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Race, Class, Gender & Property in Women's Writing of the Harlem Renaissance

By the 1920s, although slavery had been abolished in America decades before, many social, economic and legal inequalities remained between whites and blacks. This is well-known United States history, although to many, it still exists as a rather vague idea, all too easily over-looked, as the injustices are hard to personalize. Many black women writers in American history strived to bridge this gap by providing stories of black women whose life stories were deeply impacted by all of the types of inequalities that existed. Two of the most well known of these authors are Zora Neale Hurston and Jessie Redmon Fauset. These women, with their similarities and differences, put a face to the modern black woman through their story telling. Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, as well as her two short stories, "Spunk" and "The Gilded Six-Bits," provide an interesting comparison to Fauset's novel *The Chinaberry Tree* and her short story "Emmy."

In order to make assumptions about the authors and their works, it is important to understand their backgrounds and personal histories. Hurston and Fauset's personal stories add to the uniqueness of their works and greatly influenced them. As Sharon Jones wrote:

> Not only does their work reveal the complexities of tripartite race, class and gender relations, but their lives and the challenges they faced as writers all call attention to the double jeopardy of being black and female in pre-Civil Rights Movement America as they forged ahead in their desire to rewrite the American literary landscape" (2).

Zora Neale Hurston was born in 1891 and spent the majority of her formative years in Eatonville, Florida, "the first incorporated black township in the United States and the setting for most of her fiction" (Bomarito 89). Despite her humble background, Hurston was dedicated to furthering her education and attended Howard University as well as Barnard College, where she met Franz Boas, an anthropologist for whom Hurston did field work. Hurston's love life was relatively tumultuous, none of her relationships lasting. She was married twice, both marriages ending in divorce. All the while, Hurston continued writing, but was largely forgotten until Alice Walker rediscovered her works in the early 1970s, "launching a Hurston revival" (*Their Eyes* 219). Jessie Redmon Fauset, on the other hand, grew up in Philadelphia "in cultured by economically poor circumstances" ("Jessie Redmon Fauset"). She was extremely well educated, and attended Cornell University after officials from her school of choice, Bryn Mawr, "obtained aid for her to go instead to Cornell University" ("Jessie Redmon Fauset"). Fauset continued her education and received a Master's degree as well. Fauset married when was twenty-nine, and stayed with her husband until his death in 1958. Her involvement in the Harlem Renaissance was very focused around being an editor for various publications, most notably as literary editor at W. E. B. Du Bois' magazine *Crisis*. As with Hurston, Fauset's achievements went rather unacknowledged, and arguably, she is "an example of an extremely admirable person who made the most of her opportunities but whose modesty and selflessness prevented her from becoming a major American literary figure" ("Jessie Redmon Fauset").

Previous scholars have looked at the works of Hurston and Fauset (although particularly Hurston) and noted the overall importance that race, class and gender play for the women. The main difference between the works of the women is the space in which

the women in their works live. Hurston's heroines' lives exist in the rural South, usually in Florida, meaning that her works evoke the more folk aspect of the black experience. On the other hand, Fauset's setting is more focused around middle and upper class families in the North. Hurston may have gained more momentum than Fauset because, "writers whose work seemingly reflected bourgeois or proletarian strains remained marginalized and devalued or dismissed as inauthentic representatives of African American experience (Jones 4). The fact is, the folk aesthetic employed by Hurston created a stereotype of the black experience that was not necessarily the complete story, which Fauset fills in with her own style. The issues faced by Hurston's heroines and Fauset's heroines were very similar, despite differences in their socioeconomic statuses.

The fact that Hurston chose to emphasize the Southern, folk culture of black Americans may be controversial, and does play a role in the way that the audience perceives her characters. When *Their Eyes Were Watching God* was first published, "the first white reviewers saw Hurston's use of dialect as a strength of her writing, while important black reviewers criticized Hurston for submitting to white stereotypes" (Heard 132). Dialect is used in all of Hurston's works and it works to place the characters in time and space. The use of dialect is a double-edged sword — it can both empower and degrade black culture. Fauset, in her embrace of middle class, Northern black culture, does not employ any form of dialect for her characters. Critical literature has done little to address this. While Hurston is accused of "submitting to white stereotypes," Fauset writes about characters whose color is arguably the only thing that separates them from the dominant white culture of America. Heard writes, "Although Hurston attempts to meet the standards of her white culture, she does so without abandoning her dialect or any

other characteristics of her home culture" (146). This begs the question: What role does assimilation into white society play in the works of Hurston and Fauset?

Additionally, social class has also been addressed in previous critical works about the Harlem Renaissance. Clearly, race and class are deeply intertwined when evaluating the stories of black Americans in the early twentieth century. Sondra Guttman addresses this in her article "Uncovering the Great Depression," which asks questions about class and race in a time when all of American society was suffering, not just blacks or whites. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, "Paradoxically, as Janie moves forward in time, she moves backwards in economic circumstance. She goes from being the wife of a free, independent farmer, to being like a slave — a field hand in the muck" (Guttman 97). This is an interesting dilemma, as the writers of the Harlem Renaissance tended to focus on the betterment of the black race, rather than fallbacks. That can surely be said for Fauset, whose main characters in *The Chinaberry Tree* see financial success throughout the novel and interact with other characters that are doctors, lawyers, and business owners. Guttman notes that, "Hurston points her readers' attention toward the repetitious nature of the African American historical experience, therefore undermining the linear narratives of progress that mark dominant historical narratives" (98). While other writers, like Fauset, may have put their characters down a line of socioeconomic progress, Hurston does not make that a priority in her writing. This contrast helps the reader to understand the many underlying class issues that the women writers of Harlem Renaissance find themselves conflicted about.

Another issue that the Harlem Renaissance writers addressed through literature was the Great Migration, a time in the early 1900s when many black Americans moved from the South to the North, and began working in more industrial jobs rather than

agriculture. This could be the major contrast in the writings of Hurston and Fauset. Fauset portrays a positive, progressive small town of Red Brook, New Jersey in *The Chinaberry Tree*, where the black characters are prosperous and race, while still a vital part of the story, is limited in its influence. While Hurston herself spent a great deal of time in the North, she saw that "rural black people were being forgotten, disappearing amidst the heady enthusiasm of the urban New Negro Movement," and used her novels and stories as a way to represent this "forgotten" group of people, particularly the women (Krasner 534).

Naturally, the writings of Hurston and Fauset present a lot of issues in relation to gender. Fauset is potentially the more traditional of the two writers, but her characters do tend to show their own agency, and the general consensus is that Hurston's works portray confident, independent women, adding a feminist angle to her writing. Nonetheless, this can be disputed. While Fauset's main characters in *The Chinaberry Tree*, Laurentine and Melissa, are portrayed as successful and modern, the novel's plot ultimately follow their tracks to marriage. Shawn Miller acknowledges this and calls it "an underacknowledged pattern" in Hurston's works, which could also apply to Fauset as well (76). The focus of these women's lives is marriage, and as Miller argues, "Hurston's novel is at the core a quest narrative whose object is love, a marriage capable of sustaining Janie's vision of bee and pear tree blossom" (76). The fact that this is such an important part of both the authors' works arguably shows the limits to which their characters are allowed to develop independently from the expectations of the time. Maybe this was because women's issues were a controversial part of the Harlem Renaissance. The male writers of the Harlem Renaissance were reluctant to accept their contemporary women writers, setting the stage for a predominantly gendered study of the Harlem Renaissance with a focus on the male

writers. As Wall states, “Engendering the Harlem Renaissance means undoing perimetes that exclude women and their writing… It means expanding thematic and generic boundaries” and while still focusing on race, also acknowledging that race and gender play an equally large role (68).

One issue that previous scholars have not studied extensively is property and the role it plays in the Harlmen Renaissance writers’ works. What did owning property mean for these characters? How did their race, gender and class influence their views of property? Through in depth analysis of both Hurston and Fauset’s works, it can be shown that the themes of race, class and gender together affect the issue surrounding property for their characters.

Race and Property

The characters in Hurston and Fauset’s works must contend with racial discrimination, both from whites and those within their own race. The characters’ skin colors play an extremely large role in shaping their identities and outlooks on the world, especially on their property and possessions. First, Hurston and Fauset are sure to describe their characters skin color, and the ways that skin color, in their characters’ eyes, relate to prestige and accomplishment.

In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Hurston describes her heroine, Janie, through the eyes of the other townspeople as well as Mrs. Turner, a woman whose opinions on race echo the racism of whites at the time. These descriptions of Janie are rather contrary to each other. The men in the town, as Hurston writes, “noticed her firm buttocks like she had grape fruits in her hip pockets; the great rope of black hair swinging to her waist and unraveling in a plume” (2). These men notice the more racially stereotypical aspects of Janie’s appearance in a positive manner. Mrs. Turner befriends Janie because her,

"coffee-and-cream complexion and her luxurious hair made Mrs. Turner forgive her for wearing overalls like the other women who worked in the fields" (*Their Eyes* 140). Ultimately, Janie's light skin color is a result of multiple generations of forced interracial relations — white men raped both Janie's mother and grandmother. These contrary descriptions present two issues to the reader. First, Janie is of mixed race, a fact that cannot be ignored, as Janie's appearance is arguably part of what makes her life so successful. Part of the struggle of blacks during the time of the Harlem Renaissance was to better the race without whitewashing (so to speak) the race. Instead of embracing her white characteristics, Janie's "journey would take her, not away from, but deeper and deeper into blackness, the descent into the Everglades with its rich black soil, wild cane, and communal life representing immersion into black traditions" (Washington 6).

Nonetheless, *Their Eyes* still puts Janie's successes in the perspective of a white-dominated world. When Janie marries Joe Starks, he has a house built, which "had two stories with porches, with banister and such things. The rest of the town looked like servants' quarters surrounding the 'big house'" (*Their Eyes* 47). Joe's success as mayor of the town is still overshadowed by the master-slave relationship. His house is large and showcases his status as a successful man within the community, and this achievement is equated with being white. Hurston explains that it made other people in the town feel uncomfortable. She writes, "It was bad enough for white people, but when one of your own color could be so different it put you on a wonder" (*Their Eyes* 48). Financial success, then, is seen as something different or separate from the black community.

As Heard writes, "While Hurston frequently portrays black characters as confident, capable, and content, she does not overlook the historical reality of 'color' as a stigma that significantly limited (and still limits) the social opportunities and identities

available to nonwhite Americans" (130). Unfortunately, that meant that the success of blacks and the success of whites were fundamentally different somehow. Blacks could be successful to a certain point; whites had infinite opportunities for achievement. The first sentence of "The Gilded Six-Bits" invokes this: "It was a Negro yard around a Negro house in a Negro settlement that looked to the payroll of G. and G. Fertilizer works for its support" (Hurston 1). The continual use of the word "Negro" gives the reader the feeling of innate separateness of white and black; that there is something essentially different about a white yard and a black yard; a white house and a black house; a white town and a black town that cannot be ignored.

Hurston is not alone in invoking this generalization in her writing because in Fauset's *The Chinaberry Tree*, the home of Laurentine and Melissa is built on a foundation of racial separateness. Captain Halloway, Laurentine's father and a wealthy, white man of the town with whom Laurentine's mother had an affair, built the house for Laurentine's mother. It served as a constant reminder of the family's race. Fauset writes of Sal, "It was only her color that kept her, the daughter of a poor Alabama farmer, in menial service… In another day and another time she must have gone far," but instead, the house was once again built with the money of wealthy whites (2). The underlying assumption is that as a black woman, because of the time, Sal was incapable of creating a home like that through her own hard work. She may have created her own home, but not a home that was, "trim and white with green shutters, a green roof, and a porch which ran around the front and one side" (*The Chinaberry Tree* 1).

Property, in this case, houses, represent a divide between the races. Certain characteristics invoke inherently "white" houses, and other characters make a house look "black." And the authors, especially Hurston, use homes as the predominant way to relate

race and property perhaps because it is a reflection of lifestyle. Janie's grandmother had encouraged Janie to marry Logan, her first husband, because "sittin' on porches lak de white madam looked lak uh might fine thing tuh her" (*Their Eyes* 114). To their characters, being white meant security, leisure and wealth, and being black meant hard work and struggle. Both Hurston and Fauset must have recognized this as a problem in the society where they were living during the Harlem Renaissance. The segregation of the races just by property alone was part of their social commentary.

Gender and Property

Gender inequalities certainly play a large role in their works as well, which manifests in issues of property for the author's heroines. Property begins to be viewed and defined by the relationships that the women have with men, and what exactly it meant for women to own property. In the works of Hurston and Fauset, the characters all have varying opinions on the subject, highlighting the underlying gender discrimination of the time when it came to property rights — women, especially black women, had much less clout when it came to property claims.

Many of the issues come down to masculinity and black, male characters showing a great deal of concern over being the sole provider. Women that have their own property are practically required to chose between holding onto their own property or married life. The best example of this comes in Hurston's short story "Spunk." Lena leaves her husband, Joe, for Spunk, and an argument over Lena contains a very telling conversation:

> Spunk reaches out an' takes hold of her arm an' says: 'Lena, youse mine. From now on ah works for you an' fights for you an' Ah never wants you to look to nobody for a crumb of break, a stitch of close or a shingle to go over yo' head, but *me* as long as Ah live. Ah'll giit the lumber foh owah

> house to-morrow. Go hom an' git yo' things together!' 'Thass mah house,' Lena speaks up. 'Papa gimme that.' 'Well,' says Spunk, 'doan give up whut's yours, but when youse inside doan forgit youse mine' (235).

It is interesting that Spunk has a complete claim over Lena. As a person, she is his property, but even in terms of *her* property ownership. He wants to be in complete control, assuming the traditional role of provider, and shows resentment toward the property Lena does have. Despite the fact that the house was given to her, somehow Spunk, through the transitive property, takes some control of it, when he says "when youse inside doan forgit youse mine." Typically, Lena is practically forced to give over control of her possessions through her union with Spunk — it is a choice she has to make for love.

Hurston in *Their Eyes* addresses this choice —property or love — as well. After Joe Starks dies, Janie inherits a great deal of money, a concern that must be addressed. Hurston shows that the rest of the community is extremely uncomfortable with a single woman having property like Janie does. After Joe died, "Janie found out very soon that her widowhood and property was a great challenge in South Florida… she noticed how often men who had never been intimates of Joe, drove considerable distances to ask after her welfare" (*Their Eyes* 90). The men tell her that women "needs aid and assistance" and that "God never meant 'em tuh try tuh stand by theirselves" (*Their Eyes* 90). This constant pushing of outsiders to take control of Janie's finances explicitly spelled out the way that women were susceptible to be taken advantage of if they did have a considerable amount of wealth or property. Janie, being the relatively independent woman that she is, shakes off these concerns and goes on about her life. But once she meets Tea Cakes, the same concerns rear their heads again. Phoeby asks Janie, "Ain't

you skeered he's jes after yo' money?" (*Their Eyes* 112). Once a woman gains property, it becomes a disadvantage to be married because it is assumed that she will ultimately lose it by handing it over to the man. Naturally, Janie's friend Phoeby is warranted in her concerns, but Janie explains, "Dis ain't no business proposition, and no race after property and titles" (*Their Eyes* 114). Janie's relationship with Tea Cake may not have been focused around property, but unfortunately that was not the case for most of the marriages represented in Harlem Renaissance literature.

Fauset's story "Emmy" tells the story of a black man, Archie, who passes as white, working in Philadelphia and his betrothed, Emmy, a black woman. The story brings together the issues of race and gender in regards to property. All of the problems that come to the couple are the result of Archie's desire to provide for his soon-to-be wife, the "whitest angel that ever lived, purity incarnate!" ("Emmy" 136). After having to chose between telling his boss that his fiancée is black or postponing the engagement, Archie rationalizes that, "The economy of the thing… was at least as important as the principle," and goes to Emmy to postpone their engagement ("Emmy" 136). Ultimately, Archie chooses to endure blatant racism from his white boss so that he can continue to gain wealth and property, all for the sake of providing for his wife. As a man, Archie epitomizes the idea that a marriage is a financial agreement just as much as it is about love. Emmy buys into this idea as well. She thinks that it is, "a nice girl's delicacy at having money spent on her by a man" ("Emmy" 138). Being a woman, being a wife, means being provided for.

Naturally, then, these characters do not have many possessions that they gained by their own merits. Lena's house is passed down to her by her father; Janie's house becomes hers after Joe's death; Emmy is willing to rely solely on Archie for financial

support. The one character who comes close to defying this theme is Laurentine in *The Chinaberry Tree*. She has her own successful tailoring business, and becomes well known for her talent in the town. But once she sees a future with Dr. Denleigh, her outlook begins to change, and her focus becomes on falling into traditional gender roles. She becomes willing to give up all of her self-earned property to have a happy life with Denleigh:

> She had some few savings — why, she had a dowry, a French girl's *dot*. Suddenly she saw the value of a system which she in common with most Americans had despised. Denleigh had been heavily taxed by his former marriage… If necessary he could use her money and they would start all over again (*The Chinaberry Tree* 153).

Laurentine notes that this is a system that "most American had despised," but as shown in the works of Hurston and Fauset, it was clearly practiced, without its traditional name. Women were expected to give up all property, and men were expected to be providers of the property.

Class and Property

At the time of the Harlem Renaissance, class and race were heavily related. Opportunities for blacks were still limited, and therefore, not only were black and whites segregated by skin color, they were also segregated by class limitations. As Guttman notes, "Historians characterize the effects of the Depression on black Americans as an escalation of already difficult economic circumstances rather than as a shocking, new experience" (100). These economic circumstances did vary, as shown in the differences of Hurston's relatively poor, rural characters and Fauset's middle class, urban characters. Class and property are obviously related — the more income you have, the more money

you can spend on material goods. But for the characters in these stories, property invokes a higher class that is automatically assumed to be more white, or different from black property. Certain property is associated with being higher class, and therefore automatically associated with whites.

In *The Chinaberry Tree*, Melissa's suitor, Malory, comes to her home and notices the interior design qualities that make it untypical of black person's home in Red Brook. He says, "I had no idea you lived like this. I had no idea any colored folks in Red Brook lived like this. What's your aunt's husband do?" (*The Chinaberry Tree* 194). Malory likely would not have questioned Melissa about her family's economic standing if she were white. Her family's property has the air of a more upper class family, which surprises Malory because the family is black. Fauset purposefully employed the use of characters whose family's economic situation was better than the stereotypical black family. While Fauset occasionally got flack for this, she argued that those who disapproved of it, "declare plainly that there ain't no such colored people as these, who speak decent English, are self-supporting and have a few ideals" ("Jessie Redmon Fauset"). That is the fundamental difference between Fauset's works and Hurston's. Fauset writes about characters whose class makes them more mainstream, while Hurston's characters are much more in tune to black culture rather than the popular, majority white culture. This does not mean that Hurston's characters did not struggle with issues of class and property as well.

"The Gilded Six-Bits" is a story in which class plays an extremely large role in shaping the plot. Missie May and Joe discuss the newcomer, Otis Slemmons, and how he is a peculiar addition to their rural town. Just by looking at his physical characteristics, particularly his clothes, the couple deduces that he is a high-class man. They note that he

has a "mouth full of gold teeths" and Joe notes that Slemmons has "de finest clothes Ah ever seen on a colored man's back" ("The Gilded Six-Bits" 3, 4). These characteristics may have been expected on a white man, but because Slemmons is black, Joe says that they "make 'm look lak a rich white man" (4). Slemmons' properties — his clothes, his teeth — are items that are associated with being rich *and* therefore being white. Hurston employs this purposefully. This couple's assumption leads Missie May to get involved with Slemmons just to get a gold coin, all for the wealth and prosperity that is symbolizes. The appearance of wealth through property, not necessarily the wealth itself, is important to the characters, as it works as an equalizer between the two races. White or black, social class determines the quality of goods one can buy. This is why the gold coin ends up being "a gilded half dollar" — the appearance of being high class was of importance to Slemmons, not necessarily attaining the wealth ("The Gilded Six-Bits" 9).

These appearances of high social class certainly affect Fauset's characters as well, the best example being Archie in "Emmy." He chooses "prosperity" over "his happiness" by agreeing to move to Chestnut Hill, his boss' segregated, white neighborhood ("Emmy" 137). This idea completely takes him over. He keeps thinking, "I'll be rich… Wonder what those 'little cottages' out to Chestnut Hill sell for" ("Emmy" 137). He wants to have all of the success and prosperity that his looking white can afford him, but at the same time, if he marries Emmy, who is clearly black, he cannot have that immediately. He would rather lie to his boss in order to keep up appearances than tell him that his fiancée is a black woman. In fact, his boss, after seeing Archie with Emmy, makes assumptions about Archie's social class, and hopes that Archie has been "reformed" and gotten "over that," meaning seeing a black woman, as not only was she assumingly of a different race, but also of a different class ("Emmy" 137).

In *Their Eyes*, Hurston attempts to spell out the feelings about a separate white social class and a black social class. When Janie is married to Joe Starks, much of their property, as noted before, puts them in a higher social class that is associated with being white. Hurston explains the issue by means of spitting pots. Joe purchases spitting pots for both he and Janie and the rest of the town felt resentment:

> It sort of made the rest of them feel that they had been taken advantage of. Like things had been kept from them… It was bad enough for white people, but when one of your own color could be so different it put you on a wonder (*Their Eyes* 48).

The townspeople relate the property, the spitting pots, to a higher class that was so different from them that they could only imagine white people being of that class. Once again, the idea of property symbolizing social class comes into play.

Social class was certainly split along lines of race, but as well, the property a character held invoked a social class that may or may not have been associated with their race, something that was unusual and often questioned throughout the writers' works. Both Hurston and Fauset use examples in order to question the underlying assumptions the races may have been making about social class at the time. Property could be a way of defying racial and class stereotypes, but at the same time, it enforces them by bringing attention to a non-likely property owner's race and class.

Hurston and Fauset use property in order to show the disparities in the United States in race, gender and class. Their characters interest in gaining financial and material well-being is a predominant theme in their works, and shows that property played a large role in the appearances. The black characters in their works use property as a way to

equalize the social inequalities that were a result of years of slavery and racial discrimination. Their characters' property questions traditional ideas about race, gender and class, and defies stereotypes. This is part of what made writers in the Harlem Renaissance like Zora Neale Hurston and Jessie Redmon Fauset so revolutionary.

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