is only twenty-four at the end of the narrative, the unnamed young woman portrays herself in positive terms and shows the reader that there is sufficient hope for the future. This one character is able to do what the

majority of Walker's characters cannot: she accomplishes a successful fusion of the past and present while developing a healthy self image. This self image is fostered by those around her--her parents and her brother but especially by Mr. Sweet.

"To Hell With Dying" is a sentimental tale of old Mr. Sweet's numerous encounters with death. But through the timely intervention of the narrator's family, Mr. Sweet is rescued from the brink of death many times throughout the thirty or forty years recorded. Each time he heard that Mr. Sweet was dying, the narrator's father would gather his children, often in the middle of the night, and rush to Mr. Sweet's bedside and cry, "To hell with dying, man. . . . These children want Mr. Sweet!" (p. 129). Then a few strokes to his long white tobacco and wine smelling beard and a little tickling by the smallest child would bring Mr. Sweet around. The family could then rest until they received word once again that Mr. Sweet was dying, and the whole scene would be repeated.

The narrator's healthy self image developed as a result of the positive feedback she received in her relationship with Mr. Sweet. He made her feel special: "Mr. Sweet used to call me his princess, and I believed it. He made me feel pretty at five and six, and simply devastating at the blazing age of eight and a half" (pp. 131-2). While it perhaps fostered a naive sense of power, the narrator participated in the "revivals" of Mr. Sweet by being "the one chosen to kiss him and tickle him long before I knew the rite of Mr. Sweet's rehabilitation" (p. 132). In return for bringing him back to life, Mr.

Sweet would play with the children, for, as the narrator recalls, he "had the grace to be shy with us which is unusual in grown-ups" (p. 130). What the children enjoyed most about Mr. Sweet, however, was the way he played his steel guitar when he was "on the verge of being blind drunk . . . and was . . . very melancholy and sad" (p. 130). When Mr. Sweet sang his bitter-sweet songs about love gone bad, the narrator fantasizes: "I held his woolly head in my arms and wished I could have been old enough to have been the woman he loved so much and that I had not been lost years and years ago" (p. 132). Sometimes when he sang, Mr. Sweet would "cry out loud," but the narrator and her brother did not let this embarrass them because "he knew that we loved him" (p. 134). This free display of emotions produced a symbiotic relationship which was mutually beneficial.

Since the story is written from a retrospective point of view, the reader sees the actions of the story through the eyes of the narrator who is older than twenty-four. Just how old is not significant, but it is important to notice that she looks back on events of her childhood and early adult life and that she interprets these events as positive influences on her character. Unlike Dee in "Everyday Use," this narrator is able to appreciate her family and Mr. Sweet even after she has moved away and acquired an education. When called back from the university to revive Mr. Sweet one last time, the narrator is just as willing to leave her dissertation for Mr. Sweet's sake as she was willing to lose a couple hours of sleep as a seven year old. After she returns home, the narrator is surprised to discover how things

have changed while remaining the same. Mr. Sweet's shack is more run down, but it is also covered with beautiful yellow roses which the narrator's family had planted years ago. Although he is now ninety years old, Mr. Sweet still has his familiar wine and tobacco smelling white beard, and his eyes light up when he sees the narrator walk in. Mr. Sweet only responds briefly to the narrator's attempts at revival before dying, but he makes sure that the trip is not wasted by telling the girl's father beforehand to give his steel guitar to his "princess" after he died. While plucking the strings and humming "Sweet Georgia Brown," the narrator is lost in a final moment of reverie:

The magic of Mr. Sweet lingered still in the cool steel box. Through the window I could catch the fragrant delicate scent of tender yellow roses. The man on the high old-fashioned bed with the quilt coverlet and the flowing white beard had been my first love (p. 138).

Through Mr. Sweet the narrator has learned the value and reality of love. Unlike Walker's characters who find unhappiness and bondage in their relationships, she finds freedom and fulfillment. The narrator's closing words indicate that Mr. Sweet was just a beginning--that due to the sensitivity nurtured in her relationship with the old man she can now turn to others and enter into a healthy exchange of love. We also see, however, that this character is not satisfied to stay at home and hold onto her steel guitar and quilted coverlet. The narrator's ability to acknowledge the past while setting goals for the future will assure her of an existence which is spiritually whole.

CHAPTER IV

NARRATIVE MANIPULATION OF HISTORY AND MYTH IN

HAL BENNETT'S INSANITY RUNS IN OUR FAMILY

If one listens to the faintest but constant suggestions of his genius, which are certainly true, he sees not to what extremes, or even insanity, it may lead him.

Walden

The works of Hal Bennett chronicle the author's creation of a fictional world and his attempts to control that world. At first loosely written and unwieldy, Bennett's novels¹ were praised for their momentary excellencies but were damned for their "persistent thinness of narrative, the repetitiveness and the so-what ending[s]."² As Bennett continued to refine his world, however, critics recognized the mark of a writer who "might do for Burnside [Virginia] something like what Faulkner did for Yoknapatawpha."³ The fifty-one year old native of Virginia creates the isolated, all-black world of Burnside to highlight the color hierarchy: light-skinned blacks rule the

¹Hal Bennett's novels are: Wilderness of Vines (New York: Doubleday, 1966); The Black Wine (New York: Doubleday, 1969); Lord of the Dark Places (New York: Norton, 1970); Wait Until the Evening (New York: Doubleday, 1974); and Seventh Heaven (New York: Doubleday, 1976).

²Rev. of Wilderness of Vines, by Hal Bennett, Choice, July 1967, p. 529.

³Irving Howe, "New Black Writers," Harper's Magazine, December 1969, p. 137.

darker-skinned. His stories also commonly deal with sexual maturation and aberration, murder, black magic, self-hatred, and mistrust of anything that is white. But Bennett was not satisfied in only creating an isolated Southern black community; Burnside is carefully balanced by Cousinsville, New Jersey, where housing projects are inhabited by folks who left their roots in Burnside and moved north during the Great Migration. In his five novels, Bennett builds new levels of meaning into Burnside and Cousinsville until both locations take on mythic proportions. Included in the setting are the historical and mythical struggles of the black man: South vs. North; agrarianism vs. industrialization; black vs. white; and man vs. woman.

At first Bennett had trouble creating people to dwell in his mythic world. In the early novels, both the characters and their stories seemed too small for the world they were called to inhabit.⁴ Irving Howe remarks that Bennett, in his first two novels, "sometimes brilliantly, sometimes clumsily, . . . begins to provision an imagined world of American blacks."⁵ In doing so, Bennett often traces the maturation of one central character, as the early novels function as satirical Bildungsromane. Although the major character of each novel is different, minor characters often appear in more than one novel. In the more recent works, Bennett's characters begin to assume the same

⁴Ronald Walcott's article "The Novels of Hal Bennett," Black World, June 1974 and July 1974, analyzes the weaknesses and strengths of the first three novels. The Choice review of Wilderness of Vines claims that Bennett "badly needs a worthwhile story to tell."

⁵Howe, p. 137.

mythic dimension as their world. Ronald Walcott claims that Bennett provides "the stuff of racial stereotype at the point where stereotype is transferred into archetype."⁶ What makes the characters archetypal is their unsentimentalized humanity. Whores and hustlers, winos and murderers live in Bennett's world;⁷ they have "real problems, real humor . . . , and [speak with] the real voices of Americans caught between unacceptable pasts and unfathomable futures."⁸

Nowhere in Bennett's work do setting and character better coalesce than in Insanity Runs in Our Family (1977), which marks Bennett's successful venture into the genre of the short story. As Langston Hughes and Alice Walker had previously made the transition from novels to short stories, Bennett easily switches genres.⁹ His first published story, "Dotson Gerber Resurrected," was highly praised.¹⁰ This story and the others in the collection perpetuate the

⁶Walcott, June 1974, p. 48.

⁷Sandra Ruoff Watson, rev. of Insanity Runs in Our Family, by Hal Bennett, Library Journal, 10 June 1977, p. 140.

⁸Rev. of Insanity Runs in Our Family, by Hal Bennett, Kirkus Reviews, 15 March 1977, pp. 297-298.

⁹Perhaps it is more impressive for an aspiring artist to write a novel rather than a story. It is also interesting to note that, like Hughes, Bennett's first published work was a collection of poetry, The Mexico City Poems [and] House on Hay (Chicago: Obsidian Press, 1961).

¹⁰Playboy selected Bennett as the most promising young writer of the year (1970) for this story. Three other stories were later published in Playboy, while others appeared in Playgirl, Players, The Virginia Quarterly Review, and The Farleigh Dickinson Quarterly Review.

world of Bennett's novels. Many familiar characters appear in stories which are intensely climactic yet profoundly humorous. Here Bennett achieves a greater degree of coherence than in his novels. He is forced to tighten his plots and characterizations, but since the mythic world is still intact, his short fiction maintains more historical and philosophical depth than does that of Walker.

The mastery of the collection is due to its narrative excellence. Far from the early Bennett who was called "a writer in search of a style,"¹¹ the author of *Insanity*, an accomplished artist, deftly manipulates narrative posture. A pleasant balance of first and third person narratives corresponds to the balance between stories set in Burnside and Cousinsville. While the majority of the stories are concretely set in either of the two mythic cities, one story is apocalyptically set elsewhere to create a universality which further expands the mythic world. Bennett's narrators emphasize place and time to demonstrate the progression of the modern black from point of origin (Burnside) to present condition (Cousinsville), and finally to future alternatives (Universality). In exploring all three areas, the narrators maintain a firm grasp on history and myth and thus create a world which synthesizes the real and the surreal. In reading the collection of *Insanity* completely through, one observes first a cautious optimism or ambivalence of narrative, then the intrusion of racial myth and origin, and finally the transformation of cultural history

¹¹Walcott, June 1974, p. 37.

into universal but fantasized truths. Here protagonists seek to liberate themselves from history and tradition as the perceptive, third person narrator has already done. Irony and evolution of characters highlight the tension between the real-life stance of the personae and the apocalyptic one of the speaker.

The sixteen year old narrator of "Dotson Gerber Resurrected" traces the evolution of his father from a man bound by history and myth to one who believes that he is free from their influence. The perceptive narrator, however, sees past his father's optimism and detects the firm grasp of tradition. Set in Burnside, the story tells of Walter Beaufort's murder of Dotson Gerber and his struggle to stand up to white society, his wife, and himself. Mr. Beaufort's unnamed son serves as narrator, and his opening sentence sets the humorous, surrealistic tone of the story: "We saw the head of Mr. Dotson Gerber break ground at approximately nine o'clock on a bright Saturday morning in March out near our collard patch."¹² Summoned by the commotion of the chickens, his wife, and daughter, Mr. Beaufort nonchalantly explains that he killed Mr. Gerber a few months earlier because

he kept calling me Uncle. . . . I told him that black people didn't appreciate white folks' calling us Uncle any longer. But he just kept on calling me that, so I hit him in the head with my shovel. . . . I didn't intend to kill him . . . I just wanted to teach him some respect. After all, things have changed" (p. 90).

¹²Hal Bennett, "Dotson Gerber Resurrected," in Insanity Runs in Our Family (New York: Doubleday, 1977), p. 88. All future references to the text will be noted by parenthetical page numbers.

As the narrator continues his story, he realizes, however, that "things" have not changed enough. Burnside and its people still shackle his father. Forced to deal with an overbearing wife and daughter who "looked at him . . . as though there were something dirty and pathetic about being a black man" (p. 91), Mr. Beaufort decides to turn himself over to the sheriff in nearby Dillwyn so the whole world can know that he killed a white man. Although Mrs. Beaufort thinks this move is asinine, the narrator, also a black man, understands why his father is so proud of killing Dotson Gerber.

Until now, he'd always had to bury his rich, black male rage in the far corner of some infertile field, lest it do harm to him and to the rest of us as well. But by telling that he'd killed that white man, he would undo all the indignities he had ever suffered in the name of love (p. 92).

When they discover that the sheriff is out of town, Mr. Beaufort and his son guide their mule to Mr. Dotson Gerber's house. They are greeted by Mrs. Gerber's insane ("white people claimed that she had arthritis" [p. 95]) mother, who sits on the front porch rocking and waving the Confederate flag. "She might have been saluting Lee's army marching proudly on its way to Appomatox, which was only a few miles away" (p. 96). This historic landmark helps locate mythic Burnside near the site of the South's surrender to the North, where according to Bennett's mythology, white men fought the black man's battle. After hearing him speak to her mother, Mrs. Gerber comes outside and reprimands "Uncle Walter" for coming to the front door. But she responds in a curious way to the news that her husband is now growing out of the Beaufort's garden. Since she is planning to remarry, Mrs. Gerber

wants to avoid any public attention. She promises to stop calling Mr. Beaufort "Uncle Walter" if he will promise not to tell about her husband's murder: "It would be a big embarrassment to me . . . if anybody found out about Dotson being buried in a collard patch. As much as he hated collard greens" (p. 98). Mr. Beaufort assures her that the collards are a thing of the past since all the blacks in Burnside gave up farming long ago and now work in the local factories. But Mrs. Gerber, "almost stomping her foot," insists, "'But collards were there'" (p. 98). The white woman simply cannot forget the past; the absent collards are as real to her as the days when a black man would not consider coming to her front door or dream of objecting to being called "Uncle."

The narrator stands by during this humorous conversation, then notices his father "looking at Mrs. Gerber with a kind of amused pity darkening his eyes, as though he realized now that no white person could ever understand why he wanted them to know about Mr. Dotson Gerber" (p. 99). He sees that the white folks of Dillwyn refuse to relinquish their myth of racial superiority and black subservience. Just as he and his father have to deal with Mrs. Beaufort who believes "'a nigger man, he ain't worth a damn'" (p. 91) and white deputies who "looked at us as though we were two hounds who had by some miracle managed to get up onto a mule" (p. 95), the narrator realizes that his father must act. When Mrs. Gerber asks what he intends to do, Mr. Beaufort assures her that he will tell no one. Then, his "face [lights] up with a great big grin. Not the kind of tame, painful grin

that a black man puts on when he's rebelling. But a large beautiful grin" and Mr. Beaufort announces, "'I'm going to plant collard greens around him'" (p. 99).

After leaving the shocked white woman, Mr. Beaufort makes the same announcement to his wife who is sure he has gone stark crazy. However, he slaps her in the mouth and states, "' I don't want no more trouble out of you'" (p. 100). The narrator comments: "Mama melted against him like warm cheese. . . . I hadn't seen them together like that for years" (p. 100). The scene is now set for the Beauforts' return to farming. Using the steadily growing Dotson Gerber as a scarecrow, the family plants collards until one day Mr. Beaufort quits his job at the factory and asserts, "'I'm farming again'" (p. 101). He thereby reverses history. By rebelling against the lifestyle which forced the black man to labor in the white-owned factories and then to spend his wages in the white-owned stores, Mr. Beaufort is able to gain his freedom. Black neighbors who "didn't visit any more, now that most of them worked in the factories" (p. 101) begin dropping by to buy a pound of collards and a few tomatoes. By the end of the summer, the whole family is working in the garden and the Beauforts are self-sufficient. Even the white sheriff stops by to get a watermelon (reversal of stereotypes!).

Bennett is not satisfied in ending on a totally positive note. He and his narrator realize that the black man cannot rectify past injustices in one short summer. There are no pat answers here. The narrator notices his satisfied-looking father turn his head to watch

the Greyhound bus rumble by on its way to Richmond where black men find "comfort" from white whores. The narrator, his epiphany completed, comments:

I think that I understood everything about him then, and it hurt me so much that I deliberately turned my back. The lesson of that summer seemed a particularly bitter one, because we had done everything and we had done nothing. Mr. Dotson Gerber would certainly be growing in my father's fields every spring forever. And my father, my poor father would always watch and admire the Greyhound to Richmond. The same way that in the deepest and sincerest and blackest part of himself he would always hate himself and believe that God is the greatest white man of all (pp. 102-3).

For a brief moment the narrator wants to believe that his father, representing all black men, is able to change his history and counter-act some of the white-perpetuated myths. But he concludes by acknowledging "how it feels to be black and forever afraid, and [how] the white man, goddamn him, . . . causes everything. Even when he is God. Even when he is dead" (p. 103). In his resurrected power, Dotson Gerber still calls the shots for "Uncle Walter." Although Mr. Beaufort fails to comprehend his predicament, the observant narrator gains increased racial awareness. Through the father's folly, the son triumphs.

David Stapleton, the seventeen year old narrator of "The Ghost of Martin Luther King," also struggles to come to terms with history and tradition. Here history haunts the present as ghosts recall past injustices and offer direction for the future. The narrator comes off age when he moves beyond the ineffectual example of his elders and learns to act on his own. This story is one of the few where humor plays no part whatsoever, since pathos dominates the narrator's

sensitive description of events. David is the son of a man "who is thin, timid and black" (p. 68) and a large, light-skinned woman whose left breast (the one closest to her heart) was cut off five years earlier by white doctors attempting to stop the spread of cancer. David remarks that "the fact that she is still alive has converted her to the rationale of white men," but adds, "the rest of us are not so ready to believe that white people have stopped being diabolical after three centuries of being devils" (p. 69). David's only hope for a positive role model comes from his Uncle George who stands in sharp contrast to his emasculated father and "hollowed-out" (p. 70) mother. George is an activist; he is the ring-leader of a group of blacks who protest their denial of equal opportunity at the factory in Dillwyn.

While visiting neighboring friends one night, David receives word that his uncle has been beaten up and arrested for picketing the factory. On his way home to notify his parents, David notices the abandoned farmland surrounding him: "the fields were stark under the hunched moon's glare, as though the earth begged forgiveness for the evil that man was doing to himself" (p. 73). David, like the narrator of "Dotson Gerber," recognizes the destruction which industrialization has brought to the black community, but his sense of history goes back even further. Hearing the yelping of dogs, David thinks

about those movies I had seen of Nazi Germany and the hounds of fear. It was true, too, that in these same woods and fields, black slaves had once made their desperate bid for freedom in the years before the Civil War. There had been hounds then, too, slaving at the heels of frightened men.

Had so much changed since then? Was it true that America's Negroes had become the successors to Hitler's Jews? (p. 73).

At this point of awakened historical awareness, David first sees the ghost of Martin Luther King who approaches him "eyes cast down, with an expression of infinite sorrow on his face, as though he was looking for something on the way and not finding it" (p. 74). David assures the reader that the ghost is "as real as anything" (p. 74) he has ever seen. Diving into bushes by the roadside, the young man watches silently as the ghost walks by and finally disappears "as completely as though he had not existed at all" (p. 74). Thrilled but not frightened by the apparition, David makes his way home and tells no one what he has seen.

After seeing the ghost several more times in the weeks that follow, David ventures to tell his parents and "finds my mother afraid to believe that the dead can return and my father wanting to believe but fearing some danger if he did" (p. 75). Shortly after this, George's activist plans pay off; the black workers walk out, and the factory closes down. But as the strike continues and their money runs out, the black workers are forced to forage in the fields and woods for what little food they can find. Walking home from a meeting with the other striking workers, David, his father, and George are accosted by a carload of klansmen. David's father runs and stumbles into a ditch, but both David and George are beaten senseless. David is disgusted by his father who "whine[s] like a woman," but adds "it was his weakness that gave me strength" (p. 78). After the three men stumble home, David sits outside with his uncle "in a warm glow of contentment" (p. 78). What makes the young man so happy is that he had

shared in his uncle's beating without running. George tries to placate David's aversion to his father by explaining the force of history:

"Don't think too hard of [him]. . . . Sometimes a man can't help being the way he is" (p. 79). Walking back from the road where he had gone to say goodnight to his uncle, David once again sees the ghost. This time, however, it seems to David that "he was crying. While I did not see his tears, it was something that I felt intensely--a sense of his sorrow and his weeping" (p. 80). David suddenly realizes that he is special; the ghost walks only for him. But the realization also distresses him since "being the only one to see the ghost [is] almost too much to bear" (p. 80). Trying to discern the ghost's message, David senses that "all there is for me in life is to live a little, perhaps to love, and then to die . . . shamefully" (p. 80). Guided on by this historical and mythical giant, David visualizes "how desperate and violent and fragile life is" (p. 80).

Once again, Bennett adds an extra dimension to his story by concluding with a surrealistic death scene. The black community's only source of hope for sustenance is a white sow which David's family has raised. While Mr. Stapleton hates to see his pet pig killed, he agrees, out of desperation, to let George slaughter it. With all of the neighbors gathered around on a snowy November day, David's father instructs George to follow S.P.C.A. regulations and shoot the sow with one of their two remaining bullets before slitting her throat. George sardonically replies, "If the white man says shoot her . . . then I'll shoot her. I always do what the white man says" (p. 82). He then

fires, but misses, and the white sow, "fleet and as elusive as a ghost" (p. 83) gallops off into the surrounding woods. David and George send the others back to the house and stealthily track the sow through the woods where "the sun glimmered whitely" (p. 83). Finally spotting her, David points out the animal to his uncle who puts the rifle aside and demands: "'Gimme that goddamned knife'" (p. 83). David senses a change in his uncle whose "face was so black and ugly now, I wondered that I had ever liked him" (p. 83). The sow hears the man approaching, however, and crashes off further into the woods. The furious George "seem[s] like a complete stranger" (p. 83) to his nephew as they once again follow the animal's trail. The sky, which had been white, now turns grey and threatening, and the two men discover the sow on the other side of the creek with a barbed wire fence trapping her from behind. When George beckons the sow, "'Come on, white baby. . . . You come on to your black Daddy,'" David realizes that his uncle had intentionally mis-aimed so "he could cut her throat without shooting her first" (p. 84). But as George struggles with the sow, "a strange thing happens" (p. 85). From the dark sky, thunder, "deep throated, primeval" shatters the silence (p. 85). While George remains frozen with the knife at the sow's throat, the ghost of Martin Luther King appears, walks across the creek, "[kneels] beside the sow, and [lays] his hand against her throat" (p. 85). David receives the ghost's silent instructions and calls out "'Uncle George'" as he lifts the rifle to his shoulder. Then, with the ghost pointing at the sow's head while "leaning in an attitude of near supplication over the

struggling animal" (p. 85), David aims very carefully and fires. The sow dies immediately, and the ghost disappears. George, splattered with blood, lunges at David, but the young man raises the empty rifle. George stops. "'You wanted to kill her because she was white. . . . You hated her because she was white'" (p. 86), David insists. George simply replies, "'Well, didn't you?'" (p. 85).

The sow is carried home by some of the men where she is butchered and parceled out to the hungry neighbors. The strike ends several days later, with the "management making a few token concessions that the black men were eager to accept" (p. 87), and the snow continues to fall, making "the world . . . almost completely white, ugly in some places, beautiful in others" (p. 87). David concludes his narrative by symbolically referring to his reawakened historical and racial awareness:

I have not seen the ghost of Martin Luther King since that day in the woods, although I have looked for him from time to time. But I have not seen him; and all there is to do now is to look at the snow and to wait, with whatever patience I am capable of, until the sun comes again to hammer it into the ground (p. 87).

David no longer needs the ghost since he has heard all that the ghost has to say. He must now act with his awakened understanding.

David's awareness thus encompasses the entire black experience.

It leads him from the days of slavery, to the influx of industrialization, to the civil rights movement, to the present--when the klan still rides, and, finally, to the future--when whiteness might be "hammered into the ground."

"The Day My Sister Hid the Ham" shows a people who are even further displaced from their roots than the residents of Burnside. Trapped in Cousinsville, the characters are forced to sift through history and myth to discover the truth necessary for survival. The forty year old nameless narrator struggles with the past, but finally gives in to its destructive power. While hoping to liberate himself through an all-embracing humanistic love, the narrator, nevertheless, remains hopelessly trapped by a historically perpetuated hatred of self and others. Visiting his nameless sister in Cousinsville, the narrator faces his family and racial history and the personal myths his sister has created. Like most of the residents of Cousinsville, the narrator's family fled from Burnside only to find worse problems in New Jersey. As children, the narrator and his sister worked on their grandfather's farm in Burnside where they were "used . . . as slaves" (p. 234). The grandfather long dead, and the land standing idle, the narrator's sister wants to once again escape with her four illegitimate children and her welfare check and go "down Home" to Burnside. But the narrator wants to write instead of farm, even though he has just earned a degree in soil management and crop production from Rutgers. He realizes that the

days of [his] grandfather's autocracy have long since disappeared. . . . Machinery has rendered black men and women obsolete. And it is obvious to even the most casual visitor that the so-called new South has replaced the old only in terms of time, and inflation, and the facade of tolerance pasted on the faces of whites by federal courts (p. 234).

This is one black man who, once out of the South, is not going back for seconds.

The narrator begins his story by explaining that "when my sister tells people I am a fag, I suppose it is her way of saying I am different from other black men" (p. 231). He later makes clear that, according to his sister, "fag" and "homosexual" are not synonymous; "a fag is someone who refuses to be a 'man'" (p. 235). This is one of the many myths which the narrator exposes in his story. His sister also believes that "the low station of black Americans is based on [the] lack of virility in our men" (p. 235). The narrator counters, however, that "the fault [lies] with black women, in their inability to see that they have established a ritual of contempt toward black men because we happen not to be white" (p. 235). Later he adds, "Wasn't it my oldest sister who had first told me about white men and black women, how they conspire to castrate black men, to keep us down?" (p. 240).

After feasting on Virginia ham and black-eye peas, the narrator leaves his sister's house to visit Coretta Lewis, his long time lover. The two had considered marriage, but Coretta was afraid that the bonds would spoil their good relationship and the narrator agreed. An afternoon of love-making accompanied by strains of Beethoven, is interrupted by Bill Campobello, the white landlord's son. Coretta had scheduled a trip to the mountains with Bill for the following day, and her black lover is furious. He had met Bill before and despises the way "he swaggered about as though he owned the world," but he also suspects

that Bill is "afraid most of the time, especially of black people" (p. 239). Bill, nonplussed by the black man's presence, confirms his date with Coretta and then invites the narrator to have a drink with him "just to show they're no hard feelings" (p. 239). At the tavern, the narrator discovers that Bill is a "nice enough guy" and that he is "not only frightened but also lonely" (p. 241). After four vodkas in twenty minutes, Bill rubs his abdomen and explains that "sometimes I feel like I might have cancer, like something dangerous is growing inside me" (p. 241). The narrator comprehends on a deeper level: Of course I knew what he meant by the insistent gnawing away at the body. Society had imposed a lean diet on all of us. And all of us were unsatisfied. . . . I wondered if I could do something to help ease his hunger" (p. 241).

The narrator invites Bill to join him at his sister's house for some Virginia ham, and while walking there remembers that as a child "it hadn't occurred to me that white people might get hungry like black people did, . . . but now it seemed an exciting prospect to feed this white man food from Burnside, where no white people lived" (p. 243). Staggering up the walkway, they are greeted by the narrator's sister who inspects the two with "wretched nigger eyes" and then pronounces her judgment: "'You all look like lovers'" (p. 242). Trying to ignore the slur, the narrator asks for a couple of ham sandwiches, but his sister claims that "the ham's been eat up" (p. 243). Her pregnant, stupid daughter, "apparently moved by some primitive sense of fair play," says "'Mama, you know you hid the ham'" (p. 243). The

mother slaps the girl in the face and sends her to her room, leaving the narrator alone with Bill, his sister, and his thoughts:

. . . there are black people who blame white for every calamity. They make this judgment about black and white as though mankind were still huddling in caves, when darkness and light seemed a terrible and frightening struggle between opposing gods. In my sister's case, I think that the blaming of every evil on whites had to do with the fact that she clearly remembered when a part of her was not human, when our forefathers lay with deer or slid on their bellies with serpents, for she had the gentleness of one and the other's venom both at work inside her (p. 244).

With forced sweetness, the black woman denies her daughter's accusation: "'Honey, you know I wouldn't hide no ham from nobody. Don't you?'" (p. 245), but she still makes no motions to get Bill anything to eat. Soon the white man becomes ill, and steps outside just in time to vomit the greenish-yellow contents of his stomach. The alarmed narrator offers to take him to the hospital, realizing that "the way back to Burnside [lies] through reconciliation. . . . I [want] to give, to love, to bind up the wounds of all the people" (p. 245). On the way to the hospital, the black man admits that "I loved him now because he knew pain as I had known pain" (p. 245). Angered because the black man tells the doctors that he drinks a lot, Bill sends him away, telling him to take some money for his time and trouble. The narrator stalks from the hospital and returns to his sister's house, only to discover that she has gone to the hospital with Coretta. Alone with his pregnant niece, the narrator asks, "'Ernestine . . . do you love your mother?'" and the girl instantly replies, "'No. Do you?'" (p. 246). The man is forced to say "'No.'" He further reflects:

After saying that single word, I felt like the loneliest man alive. For I realized that I didn't love any more, if I ever had at all. Not my sister, nor Coretta. Not my niece . . . not even the generation that she had poked out in front of her. Especially not that generation to come, for we [have] very little of importance to leave anyone (p. 246).

Ernestine confides in her uncle that her mother hid the ham, platter and all, in the washing machine. So the narrator goes to the basement, loads dirty clothes in on top of the aluminum foil-wrapped ham, adds detergent and a whole bottle of bleach, and starts the machine. As he listens to his grandmother's platter crunching inside the washer, he feels "the chains that had held him to centuries of subservience suddenly snap," and recognizes that he is "trying to wash off the dirt of generations that had brought [his] family first from Africa, then from [his] grandfather's mansion to this grimy cellar" (p. 247). When the washing cycle is completed, he removes the bleached-white remains of the Virginia ham, thinking "how white somehow always manages to survive the best efforts and the worst intentions of black men" (p. 248), and hangs the ham out to dry. Just as the sky turned grey before David and his uncle killed the white sow in Burnside, the Cousinville "sky had steadily darkened, and the [white] ham hung solidly, like a corpse gnawed by rats, a tattered standard of defeat" (p. 248).

By this time the narrator's sister has returned from the hospital and offers her brother a ham sandwich, adding, "'You know you're always welcome to what I got'" (p. 248). The man simply replies, "'I washed the ham'" (p. 248). His sister, "her face turn[ing]

dark as outdoors" yells, "'You did what, nigger?'" (p. 248). He explains, but she counterattacks with a jibe intended for his heart: "'That white man in the hospital, . . . said when you all were drinking in the bar, you grabbed his wee wee'" (p. 249). The narrator, of course, denies the accusation, but still he feels "very tired, very old" (p. 249). The domineering black woman has her brother under control; "she now had--or claimed to have--a white man's word to back . . . up" her previously unfounded rumors (p. 250). At her coaxing, he calls Bill at the hospital and "act[ing] like the worst nigger that ever lived" (p. 250), curses him out for telling his sister lies. He hears the white man's feeble voice say, "'I didn't say anything to your sister. And I'm sorry for the way I treated you'" (p. 250). Even though the narrator believes him, his sister's presence forces him to shout, "'If I ever see you again, I'll kill you!'" (p. 250). The enraged black man slams down the receiver and turns to his sister who pours him a glass of cold buttermilk which falls "into the large glass like bleached sperm--thick creamy, deceptively virile-looking--the effort of chemicals, artificial beasts" (p. 250). Recognizing the mythical temptress, the narrator knows that if he accepts her food, "all those years of trying to piece together the remnants of an empire would be realized" (p. 251). She even smiles at him like "a snake who'd just swallowed a rabbit" and asks him the final question: "'Did you really mean it when you told that white man you'd kill him?'" (p. 251). The narrator's confession that he had indeed meant what he had said brings a baptism of tears--"A great calm washed over me, like the purification

of water" (p. 251). Glancing at the ham hanging outside in the rain, he senses that "something, perhaps the smallest part of [him], had just died" (p. 251). He consequently sits down at his sister's table, eats her food, and "for the first time in [his] life, [feels] truly nourished" (p. 251). But it is the buttermilk he likes best "even if it [is] a lie" (p. 251). The defeated, fallen man concludes his tale:

Eating, I thought that maybe there was something in Burnside for me after all. I also thought that my sister had been dead wrong about me all those years. I wasn't so different from everybody else, so I couldn't be a fag (p. 251).

The fact that the narrator and his sister remain nameless gives the story an allegorical, universal dimension. Black Man wars against Black Woman and White Man and loses. His downfall allows his two oppressors to control his future, and his once healthy awareness of history is destroyed by myth. The final irony arises when the narrator realizes that with his new-found ability to hate, he is now no different from anyone else. Black rage provides the artificial power he needs to be a "man" and not a "fag."

Bennett steps outside his mythic world in "The Abominable Snow Man" in order to show the transformation of cultural history into universal truths. The third person narrator speaks apocalyptically as he comments on the life of a "typical" upper-middle-class black couple who are caught between the desire for a black revolution and the desire to be white. Their struggle assumes allegorical dimensions as the surrealistic battle between good and evil unfolds. By placing the story outside of Burnside and Cousinsville, Bennett emphasizes the symbolic fate of the black race.

John and Alice Lowe, the story's main characters, are different from Bennett's other creations. They are upper-class blacks who idealize the power of money. John, a student at New York University, currently writes his master's thesis entitled Black Power: Blueprint for Revolution in which he envisions "a showdown battle between blacks and whites, from which blacks would emerge bloated with victory and love, and purged for all time of the curse of inequality" (p. 143). Alice, who was born in Burnside, is now a stenographer for an anti-poverty agency. She "was not a revolutionary herself" but "bought Ashanti earrings and a bouffant Afro wig" (p. 143) to encourage John's militancy. Unfortunately, John's writing bogs down, so he and Alice, urged on by Madison Avenue's advertising, leave their Upper East Side luxury apartment for a three week vacation in the snowy Adirondacks. When they arrive in tiny Hanover, Alice is immediately taken aback by "the large number of Negroes that she saw" (p. 144). The narrator assures the reader that Alice is not a prejudiced person, but that she "had naturally assumed that the snow-capped mountains somehow implied white people, with whom she always felt more comfortable" (p. 144). John is in his element, however, and soon is enjoying the company of an old black man in a nearby bar. Dressed entirely in white, Alice feels soiled by the surroundings and is impatient for John to get her out. But John is in no hurry. The subject of his thesis comes up in the course of the conversation, and Peter, the old man, shakes his head sadly and places John's black revolution in historical perspective:

"It will be an act of magic or of madness. . . . What we've first got to do is find some way to keep the white man from

fighting our battles for us. We've done the same thing in every rebellion since before the Civil War and up to and beyond Selma, Alabama--let the white man fight our battles" (p. 146).

Alice soon offends Peter by refusing to have another drink with him, so they head outside, only to discover that Peter is the driver who will take them the three miles into the "snow-patched mountains that surrounded everything" (p. 148). The countryside eerily unfolds with "ghostly woods measur[ing] their progress" (p. 148), and "tall pines nodd[ing] their fronts in dismal, dreamlike rhythms. Beyond, the naked trees [raise] their arms, knotted and writhing, like the wrinkled arms of women in agony" (p. 150).

When Peter's car overheats, John walks ahead to the black man's cabin where he discovers, in a locked ice house, a grinning, full-sized snow man, just like the one he had seen earlier behind the tavern. Staring at the snow man through a tiny window, "John [feels] as though his reason [has] suddenly divided, one part warring with the other in a conflict that could never be resolved" (p. 150). When he asks Peter why he keeps a snow man locked up, the old man growls,

"That's part of the revolution . . . all you young people are talking about nowadays. . . . You young people do all the talking, but we old folks know the revolution's already started. And it's in the hands of people you'd least expect" (p. 151).

Peter ominously announces that "'Things are going to change very soon. . . . because of a snow man'" (p. 151). Entirely baffled, John returns to the car where Alice is icily waiting, still angry because John had reprimanded her for her rude behavior. When they reach the cabin, Alice informs John that she is returning to New York, and John does

not bother to stop her. Peter drives Alice back into Hanover, and John is left alone in the cabin nestled in the snow-covered forest. He discovers that the seclusion is just what he has needed to get his creative thoughts flowing, and sits down at his typewriter and writes: "The revolution was caused by that final unacceptable insult where man's spirit must rebel or remain enslaved forever" (p. 154).

While breakfasting the next morning, John is surprised to see three small black children playing in his yard. As he revises some of the previous night's writing, he notices that the children are building a snow man who is "certainly a brother to the snow men . . . behind the tavern and at the old man's house" (p. 156). John attempts to determine whether the children are responsible for the other snow men, and writes in his thesis:

Is it possible . . . that Armageddon, the final battle between good and evil, will take place on a snow-swept plain? And that it will, at the same time, be the decisive conflict between black and white, as well? (p. 156).

He crosses this out, however, because if there were a battle "between him and the children, it would be black against black, and would have very little to do with his idea of how the revolution would be" (p. 156). The children return the next morning to get clothes for the snow man, and when John refuses to give them any, the oldest child, a girl, angrily replies, "'But he's your snow man. You're supposed to dress him'" (p. 157). John, however, refuses to take possession of the snow man; but later that night when he is drunk, John feels sorry for the naked snow man and clothes him.

Early the next morning, John awakens from a dream in which the

children had returned to destroy the snow man. As he rushes to the window, he sees that the children have in fact returned, and it is "clear that they wish to destroy the snow man" (p. 160). What ensues is a surrealistic battle, with John defending the snow man with snow balls, and the black children bombarding him with rocks and sticks. John is terrified by the children's "passionate fury which motivates armies of men" (p. 161) and is convinced that "only the corpses of dead soldiers and bloodstains spotting the virgin snow are needed to complete the panorama of warlike horror" (p. 162). The children's missiles finally meet their target, and the stricken John retaliates by throwing rocks back at them, hitting first the youngest boy, then his older brother. Only John and the girl now remain on the battlefield, and she approaches him in an air of childish innocence. For John, seeing the thirteen year old girl sheepishly kicking at the snow is "like emerging from a nightmare" (p. 163), but he does not fully drop his defenses. When he asks the child why she and her brothers came to destroy his snow man, the girl, "feigning surprise," responds, "'Destroy him? Oh, we wouldn't hurt the pretty snow man! We love him!'" (p. 164). But soon her girlish charms transform into business-like precision, and she asks John if he will accept his snow man. John agrees to take possession of the creation, and the girl warns him not to let the snow man melt. When John asks, "'What happens if he melts?'" the girl replies, "'Then you die'" (p. 164). As the children disappear into the woods, John feels "a certain warmth toward them . . . ; given another time, another location, they might have been his own children" (p. 165).

John goes inside and calls Alice to tell her that in Vietnam he had killed thirteen enemy soldiers. He had tried to tell her this for years, but she always refused to let him talk about his combat experiences. While talking with Alice, John suddenly realizes that the children "had not come to destroy the snow man after all . . . they had attacked in order to force him to accept it" (p. 166). John wonders if this is "some kind of black magic in reverse? Was it possible that the black children were conjurers and the snow man some kind of devil doll? If the snow man melts, you die" (p. 166). But he dismisses this speculation because he is a "logical man"; nevertheless, he still feels afraid "as if the cold warning of death that lurks in the back of all minds had begun to thaw" (p. 166). Alice, still on the phone, startles John back to "reality" by reassuring him that the thirteen deaths in Vietnam were acceptable since he was fighting for America. John receives these words joyfully, and they have "a cleansing effect on the guilt he'd been feeling since coming home from Saigon" (p. 166). With this sense of absolution, John announces that he will return home immediately so they can "have a very merry Christmas" (p. 167) together.

The narrator now exposes John's myth:

he felt like a new man. What he clearly loved in Alice was the fact that she was nearly white. As what she loved in him was obviously the fact of his being black, which made her feel superior to him (p. 167).

John calls Peter to come pick him up, and the old man says, "'Ah . . . so you've had your turn with the children?'" (p. 167). He goes on to warn John not to make the children mad since "'it's dangerous to fight

them'" (p. 167). When John confesses that the battle has already taken place, Peter ominously replies, "'Then I'm afraid it's too late. . . . Now the children are the leaders. They will decide if you're worthy . . . of the revolution'" (p. 167). The line goes dead, and John discovers that the children have cut his telephone wires. He rushes to the kitchen window where he sees the snow man now standing in the cabin's ice house.

Sensing his imminent doom, John suddenly feels "very tired, as though he had come to the end of a long and arduous journey" (p. 168). But he also feels extremely happy, "as though the meaning of things previously undefined was now very clear to him. He absolutely hated being black--he was free to admit it now; the snow man gave him that privilege" (p. 168). John realizes that "he must step out of the next generation's way," but he still "rebels at the idea of bowing to children" (p. 169). Comparing his revolution of words to the "insane army of snow men" built by the children, John concludes that his revolution is "less real" (p. 169). After all, "what army was he bringing together, except a battalion of borrowed concepts based on weak memories?" (p. 169). He turns to his typewriter one last time and types:

Furthermore, the Negro in America is especially vulnerable to the myth of revolution because he is at the same time part black and part white. It is this ambivalence that makes cowards of us all. While the black part of us yearns for rebellion, the white part recoils in horror. . . . The larger revolution must come first--a complete upheaval in our way of responding to Western mythologies--before the black revolution can take place. So we come to nothing, like children abandoned in a playpen among the useless destruction of toys (p. 169).

As John turns the girl's words over in his mind, "We were just playing" (p. 170), he agrees that "life indeed is a game. Or perhaps, . . . it would be more truthful to say that the game we call life is simply the tag end of a terrifying nightmare, and death is waking up" (p. 170). John senses just such a personal awakening, and the narrator surrealistically concludes by stating:

A strange thing was happening to him. He was filled with love for the snow man. And he could accept without horror the fact that the snow man represented him. . . . Then a sharp pain stabbed his heart. . . . John was filled with consuming love, as if this was the moment he had hoped for and feared all his life. He could see the children dancing in a wide ring outside. They had set the ice house on fire (p. 170).

Consumed in this fire are the trappings of the past--the ineffectual rhetoric and the power of tradition. Death becomes symbolically positive as history gives way to universal, though fantasized truth. Since John finally admits that he hates being black, and that he only has "weak memories" of what it is like to be black, the children can destroy him in effigy. The old self is put to death so the new self--one filled with self-affirmation and true racial awareness--might live. Analogous to the social reform of the 1960's, when black college students overthrew the complacent standards of their elders, Bennett's "children" offer the only hope for black life to continue. Paradoxically, this life is only found in death. It may come symbolically as in the death of Western mythologies, or it may come literally and violently: "I thought about the epitaph on the

gravestone of Martin Luther King: FREE AT LAST, FREE AT LAST. THANK GOD ALMIGHTY I'M FREE AT LAST. Because he was dead."¹³ Since John comprehends his moment of liberation, he ironically frees himself from the limitations of history and almost assumes the apocalyptic vision of the narrator.

Bennett thus completes his fictional world. Black men struggle incessantly with the forces of history and tradition, and few transcend these powers. While reality becomes a relative term, myth predominates. Only the apocalyptic narrator escapes from the destructive past of Burnside and Cousinsville to offer hope for a better future.

¹³ Hal Bennett, Wait Until the Evening (New York: Doubleday 1974), p. 258.

CHAPTER V

SHALL WE GATHER AT THE RIVER?

"Lethe and Eunoe--the remembered dream
And the forgotten sorrow--bring at last
That perfect pardon which is perfect peace"

Longfellow
"Divina Commedia"

The black writer, like Dante, drinks from the rivers Lethe and Eunoe. If he drinks from one but not the other, his perception is muddled and his art is false. Some encourage the black author to forget his past entirely--to drink deeply from the Lethe--and thereby become an artist of universal appeal and not simply a "black artist." Others lead the author to the Eunoe, claiming that the pleasant in black life far outweighs the painful. The tension between forgetfulness and remembrance faces every black person, and to be successful, the artist must resolve that tension.

When the black artist comes to terms with racial experience, the result is a lasting literature. In the brief period that black authors have been writing short fiction, three qualities mark the successful story. First, the work is innovative. It does not merely imitate in form or content the stories of earlier writers, white or black. Second, the art displays a historical awareness of the black experience by exploring relevant themes of racial and personal

identity. It often depends heavily on humor and irony to expose the dark side of black life. Finally, the successful black story affects the reader. For the black reader, it aids in uncovering the emotional complexity of living in a "white" world. For the white reader, it provides the humanistic viewpoint needed to understand the black experience.

The writers discussed in this study have produced successful literature. Langston Hughes not only interprets black history--he makes it. As one of the first artists who refuses to compromise his racial pride, Hughes breaks away from the established tradition of Uncle Remus humor and creates positive stories. The Ways of White Folks innovatively explores narrative posture and deals with timely (though dated) themes. Much has changed since 1934, but Hughes's work and critical reception prove the permanence of his art.

Alice Walker's experimentation with the form of the short story is surpassed by few contemporary writers. The stories in In Love and Trouble prove that she is not satisfied to mimic earlier writers. Walker's overriding desire for spiritual wholeness (racial awareness plus self-affirmation) requires narrative techniques which will adequately chronicle her character's quest for fulfillment. While her stories are overwhelmingly negative, the pain, unfortunately, is all too real. Readers of all races are forced to deal with ugly reality before they can enjoy Walker's poetic beauty.

The current master of the short story is Hal Bennett. Insanity Runs in Our Family displays all of the marks of an

accomplished artist. Its stories are relevant without being polemical, and humor dominates. Irony and satire add depth to the tales, since new levels of meaning emerge each time one rereads the collection. Bennett leads his readers from the past to the apocalyptic future; his characters struggle incessantly with racial history and myth.

While critics have attempted for years to bring recognition to black literature, they have primarily focused on the artist rather than on the art. By stressing the importance of narrative technique, this study departs from a purely historical or biographical approach and emphasizes the strengths inherent in the literature. The possibilities for future study are limitless. Scholars have failed to recognize the central role of irony in Hughes's fiction and have ignored the skill displayed in his Simple tales. Alice Walker deserves more recognition as a follower of Zora Neal Hurston and a precursor of Toni Morrison. The works of Hal Bennett offer a wealth of critical opportunity. His most recent novels (his best) have been totally neglected; a study of Seventh Heaven (1976) will reveal unrefined versions of several stories later revised and published in Insanity. Bennett's works plainly display the artist's development, and critical exposure will guarantee his prominence among black writers.

When critics finally acknowledge the viability of black literature, the scholarly groundwork can be laid for a new depth in black criticism. All future studies will reveal the black writer's grappling with "the remembered dream / And the forgotten sorrow." But as the black author coalesces past and future, he or she can confidently claim: "My soul has grown deep like the rivers."

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VITA

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