Salve Regina University
Digital Commons @ Salve Regina

Pell Scholars and Senior Theses | Salve's Dissertations and Theses

4-29-2007

# Writers of the Harlem Renaissance at Odds: Wright and Hurston's Different Approaches

Sarah L. Labbe
*Salve Regina University*

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.salve.edu/pell_theses

Part of the History Commons

Labbe, Sarah L., "Writers of the Harlem Renaissance at Odds: Wright and Hurston's Different Approaches" (2007). *Pell Scholars and Senior Theses.* Paper 15.
http://digitalcommons.salve.edu/pell_theses/15

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Salve's Dissertations and Theses at Digital Commons @ Salve Regina. It has been accepted for inclusion in Pell Scholars and Senior Theses by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Salve Regina. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@salve.edu.

**The Harlem Renaissance**

In the early 1920's, a literary period known as the Harlem Renaissance began, allowing black artists a voice in American society. The black artists of the Harlem Renaissance "Rejected the notion of the racial struggle as the sole mission of the black elite. Instead, this group was dedicated to literature and the arts as paths to uplift the black race," (The Queen of the Harlem Renaissance 52). Two key authors of this time were Zora Neale Hurston and Richard Wright whose approaches to the themes of this era were vastly different, but their goal was the same: to promote the literary work of black people. While this was a similar goal between the writers, Wright and Hurston had very different approaches. Hurston tried to bridge the cultural gap between blacks and whites, while Wright moved beyond this to obtain equality between the races.

The Harlem Renaissance is generally believed to have begun in the 1920's, ending in the late 1930's (Aberjhani xviii), just before the Great Depression. The movement was said to be a development of "a unique awakening of mind and spirit, of race consciousness and artistic advancement" (Aberjhani xviii). In other words, it was a time where black people became more aware of themselves as a group and discovered their own forms of literature and other types of art. Several new genres came out of the Harlem Renaissance including the musical genres Jazz, Ragtime and the Blues; as well as black journalism, literature, theater and the visual arts. The Harlem Renaissance also gave birth to "several new civil rights organizations such as the NAACP, The National Urban League, and the all-black Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and Maids" (Singh 340). This period in African-American culture was fueled by a need for blacks to at least be seen and respected, and the ideas of the civil rights movement began to take hold.

The movement began after the Great Migration "When the masses of blacks living in the rural south made their way to the urban centers of the North and Midwest" (Aberjhani xviii). The period is known as the Harlem Renaissance because Harlem, New York is the place where many of the artists settled and congregated and where many civil rights organizations began. However, many of the writers were from various locations throughout America. Richard Wright was from Chicago and Zora Neale Hurston spent her childhood grew up in Florida. Both authors at one point in their lives lived in New York City, however, the Harlem Renaissance was a movement that covered the entire nation.

Writers of the Harlem Renaissance had a "motivation to write about black heroes and heroic episodes from American History as well as the need for African Americans to express a franker and deeper revelation of the black self" (West 202). Thus, they wanted to define a culture of their own in a country where they believed they were not wanted or respected. There were two general phases of the Harlem Renaissance. The first phase, 1921-1924, was the "Propaganda phase…to reveal the humanity of—and, thereby, validate—the African-American race through the strength of its arts and letters" (West 202). Thus this early stage was to show that blacks were feeling beings, like whites, and they showed this through their artistic abilities. The second phase, 1924-1931, "Connected Harlem writers to white intelligentsia with its access to established publishing companies" (West 202). The second phase housed both Richard Wright and Zora Neale Hurston. Many writers of this second phase had black and white patrons who gave them financial assistance so that they could create their works of art and get them

published or sold. Zora Neale Hurston was one such author who had the help of a patron to get her work out in the publishing world.

Zora Neale Hurston and Richard Wright are two of the best known authors of the Harlem Renaissance. Hurston produced a plethora of literary works in her lifetime, including "essays, folklore, short stories, novels, plays, articles on anthropology and autobiography"(Aberjhani163), *Their Eyes Were Watching God* being one of the most widely read. Hurston wrote for the sake of writing, rather than for a greater political good. Some argue her place in the Harlem Renaissance, citing "her flat refusal to politicize her early writings by adopting the prevailing notions driving African-American social reform" (Dawson, Aberjhani, 165). However, Hurston wrote powerful works that were widely read by blacks and whites alike, which is more than enough to guarantee her spot as a great writer of the Harlem Renaissance.

Hurston grew up in rural Eatonville, Florida, the main location of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. It was an all black community in which she never realized she was colored (Campbell 2). In this town she "was never indoctrinated in inferiority, and she could see the evidence of black achievement all around her," (Boyd 3). Later, Hurston attended Howard University, a prestigious black college. Thus, she never experienced racism as severely as most black children of that time. Because she never experienced racism fully, it is not the main focus of her works. Rather, "She was proud of [her] black heritage, with its roots in Africa and a black folk tradition," (Campbell 3). Thus, Hurston's writing during the Harlem Renaissance was to celebrate black culture rather than actively fight for equal rights.

Richard Wright became the most famous African-American writer during the Harlem Renaissance. His technique in writing for the Harlem Renaissance was vastly different from Hurston's. He beautifully crafted several novels about the plight of the black race. Unlike Hurston, he fills his novels with racism fueled plots; this is especially true in *Native Son*. Wright was considered such a strong writer because he, "broke with what he considered the more romantic novels of the Harlem Renaissance" (Aberjhani 371). In other words, Wright is given credit for breaking the mold of writing for black advancement and pushing forward towards desegregation.

Wright grew up in Memphis, Tennessee where he was abandoned by his father. His mother was unable to take care of him and his siblings, so they were raised in orphanages and by his grandmother. Growing up was not easy for Richard Wright and racism was a constant in his life. He eventually moved to Chicago where he had "to accept public assistance to survive," (Felger 5). Wright struggled a lot in the early parts of his life before he gained fame for his writing.

Richard Wright eventually became a member of the Communist Party of the United States of America (CPUSA), and "Identified the CPUSA as the best hope for fighting racial inequalities in employment, housing, and education in the United States," (Carreiro 247). Thus, he viewed communism as not just a way to gain respect for all people, but to allow them to live better lives. During the time that Wright was a member of the CPUSA, there was tension in the party. Some felt that the purpose of communism was to reform racial segregation, and others thought it should be an economic reform; Wright believed that both were necessary for any real change to occur. His communist beliefs came through quite forcefully in his work. His communist beliefs spurred from

the racism he suffered and his struggles growing up. He believed that communism was the only way to gain equality amongst people

While both authors wanted respect for black people, their approaches to gaining this were vastly different. Wright believed an entire change in society needed to occur and used scare tactics to get this point across. Hurston took a more passive approach in her works of the Harlem Renaissance, writing culturally rich stories that are appealing to all types of people.

**Analysis of Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God***

*Their Eyes Were Watching God*, by Zora Neale Hurston, is a novel about the plight of black people that does not attack the oppressors, white people. Rather, Hurston creates a character, Janie Crawford, who both black and white people can relate to. Using themes, characterizations, and her own personal writing style, Hurston is able to craft *Their Eyes were Watching God* into a story about a black woman finding herself.

The search for identity is the biggest theme throughout the book. Janie is constantly trying to find bigger and better things because nothing seems to suit her. Initially, Janie's grandmother, Nanny is trying to keep Janie from being hurt and unhappy like she and Janie's mother had been. Nanny says, "You know honey, us colored folks is branches without roots and that makes things come round in queer ways. You in particular. Ah was born black due in slavery so it wasn't for me to fulfill my dreams of whut a woman ought to be and to do" (16). Here she's telling Janie that she was unable

to seek out happiness because she was rooted in slavery. Nanny goes on to explain that Janie's mother was unable to seek happiness as well because she was raped at a young age, which ruined her life. Thus, she wants Janie to have a better life and arranges her marriage to Logan Killicks before she has the chance to be raped. However in doing this, Nanny is taking Janie away from the freedom to find herself and tying her down to someone who is not at all right for her. For her grandmother's happiness and peace of mind, however, Janie agrees to the marriage. Though she is unhappy with this decision, Janie has the idea of finding happiness embedded in her mind and this will lead her to ultimately finding what is right for her and thus, finding herself.

Janie quickly tires of her first husband and meets Joe Starks who wins her affections. She runs away with him to the all-black-community of Eatonville. Initially she's happy, however, she soon finds that Joe refuses to let her be herself. He constantly tells her to be quiet and yells at her for not doing enough work. For many years, Janie takes this treatment until a day when Joe publicly embarrasses her. She no longer accepts the poor treatment and in turn publicly humiliates Joe, telling the community that he's not a very good lover. In this scene, "Janie's ability to speak out in self-defense is a major step towards self-expression," (Campbell 66), thus, this is a landmark in Janie's quest for self discovery. She is finally speaking up for herself. Soon after this public dispute, Joe falls sick and dies, freeing Janie from yet another unhappy marriage. Here, Janie is another step closer to finding herself.

Very soon after Joe's death, Janie meets Tea Cake, a younger man who intrigues Janie. There is a serious lack of trust between them due to her previous experiences with men, but Janie decides to marry Tea Cake. Her marriage to Tea Cake shows Janie finally

doing what is right for her, and not caring what others think. It's very taboo that she's re-marrying so quickly after her husband's death, but worse that she's running off with a man so much younger than herself. However, in this marriage, she finds real happiness. She's no longer living in the lap of luxury like she was with Joe Starks, but she is with a man she truly loves. With Tea Cake life doesn't seem to be so great; Janie is working in the fields and suffers through a terrible hurricane. However, through these trials she realizes who she is, takes risks, and finds real happiness.

The happiness Janie finds is sadly short lived, as Tea Cake dies about two years after their marriage. Thus, it may seem that Janie does not ultimately find happiness. This, however, is not the case. Janie experienced true happiness and that is something she will have for the rest of her life. Through her journey to self discovery, Janie does something that everybody wants to do. She fought against oppression to find happiness and herself, and she found both. She struggled against many odds: family, color, gender, and came out the better for it. Through it all Janie is able to find herself and becomes an inspiration. Thus, she relates to all types of readers black, white, male and female, as all these people ultimately want to find themselves. Elizabeth Meese discusses this theme by saying that Janie's identity "finally begins to take shape as she throws off the false images which have been thrust upon her because she is both black and a woman in a society where neither is allowed to exist naturally and freely," (Meese 60). Thus, Meese is saying that Janie's quest for self discovery is particularly challenging because she is a black woman. She has to overthrow society's defined roles for both woman and black people. Therefore, her victory over these "false images" shows Janie to be even more inspirational than it may seem on the surface.

Racism is another important theme in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, though it's used very subtly. Zora Neale Hurston uses the idea of racism as a secondary idea of the novel; it does not drive the plot. It is instead woven inconspicuously into certain points in the story to help the reader understand why some of the events are unfolding the way they are. However, in reading the novel one may wonder where the racism really comes into play. Dolan Hubbard wrote that "*Their Eyes Were Watching God* celebrates the art of the community in such a manner that the harsh edges of life in a Jim Crow South seldom come into view" (Hubbard 101). Thus, while racism is touched upon it's not shown in so harsh a light as it is in reality.

The first glimpse of racism in the novel concerns Nanny, Janie's grandmother and guardian. She was born into slavery and was raped by her white master. In discussing the rape Nanny accepts what happened to her. She shows no anger or hatred to the white people who enslaved and raped her. Nanny accepts it as the past and fights for a better life for Janie. In showing Nanny's past in this light, Hurston is not outright attacking white people for the horrors they put black people through in the past. Rather, she is touching on the serious problem of race discrimination and cruelty subtly. In doing this she has created a realistic novel about a black family, without putting off white readers. A more accusatory novel would likely have been far less appealing to the white reader.

After the great hurricane which ultimately leads to the death of Tea Cake, racism is shown at its worst in the novel. The racism occurs when Tea Cake is told to help clean up the dead bodies on the streets of Palm Beach. The men are disposing of the decaying bodies by sorting them into piles. The black bodies are to be buried in a mass grave

while the white bodies will receive individual coffins, "Even though the storm does not discriminate between class or race, white authority in Florida does: Blacks are buried separately from whites," (Campbell 71). A guard yells at Tea Cake to make sure that he's putting the right bodies in the right piles, and Tea Cake responds:

> Us got tuh handle 'em slow lak dat? God have mussy! In de condition they's in got tuh examine 'em? Whut difference do it make 'bout de color? Dey all needs buryin' in uh hurry...Shucks! Nobody can't tell nothin' 'bout some uh dese bodies, de shape dey's in. (Hurston 171)

Here we see that racism is a problem even in death. The fact that all the bodies look the same at this point emphasizes the ridiculousness of racism. However, while there are exclamations of how ridiculous the treatment of the dead is, there is again no direct blame put on white people. Again, Hurston is showing that racism happens and it's terrible, but she points no fingers of blame or anger.

The theme of racism is also portrayed in a significantly different way in the novel. The racism here is the product of a mixed-race woman who is being racist towards all black people with darker skin than herself. The woman is Mrs. Turner who lives in the mucks like Janie and Tea Cake. She seeks Janie out to be her friend, because like herself Janie is mixed white. Hurston writes, "That was why she sought out Janie to friend with. Janie's 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. She didn't forgive her for marrying a man as dark as Tea Cake, but she felt that she could remedy that" (140). It's fairly hypocritical that a fellow person of African-American descent would be racist towards others of that race because of the darkness of their skin; their

degree of blackness. However, in having this character introduced in the book, Hurston blames racism on not just the white oppressors, but on society as a whole.

Near the very end of the book, this idea of racism aimed at the wrong target is pursued again. This time it's at Janie's trial for killing Tea Cake. The black people in the courtroom are all against her. It's the white people who understand where she's coming from and comfort her. This again goes to show that Zora Neale Hurston is not criticizing white people in general, but rather all groups of human beings.

These two themes of the novel do a lot for Hurston in terms of obtaining recognition from white people. The use of characterization does this as well. In *Their Eyes were Watching God*, Janie has physical characteristics that bring her closer to white people, but she also has emotional and personal characteristics that serve to make her a relatable character.

Janie is considered of mixed race. She has creamy coffee colored skin, rather than the dark black of the truly African American. On top of this her hair is silky smooth, unlike most African American's. The fact that Janie is a mix of the two races shows how accessible she is to all types of readers. Therefore, it makes the story more relatable to these people and gives Hurston the chance to be read by more people and gain greater acclaim. Thus, she's truly serving the purpose of the Harlem Renaissance. Her goal in writing isn't to fight racism, but to gain the respect of white people by showing that she can write.

Through *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, it is clear that Janie has a very strong inner character. She has a strong will to seek out her own happiness. Throughout her

journey in the story, Janie overcomes many obstacles to find out who she is. Other people in the story often try to suppress this will for self discovery in her, especially her second husband, Joe Starks, but Janie always perseveres and ultimately finds her own happiness. Janie's, "Desire to be—to be able to know and express herself—is the realistic goal of all of us. Her desire to share who she is with someone she loves is something we can all share," (Campbell 68).

On top of this, Janie is a very likeable character. She is very simple and doesn't need a life of luxury, just some fun and entertainment once in a while. For example, her issues with Joe Starks begin when the men of the town are joking around on the porch and Joe tells her not to sit and gossip with them. All she wants is a little conversation and fun in her life, but her fun personality is being kept down by Joe. Around the time when the tension between Janie and Joe is mounting, the story of the mule that is starved by its owner, Matt Bonner, is told. The mule is described as being the most pathetic creature anyone had ever seen. When Joe buys the mule and allows it to roam free and do whatever it wants, it's noticeably happier. Janie is like the mule, she is being starved of fun and life which she needs to be happy.

Overall, Janie is described as simple and wise, but not very well educated. She often says things that show how high her intelligence is. For example, when talking to her friend Phoebe at the beginning of the novel she comments on the people who are curious and critical about her life decisions. She says:

> To start off wid, people like dem wastes up too much time puttin' they mouf on things they don't know nothin' about. Now they got to look into me loving Tea

> Cake and see whether it was done right or not! They don't know if life is a mess of corn-meal dumplings and if love is a bed-quilt. (Hurston 6)

In this passage, Janie shows her understanding of the world around her. She says that she knows what's right for herself, and therefore knows that what she has done is right. Further, she doesn't care what the gossipers think of her because she is happy and knows love, while they don't know the meaning of life or love from simple everyday things. The passage also shows Janie's ability to speak metaphorically, which she does often in the novel.

*Their Eyes Were Watching God* also lends itself to white readers in terms of Zora Neale Hurston's writing style. The novel often transitions from perfect written English when the narrator is speaking, to a heavy Southern dialect when the characters speak. This shows that Hurston is staying true to her Southern roots as she is depicting her characters in the way they truly are.

Hurston writes the narrative in perfect, proper English. She uses strong metaphors and brilliant imagery to depict the life of Janie in the Southern towns of Florida. By writing this way, she is clearly reaching out to white audiences. Had she written the narrative with more slang and African American voice, she may not have been as widely read by white people.

Despite the fact that Hurston writes the narrative this way, she uses the vernacular for her dialogue. By doing this she is staying true to her southern black roots. She has been criticized in many reviews of the novel for using the Southern dialect in her novel. One reviewer said that:

> Her dialect is really sloppy…To let the really important words stand as in Webster and then consistently misspell no more than an aspiration in any tongue…the vernacular reads with about this emphasis: 'DAT WUZ UH might fine thing FUH you TUH do.' (Ferguson 78)

Ferguson is saying that writing in the vernacular draws attention away from the meaning of the sentence and rather draws attention to the menial words. From the time the novel first came out the dialect was a problem with reviewers (Heard 131), but Hurston "Voiced her commitment to represent the language of the Southern black community realistically," (Heard 131). Thus, she didn't care that it was a technique that warranted criticism; she wanted to stay true to her culture. During the Harlem Renaissance, she faced "Extreme censorship, and she needed to create a style that would not alienate her writing from white readers (and patrons), but at the same time she could not completely separate herself from the values and traditions of her "home" culture," (Heard 131). Thus, by using strong prose in the narrative and the dialect in the dialogue, she is catering to white people while at the same time staying true to her own culture.

Zora Neale Hurston uses a framing structure in which Janie tells her story. The novel opens with Janie returning to Eatonville after the death of Tea Cake. She is stared at with questioning eyes by the townspeople as she approaches her home to be met by her friend Pheoby. The reader is instantly curious what all the interest in Janie is about, as is Pheoby. After having some food Janie begins to tell Pheoby about her life, starting at the very beginning. The framing creates an "An illusion that Janie has achieved her voice (along with everything else), and that she has even wrested from menfolk some control of the tribal posture of the storyteller," (Stepto 7). This contributes to the inspirational

nature of the story, in that it shows Janie after overcoming those hard times and fully coming to terms with them. However, the use of the "narrative frame of Janie relating the saga to her friend Phoeby, one more experienced woman passing on her thoughts and emotions to another less experienced friend, creates a friendly, inviting tone" (Hausmen 62). In this way, reading *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is like talking to an older sister about her experiences. This further shows how Hurston's style allows all people to relate to the novel, as it is told in such a warm, inviting way.

*Their Eyes Were Watching God* is a book that anyone can relate to. The meat of the story is of a woman trying to find herself. It's about a woman who from a young age has a goal for her life which she fights for and ultimately attains. Zora Neale Hurston is able to create a novel that can earn her acclaim from all people, not just her own race. Thus, Hurston's work embodies the idea of the Harlem Renaissance. Her focus isn't on attaining equality, it is on bettering the arts so that there can be some strong black figures in American society.

**Analysis of Richard Wright's *Native Son***

Richard Wright's *Native Son* depicts the life of Bigger Thomas, a poor black boy living in the black district of Chicago in the 1930's. Bigger is hired by a prominent white family and out of fear and anger accidentally kills the family's only daughter. This leads Bigger to further criminal actions, the electric chair, and, most importantly, the first sense of freedom he's ever experienced in his life. In writing a story that could easily enhance

fear and anger towards black people, Wright is taking a very big risk. However, in doing this, he's also showing how the treatment of Bigger by the white people before and after the crimes will only create more violence. Thus, Wright is taking the ideas of the Harlem Renaissance one step further by introducing his political and social ideals to his readers. He gets these ideas across through thematic elements, the characterization of Bigger, and his writing style.

The biggest theme in *Native Son* is racism. It is an important element throughout the entirety of the novel. His entire life, Bigger and his family have been oppressed. The family pays more for their rat infested one-room apartment than some white people pay for a decent, clean apartment. Mr. Dalton, the father of the white girl Bigger kills attributes this to supply and demand (Wright 326). However, his reasoning for not renting the white apartments to blacks is because "I don't think they'd like to live any other place," (Wright 327) and that it's a custom not to and he must follow the code of ethics of business (Wright 328). Thus, Bigger's family and so many other black families are forced into perpetual poverty because of segregation.

Racism is also what makes Bigger who he is, an angry hoodlum who's constantly finding himself in trouble. Before taking on the job at the Dalton's, Bigger is seen going around town with his gang. They plan robberies together, bully each other, and publicly masturbate at the movie theatre. They're the stereotypical black hoodlums often blamed for keeping down the black race. However, during the scenes with his gang we see how the boys feel about being black in a white world. The boys "play white" (Wright 17) and pretend to be J.P. Morgan and his stock broker, even the president of the United States.

When Bigger tells his friends about his new job they ask where he lives. He responds that they live, "Right down here in my stomach…Every time I think of 'em, I *feel* 'em…It's like fire" (Wright 21-22). Thus, Bigger doesn't just have a mental reaction to white people, he has a physical reaction, too. This is from years of being rejected, feared and oppressed by them. These early scenes in the book give us an idea of what racism has created, Bigger Thomas.

When Bigger finally takes the job at the Dalton's, the readers understanding of racism is shifted, as the Dalton's treat him with respect and good will. They give him a room in their house, provide him with good food and bonus pay which he can keep for himself. However, Bigger doesn't trust them after a lifetime of mistreatment by white people. Thus, when Mary Dalton, the white girl Bigger kills, and her boyfriend, Jan, try to befriend him and discuss their communist views with him, he's immediately uncomfortable, angry and confused. They take him out to dinner, ask him personal questions and essentially treat him as though he is no different from them. This makes Bigger feel:

> Naked, transparent; he felt that this white man, having helped to put him down, having helped to deform him, held him up now to look at him and be amused. At that moment he felt toward Mary and Jan a dumb, cold, and inarticulate hate. (Wright 67)

Mary and Jan's kindness towards Bigger is something he just can't understand. The racism he has experienced throughout his life has made him unable to believe that any white person would ever show him respect or kindness. Thus, in entering the Dalton household, Bigger is entering a whole new world which he does not understand at all.

Racism is a huge theme in *Native Son*. It drives the plot and Bigger's character throughout the novel. In making racism a large theme, Wright is attacking the existence of it forcefully. There can be no mistake that in *Native Son*, Richard Wright is revealing the terrible effects of racism on not just black people, but also on society as a whole.

A theme that branches off of racism is the theme of fear in the novel. Fear is another one of Bigger's drives and motives. It is the fear of being accused of raping Mary that leads Bigger to suffocating her with his hand. Fear of being caught in the act of murder leads Bigger to chop off Mary's head and burn her in the furnace. Further, in fear of being caught Bigger formulates the plan to write the ransom note saying that Mary had been kidnapped and asks for money so that he can run away and never be caught. It's not greed that causes him to do this, it's simple, raw fear. Bigger's decision to murder Bessie is also due to fear. In this case, he doesn't feel that Bessie can be trusted with the information, because she's too scared. Thus, to save himself he kills her.

Had Bigger not been raised in a world where a black person being found in a white woman's room would immediately be accused of rape, the murder would never have happened because Bigger wouldn't have been so frightened. Thus, the themes go hand in hand together. Racism causes fear, and fear causes crime.

Another major theme of *Native Son* is communism. The idea of communism first appears in the novel when Jan and Mary take Bigger out to dinner. They provide him with pamphlets about communism and essentially tell him that they believe that everyone was equal. However, Bigger was well enough aware of the world around him to know

that communists ranked just higher than black people in America during that time. Thus he didn't want to trust the communists, as being considered one of them would make him that much lower in the eyes of America.

Further, Bigger's act of signing the ransom note Red allowed Wright to show the injustice to communists as well. The content of the letter is typical and standard for a ransom note; however, Bigger's is full of grammatical errors. He closes the letter with "Do what this letter say" (Wright 177). The fact that the letter was written in this way should have been an instant indication to the police that Jan, a very educated person, did not commit the 'kidnapping'. Due to the authorities' hatred towards communists, Jan is arrested for the crime. Long after Bigger comes out as Mary Dalton's murderer, Jan, the communist, is still considered an accomplice to the crime. There is no proof whatsoever that Jan had any part in the murder, however, the fact that he's a communist is reason enough to keep him in jail for an unjust period of time. Wright is pointing out injustices of not just blacks, but of anyone that intimidates the white middle- and upper-class.

The theme of communism concludes the novel in the form of Mr. Max, Bigger's lawyer. He is the only character in the novel that is able to get Bigger to think about his crime and why it was committed. He's the only one who understands Bigger, and he is a white man. During his closing argument, it's easy to see some of Wright's own ideas coming out. Mr. Max has a twenty-two page monologue in which he pleads for Bigger's life. The content of this speech does not just speak for Bigger, but all blacks and persecuted people in America.

In *Native Son*, Wright criticized white reformers, as they "Often robbed African Americans of their identity…and maintained the segregation of blacks in American

Society," (Carreiro 250). An example of this from the book is when Jan and Mary take Bigger out to dinner. Amy Carreiro says, "Unintentionally and paradoxically, Mary and Jan emphasize Bigger's color by minimizing it's importance…Their behavior is alien and unsettling, placing Bigger in unfamiliar territory," (Carreiro 251). Thus, Wright is showing that he doesn't expect an immediate change, and feels that white reformers can't help by simply forgetting skin color. In adding this, Wright is criticizing his fellow members of the Communist Party of the United States of America, as it was full of people like Mary and Jan.

Wright further disparages the white reformers for their naiveté. Examples of this are again Mary and Jan trying to befriend Bigger, but also Mr. and Mrs. Dalton's donation of money to black schools. However, helpful they may feel this donation is, "it is ambiguous in that their efforts to help 'colored' schools also have the effect of reinforcing segregation," (Carreiro 250). Richard Wright is proving in *Native Son* that it's going to take much more than such donations to accomplish anything. He believes that for significant change to occur white people and black people need to get to know each other and segregation needs to stop. With segregation being upheld, no momentous transformation will occur.

Overall, the Communist themes throughout the novel show the kind of society Richard Wright is hoping for, one in which everyone is equal. By criticizing the steps being currently implemented to achieve this, he is showing that a change needs to occur. Though he sees problems with the communist party, he feels that it is black peoples best bet to achieving equality. In this sense, he is being very bold in his actions towards

achieving equality for the black populous, as he is alienating himself from both the communists and the anti-communists.

Bigger's character is very important to the development of the novel. Bigger's life and his actions show what racism can create in society. Further, since the reader sees Bigger as an oppressed victim as well as a cold-blooded murderer, it is difficult to pass judgment on him. One may even feel sympathetic for him by the end of the novel.

Bigger is introduced as a young man who simply can't find his place in life. His family constantly gives him a hard time, he must act tougher than he really is to impress his friends and there is the simple fact that he's a black man. It's clear to see that Bigger is not happy with his life and that he's not going anywhere. When deciding whether or not to take the job at the Dalton's he thinks "Yes, he could take the job at Dalton's and be miserable, or he could refuse it and starve. It maddened him to think that he did not have a wider choice of action" (Wright 12). Clearly, Bigger doesn't have many options and is, in a sense, a lost soul.

*Native Son* ends with Bigger coming to a realization about himself. He understands why he killed, saying, "They wouldn't let me live and I killed. Maybe it ain't fair to kill, and I reckon I really didn't want to kill. But when I think of why all the killing was, I begin to feel what I wanted, what I am…I didn't want to kill...But what I killed for I am!" (Wright 428-9). Bigger comes to this realization after Mr. Max asked him various questions about his life and then had time to reflect on them. It also came after he had been sentenced to death and had a chance to dwell on that fact. At that time, Bigger comes to understand that he did not want to be a murderer, but that he couldn't

survive living as he had been. Bigger was suffocating under the oppression of white people. His act of murder was in a sense like a drowning man finally getting a fresh breath of air. Thus, Bigger is not trying to apologize for the violent acts he has committed. Rather he is coming to terms with them for his own well-being. While he is verbalizing these thoughts and feelings to Mr. Max he is simultaneously trying to understand them himself. Doing this allows the reader to fully comprehend the complex motives and characteristics of Bigger Thomas.

Bigger's last words in the novel are also quite significant to understanding the journey Bigger has taken in the novel. He says to Max as he's leaving, "Tell…Tell Mister…Tell Jan hello." This is significant because before this point in the novel, Bigger refused to address a white person so impersonally. Addressing Jan this way shows that Bigger finally understands that not all white people are the same.

After writing *Native Son,* Richard Wright wrote an essay called "How Bigger Was Born." In this essay he explained who he modeled Bigger after, as well as what Bigger stands for. Wright says "The birth of Bigger Thomas goes back to my childhood, and there was not just one Bigger, but many of them, more than I could count and more than you suspect," (Wright 435). He goes on to describe five or so of these Biggers he once knew. It was easy to see how each of these real life people merged to form the Bigger Thomas of the novel. Wright went on to say that most blacks he knew were mild mannered and accepted their place in the white world; he said:

> The Bigger Thomases were the only Negroes I know of who consistently violated the Jim Crow laws of the South and got away with it, at least for a

> brief short spell. Eventually, the whites who restricted their lives made them pay a terrible price. They were shot, hanged, maimed, lynched, and generally hounded until they were either dead or their spirits broken (Wright 437)

Thus, though Wright fully understood that the way the Bigger Thomases behaved was wrong, he also knew that their punishments were far too severe. Through writing *Native Son*, Wright hoped to bring about a change to such harsh punishments black people received. Again, Wright is pushing for equality in every aspect of peoples lives and reveals the current problems with society.

In his article Wright also discussed the reasons why the Bigger Thomases acted the way they did. One reason he gave was that they "Had become estranged from the religion and the folk culture of his race" (Wright 439). This is true for Bigger who feels that no one understands him, not even his own family. Further, he is constantly getting into arguments with his friends. Wright also said that the Biggers were trying to "react and answer the call of the dominant civilization whose glitter came to him through the newspapers, magazines, radios, movies and the mere imposing sight and sound of daily American life" (Wright 439). Again, this encompasses Bigger's actions and motivations. He's constantly seeing the way white people live through their movies and later through working at the Dalton house. Thus, Wright does a wonderful job taking the people he knew as the Bigger Thomases in real life and putting their characteristics and motivations into one fictional Bigger Thomas.

Richard Wright has a very distinct writing style that helps bring out the major ideas of the novel. He is not afraid to be graphic and bitterly honest. His discussion of Bigger's interaction with his gang before getting the job at the Dalton's doesn't show black culture in the best light, as they talk about armed robberies and their many other crimes, but it's very real. The graphic depictions of the murders of Mary and Bessie are meant to shock and horrify readers. Wright graphically describes Mary's decapitation:

> Then blood crept outward in widening circles of pink on the newspapers, spreading quickly now. He whacked at the bone with the knife. The head hung limply on the newspapers, the curly black hair dragging about in blood. He whacked harder, but the head would not come off. (Wright 92)

In doing this Wright is showing that he knows the horror black men are capable of creating, but he also shows why they behave this way. It may seem like a bad idea for Richard Wright to portray Bigger in this way, however, he's doing it as a warning to society. He warns that if whites continue to treat blacks the way they are treating them more murders as graphic and horrible as those committed by Bigger will happen.

According to Sharon Hamilton, Wright's vivid imagery in the murder of Mary Dalton has strong echoes of the style of Edgar Allan Poe. Hamilton says, "Like Poe, Wright creates a feeling of horror through strong contrasts in color," (Hamilton 227). She says that in the scene of Mary's decapitation, Wright contrasts the color of Mary's flesh and the red of the knife, Mary's blood and the white of the newspaper, and Mary's black hair and her red blood. In many of Poe's works he did this as well to emphasize the horror of the scenes. Hamilton goes on to explain the significance of the Poe connections in Wright's use of the white cat who witnesses the murder of Mary Dalton. Poe wrote a

story called "The Black Cat" in which a black cat ultimately reveals the guilt of its owner to the police. The white cat in Wright's *Native Son* does not reveal the guilt, but like the black cat he knows the guilt of a man. Hamilton explains that many other aspects of the decapitation scene relate to the murder in Poe's "The Black Cat" (Hamilton 228). These echoes of Edgar Allan Poe, the great gothic, horror writer, show that Wright really wanted to strike a sense of terror into his readers to teach them a lesson as to what racism can do.

Wright's style is also effective in how it depicts what goes on inside Bigger's head. The story is told by an unknown semi-omniscient narrator, who focuses on Bigger, his thoughts, and his actions. Though Bigger is not telling the story, the reader is able to fully understand his reasons and motivations for what he does. An example of this is when the reporters find the remains of Mary's bones in the furnace. Bigger's reaction is that:

> He could not stay here now. At any moment they would suspect him. They would hold him; they would not let him go even if they were not certain whether he had done it or not…Quickly, Bigger's eyes looked at their bent backs; they were not watching him…Yes; he would go, now! He tiptoed to the rear of the furnace. (Wright 220).

Here Wright is showing what Bigger is going to do next, run away, but he's also telling why, because he knows he will be an immediate suspect. Wright does this throughout the book. Constructing the novel like this helps Wright get his message across that although Bigger's actions aren't right or just, he has reasons for doing them. In several cases his reasons are sensible though poorly carried out.

The novel is broken up into three books: “Fear”, “Flight”, and “Fate.” Each book represents a different portion of the novel. “Fear”, the first book, shows Bigger’s life, his feelings and reasons for being scared. In this section we see the events leading up to and including the murder of Mary Dalton. The section “Flight” shows Bigger trying to escape the crime he has committed. However, he only seems to get himself into deeper and deeper trouble. The final book, “Fate,” show’s Bigger captured and on trial. He meets his fate and finally comes to terms with who he is and what his fate was all along. Each of these sections begins with Bigger, “Rousing from sleep into a horrific world, suggesting that the realm of normal activity is for Bigger a place of terror,” (Britt 4). This allows the reader to see the world Bigger is living in, and further understand his actions.

*Native Son* does more than the average work of the Harlem Renaissance. While it shows how a black man can excel at the arts, it also shows the black person’s wants and needs of the time. In *Native Son* Richard Wright viciously attacks the institution of discrimination that initially led for the need of the Harlem Renaissance. *Native Son* is a powerful novel that doesn’t cover up any ugly truths about the black race; however, it makes them more understood. *The Oxford Companion to African American Literature* cites *Native Son* as the end of the Harlem Renaissance, saying, “There is a general consensus that the publication of Richard Wright’s *Native Son* in 1940 heralded a new phase of harsh realism in African American writing,” (Singh 340).

**Discussion of the Two Works**

*Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Native Son* both came out of the Harlem Renaissance. Richard Wright and Zora Neale Hurston, however, "Disagreed about each other's work because she celebrated black folk values, whereas Wright gave much more attention than she did to white racism and the violence it could cause," (Felgar 6). This shows that they had different purposes in writing, despite the fact that they both are seeking respect for black people. Due to these differences the novels are different in terms of characterization, themes and writing style.

The main characters of the two novels are vastly different. Bigger is a troubled city youth, while Janie is a poor Southern girl. Their lives are obviously meant to be much different from the start. The authors' intentions in writing their respective novels are evident through the characterization of these two characters. Richard Wright wants to show what white oppression has caused black people to become. Bigger is a prime example of this with his anger and aggression towards white people. On the other hand, Hurston's intentions are to show white people that blacks really aren't that different after all. Janie, a mixed-race woman searching for happiness is the perfect way for Hurston to show the similarity between the races. In characterizing Janie this way, Hurston is appealing to the white crowd and earning their respect. However, Wright's creation of Bigger Thomas is far more risky, as many people would likely see him as a frightening villain.

Despite these extreme differences the purposes of the characters are also similar. In both characters, the reader is able to see their motivations and relate to them. Wright explains Bigger's extreme rage in such a way that the reader can truly understand why he

is so angry, and thus, on some degree can understand why he murdered. The same goes for Janie, as Hurston delves into her thoughts and feelings and allows the reader to understand and strongly relate to her search for happiness. Although their motivations are so very different, they are both understandable and thus, create sympathy for themselves, despite any of their disagreeable actions. This shows that though Wright and Hurston have such vastly different views and such vastly different novels and writing styles, they are still working towards a similar goal: to promote and bring understanding to black culture. However, Wright is always one step ahead, and his work pushes past simple understanding and respect. Rather, he is beginning the fight for equality.

One critic, Michael G. Cooke, found a similarity between *Native Son* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. He noted that they both "Came to a conclusion with a formal murder trial and a personal scene of human reconciliation that yet leaves the protagonist in a state of solitude," (Cooke 57). He then contrasts the way they came to their self realizations. Bigger starts off in the black world and finds himself while in the chaos of the white world. Janie, however, starts off in the white world and then ventures into the all black world of Eatonville (Cook 57). These similarities do show a similar train of thought between the two authors, as they both seem to understand the difficulty of finding oneself. The writers also recognize the strong divisions between blacks and whites and what happens when those lines are crossed. However, the main ideas and purposes of the novel remain vastly dissimilar.

The major differences in the works stem from the major differences in the writers perceptions of the Harlem Renaissance. Hurston's approach is more to show the similarities between whites and blacks and gain acceptance from white people. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is a perfect example of this. She nearly caters to white people in her method of writing, and perhaps is slightly untruthful about how great life can be for a black woman. Despite this, her story is inspirational to white and black people alike. However, she writes for personal fulfillment and shows how wonderfully artistic a black person can be.

Wright is just the opposite. He violently attacks the practice of racism and preaches about equal rights and communism. He doesn't worry about offending others or achieving respect from white people. In *Native Son* he creates a black character that is a white person's worst nightmare. However, he does this with the hope that readers will see the deeper meaning of his work and get the warning message about what racism is creating. In molding Bigger, Wright considered the fact that many people would be put off by the horror Bigger creates. However, he says:

> If I did not write Bigger as I saw and felt him, if I did not try to make him a living personality and at the same time a symbol of all the larger things I felt and saw in him, I'd be reacting as Bigger himself reacted: that is, I'd be acting out of fear if I let what I though whites would say constrict and paralyze me. (Wright 449).

Thus, Wright rebelled against the constraints of white opinion to prove his point about how white oppression is creating anger and violence in black youth. He broke the mold of the Harlem Renaissance and attempted to take the fight for civil rights to the next

level. Thus, as Singh said, he brought an end to the passive purposes of the Harlem Renaissance and pushed for the next steps of desegregation and equal rights for all people.

Richard Wright wrote a review of Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* in which he says she can write well and has beautiful prose and dialogue. However, he also believes her writing is stuck in the place white people want it to be, saying Hurston's characters "Swing like a pendulum eternally in that safe and narrow orbit in which America likes to see the negro live: between laughter and tears," (Wright 76). Thus, he's saying that she is not showing the depth of the black character. He goes on to say that her writing "carries no theme, no message, no thought…her novel is not addressed to the Negro, but to a white audience whose chauvinistic tastes she knows how to satisfy," (Wright 76). Wright is on to something when he says that she is addressing white people more than blacks. This is clear on many levels; however, Wright is ignoring the fact that her technique of catering to white people may be more effective than the brutal honesty Wright delivers. By writing for the white audience, Hurston is forming a connection between the two races. It may not be based on a completely realistic bond, but it brings about a sense of understanding. Because of the brief glimpses of racism in the novel she is still staying true to her black heritage and shows that she does want a world where everyone is equal, just like Richard Wright.

The major differences in the lives of the two authors also influenced their different approaches. The lifestyles the two had strongly reflected the nature of their novels. Hurston never experienced racism strongly, thus she doesn't make it the main focus of her work. Wright grew up constantly struggling with racism and therefore feels

very passionate about equality, thus racism is his main focus. Their life experiences strongly influenced the style and message of their works and characters, and gave them their different approaches and motivations in writing.

During the Harlem Renaissance black people began to express themselves as a distinct culture. This expression took on many different forms; visual arts, music, literature, and theater. However, each artist of this time had different experiences and stories to tell through whichever art form they chose. This is just the case with Richard Wright and Zora Neale Hurston. Their approaches in the Harlem Renaissance were vastly different, but they were seeking the common goal of all the artists of the Harlem Renaissance: to show what black people are capable of and gain respect. The differences just show the broad spectrum of black life. As Jazz and the Blues are different, so are Hurston and Wright.

Works Cited

"The Queen of the Harlem Renaissance: Her Works Were Lost, but Not Forever." *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education.* v37 (2002). pp 52-53.

Aberjhani. "Wright, Richard Nathaniel." *Encyclopedia of the Harlem Renaissance*. Ed. Aberjhani and Sandra L. West. New York: Facts on File, Inc, 2003. pp 369-371.

Britt, David. "Native Son: Watershed of Negro Protest Literature." *Negro American Literature Forum*. St. Louis University: Vol. 1, No. 1, 1967. pp. 4-5

Boyd, Valerie. "She Was The Party." *P.S. Their Eyes Were Watching God*. New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 1937.

Campbell, Josie P. *Student Companion to Zora Neale Hurston.* Westport CT: Greenwood Press, 2001.

Carreiro, Amy E. "Ghosts of the Harlem Renaissance: 'Negrotarians' in Richard Wrights Native Son." *The Journal of Negro History*. Vol. 84, No. 3 (Summer 1999), pp. 247-259.

Felgar, Robert. *Student Companion to Richard Wright*. Westport CT: Greenwood Press, 2000.

Ferguson, Otis. "You Can't Hear Their Voices." *Critical Essays on Zora Neale Hurston.* Ed. Gloria L. Cronin. New York: G.K. Hall & Co. 1998.

Hamilton, Sharon. "Wright's Native Son." *Explicator*. Summer 97, Vol. 55 Issue 4, p 227, 3p.

Hausmen, Renee. "Their Eyes Were Watching God by Zora Neale Hurston." *The English Journal*. Vol. 65, No. 1, 1976. pp 61-62.

Heard, Matthew. "Dancing is Dancing No Matter Who is Doing It: Zora Neale Hurston, Literacy and Contemporary Writing Pedagogy." *College Literature*. Winter2007, Vol. 34 Issue 1, p129-155.

Hubbard, Dolan. "Recontextualizing the Sermon to Tell (Her)story in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*." *Critical Essays on Zora Neale Hurston*. Ed. Gloria L. Cronin. New York: G.K. Hall & Co. 1998.

Hurston, Zora Neale. *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 1937.

Meese, Elizabeth. "Orality and Textuality in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*." Ed. Bloom, Harold. *Modern Critical Interpretations: Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes were Watching God*. New York : Chelsea House Publishers, 1987.

Singh, Amritjit. "Harlem Renaissance." The Oxford Companion to African American Literature. Ed. Andrews, Foster, and Harris. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.

Stepto, Robert B. "Ascent, Immersion, Narration." The Oxford Companion to African American Literature. Ed. Andrews, Foster, and Harris. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.

West, "The Harlem Renaissance." *Encyclopedia of the Harlem Renaissance*. Ed. Aberjhani and Sandra L. West. New York: Facts on File, Inc, 2003. pp 369-371.

Wright, Richard. "Between Laughter and Tears [Review of Their Eyes Were Watching God]." *Critical Essays on Zora Neale Hurston.* Ed. Gloria L. Cronin. New York: G.K. Hall & Co. 1998.

Wright, Richard. "How Bigger was Born." *Native Son*. New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 1940.

Wright, Richard. *Native Son*. New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 1940.