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ON LOVE AND TROUBLE IN ZORA NEALE HURSTON’S URBAN STORIES

***Abstract:** Long thought to be solely dedicated to Southern rural locales and storytelling, Zora Neale Hurston revealed a hidden interest of hers when several short stories from the 1920s were recovered (a scholar found most of them in the *Pittsburg Courier*). It is clear that she had an opinion about the social and economic processes that were taking place in Harlem, the center for African American cultural activity at the beginning of the century. In most pieces rural meets urban with mixed outcomes. The present paper is an attempt to further Hurstonian criticism by providing an analysis of connection between love and trouble in these “new” stories – the aim is to show how layered they are with presuppositions about the intersection between age, race and gender.*

***Keywords:** Harlem Renaissance, youth, love, blues tradition, urban, gender*

For Zora Neale Hurston the Harlem Renaissance opened a new world full of flashy establishments and possessions. She gave herself completely to its glamor and high hopes. Many histories of the Renaissance portray her as a person who was the life of the party, full of regional anecdotes and meaningful punchlines. The porch as a place of gathering in front of the store in Eatonville was a well-known space indicative of Hurston’s upbringing and values before the publication of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937). “Frequently at the parties she attended, Zora commanded center stage by regaling everyone with down-home stories – signed, sealed, and animatedly delivered straight from Joe Clarke’s porch” (Boyd 2003: 95). Leaders of the movement accepted her wholeheartedly both as a person and as a writer – her story “Spunk” (1926) was included in *The New Negro* (1925) anthology, a key text in/of the 1920s, edited by Alain Locke, who is considered to be one of the pillars of the movement, while a couple of her dramatic and shorter pieces won awards that included cash prizes – which made it possible for her to consider writing as a career. Having said that, Hurston’s critically recognized fiction and her representation of themes and characters were directly inspired by Southern folklore and culture – her masterpiece *Their Eyes*¹ utilized them as well as her well-known short works – and there was little to no mention of the urban landscape and its effect on African Ameri-

¹ *Their Eyes* itself appeared well after the Renaissance had already reached its culmination and had started to linger as a past event.

cans in the 1920s². Choosing to focus on Southern settings “brought her recognition, since everyone else seemed to be writing about urban black life, but also criticism [...] that she romanticized ‘the folk’ and reinforced stereotypes of black ignorance” (Carpio, Sollors 2010: 558). Her creative decisions which were subject to scrutiny in her lifetime continue to invite debate and discussion of her politics and literary stance even nowadays. She was a dominant presence in Harlem social circles, however, it seemed as though she had minimal interest in capturing the complexities of this environment on the pages of her books or at least that is what many believed to be the truth when her available publications were taken into account.

Recently, five new short stories of hers were unearthed (most of them originally published in the *Pittsburg Courier* at the end of the 1920s) which add a new layer to her writing – *The Back Room* (1927), *Monkey Junk* (1927), *The Book of Harlem*³ (1927), *The Country in the Woman* (1927), and *She Rock* (1933). In critical treatments the latter two have been separated from the other three as thematically closer and having a greater relation to Southern folk traditions, exemplified by the leading female character; they have generally received more attention. Nonetheless, all of the stories take place in New York City and the urban world is being actively investigated. It does not figure only as a passive background for character development. Characters are forced to question their migration, the possibility for a life there, and their future personal and professional opportunities. Such anxieties, while still related to conceptual images of the South, give insight into Hurston’s understanding of city life and its effect on human nature and relationships. The present paper aims to further the discussion of these newly published urban stories by analyzing the strong link between love and trouble some of them exemplify in order to show how this connection has been presupposed by the concept of youth. Young women, in particular, seem to turn into objects of both (sexual) desire and improper-

² If we compare her to other leading female writers of the day like Jessie Fauset then certain disparities easily become evident. Fauset produced novels that commented on the dreams, struggles, and accomplishments of the newly established black middle class. Her heroes and heroines had to navigate their professional lives while attempting to carve out a meaningful space for personal and societal ties (sometimes resorting to passing for white). If Hurston’s books have been seen as folk novels, then Fauset’s have been considered bourgeois ones by a number of critics. Sharon L. Jones has penned a nuanced reading of the life and works of Hurston, Fauset, and Dorothy West, which aims at proving that these authors are not so one-dimensional. Frequently imposed definitions of ‘folk,’ ‘bourgeois,’ and ‘proletarian’ are not fully representative of them as people and of their creations. Further, these distinctions “led to the canonization of African American writers who seemed to embody the folk aesthetic and the devaluing of authors who evoked the bourgeois or the proletarian aesthetic” (Jones 2002: 3), which paints a wrong picture of Harlem itself.

³ Not to be confused with Hurston’s story *Book of Harlem* (1995). Although both short stories share a migrant/pleasure-seeking plot and a similar formal structure, utilizing a biblical format composed of verses, they differ in character motivation and final resolution.

ly aimed violence, while their older counterparts experience the trouble of infidelity and being on the lower rungs of the ladder of spousal selection. Youth appears to be elevated to the level of an unreachable utopia and, at their extreme, older Harlemites fight age with knives.

One of the things that makes relationships more difficult than expected is the experience of financial troubles and/or strife for material gain. The issue became even more pronounced during the Renaissance due to the younger generation becoming part of the middle class and experiencing some level of financial security. In *Monkey Junk* most of the action is governed by a desire for the acquisition of more money. The unnamed main character is unable to find a *maiden* willing to be with him out of love. As a result he marries a woman who “gazeth upon his checkbook and [...] coveted it” (Hurston 2021: 182). The checkbook becomes the dominant symbol of the story. The heroine reminds him constantly that this is not a marriage sprung out of love but a business deal that provides them both with comfort: he is able to parade his wife around and she is free to roam the shops for clothes and makeup. “Thou wast made to sign checks, not to make love signs” (Hurston 2021: 182). Their relationship suggests the impersonality of the city as a place. It appears to be full of promise for great achievement, but in the end is unable to foster real romance or lasting commitment⁴. As Ann Ducille astutely points out: “marriage ceases to be celebrated on paper as the quintessential signifier of civil liberty and becomes instead the symbol of material achievement; as such, it serves as the focal point of at times biting critiques of bourgeois black society and so-called middle-class values” (Ducille 1993: 87). Financial changes affect not only people’s psychology and their decision-making, but they re-orient and transform the marital institution. Hurston’s critique seems to be aimed not so much at the middle-class and its proponents as separate concepts, but at the whole dehumanizing and materialistic environment Harlem creates. The doomed union in the story ends in a court case with the heroine demanding alimony. Even though objectively the protagonist should not be made to pay additionally in the aftermath of their shaky entanglement, he loses the case. The image the woman builds for herself transcends reason. “And she turned soulful eyes about her and all men yearned to fight for her” (Hurston 2021: 188). She is using her youth, allure, and attire to attract the opposite sex who would support her claims. Sexual desire coupled with specific age lead to financial success and to the eventual resolution of the love-and-trouble plot, which involves the protagonist returning south. He has found himself incapable to navigate the shifting, gain-oriented city life and would rather pick cotton in Alabama than try his luck again.

⁴ A more well-known Hurstonian plot involves men (mostly hustlers) who achieve financial security through a middle-class occupation to win the affection of a particular young woman. In time, these characters are not capable to sustain a proper, boring, 9-to-5 existence and they go back to their hustling ways (i.e. *The Conversion of Sam* (ca. 1922) and *Muttsy* (1925)).

Migration and the search for a wife are also key to one other newly recovered story, *The Book of Harlem*. Jazzbo leaves Georgia with the intent of finding a significant other. Even though his father attempts to convince him that he can achieve this without having to move. The son cannot be dissuaded. He asks: “Wherefore must I wed a cooker of biscuits when I crave not bread?” (Hurston 2021: 168). Jazzbo is not satisfied to settle down and live an ordinary life. He believes that he should be able to experience as many things as possible and that city women are more refined and desirable – he compares them to a cocktail he is ready to gulp in one go. What he does not realize is that the elegant women he craves would view him in the same way he denigrates and judges country women as limited, uncouth, and undesirable. When he does get to Harlem, similarly to *Monkey Junk*, the Southern protagonist is being mocked and ignored owing to the way he dresses and his general appearance. “One maiden of great sassiness turned upon him and bade him go and cook a radish and he went home with his heart heavy within him” (Hurston 2021: 169). His personality and identity are irrelevant to Harlemite women who only see him as a country bumpkin and an outsider. Jazzbo does not understand what the problem is. He racks his head for the reasons he would appear undesirable. He asks himself: “Have I not shekels in my pockets? Am I not young?” (Hurston 2021: 170). It is very telling that the first two things he mentions are money and youth. Once more the way to a woman’s heart is equated with material gain, supported with a specific age requirement. Youth and wealth as two of the ruling forces of the city attract people to one another but both *Monkey Junk* and *The Book of Harlem* indicate that they are not able to lead to and sustain a long and healthy relationship.

In time, Jazzbo erases the country out of the boy by changing his attire, cutting his hair, learning to dance and improving his speech. The transformation concerns solely his physicality; he continues having the same values and motivations. When he does find a prospective lover, he attempts to entice her using his old tactics. “The maiden parked her head upon his shoulder and his mouth flew open and he told her all about his father’s shekels, and she loved him” (Hurston 2021: 171). The girl that supposedly falls in love with him after he showers her with promises to supply her with expensive gifts turns out to be just a one-night stand. She becomes the first in a line of usable and replaceable women who allow the protagonist to indulge in his fantasies involving sexual encounters before he decides to marry and settle down. Jazzbo is very specific about his future legal partner. He would only accept a virtuous woman who is a virgin, a figure that is in complete contrast with the women he used to run around with. His insistence on virginity is not surprising if we take into account the history of male-female relationships (in most cases marriages) and exchanges. According to Jessica Valenti:

It’s hard to know when people started caring about virginity, but we do know that men, or male-led institutions, have always been the ones that get to define and assign value to virginity. [...] a long-standing historical interest in

virginity is about establishing paternity (if a man marries a virgin, he can be reasonably sure the child she bears is his) and about using women's sexuality as a commodity. (Valenti 2009: 22)

In other words, virginity increases the material value of a woman and is a way to confirm paternity. If Jazzbo marries a virgin, he would be able to further increase his wealth and standing in the community. The envisioned woman would be the best of both worlds: a city woman with tamed sexuality and clear morality (characteristics more typical of rural areas where many people feel more limited by tradition and convention). Last but not least, Jazzbo's story may be considered an alternative example to the blues tales of trouble. Instead of having a tragic heroine recounting the difficulties she has with finding a reliable partner, we are made aware of what inspires such behavior and how men accept and affirm its validity. Jazzbo assumes without question that this is the path he is meant to traverse so he could authenticate his masculinity and prepare himself for long-term commitment. The way he treats city women is no different from the way he acted toward country women. Both types continue serving as a means to an end for him rather than as sentient individuals capable of feeling and thinking. Mary Lupton points out that: "in all of Hurston's fiction, male and female are, despite a mutual sexual attraction, still in conflict" (Lupton 1982: 50). Even in a short story like *The Book of Harlem* where there is no direct altercation or a heated exchange of words, there is a subdued ever-present tension that might escalate and erupt. Regardless of its light-hearted tone, the story still hints at important problems and unsolved questions when power and gender overlap.

Inability to escape the country completely when one migrates to the city becomes apparent in two more short stories of the ones recently discovered, *The Country in the Woman* and *She Rock*. Both pieces employ more or less the same narrative: Caroline and her husband Mitchell/Oscar migrate from the South to Harlem. Mitchell/Oscar as a compulsive cheater almost immediately starts pursuing young attractive girls. Caroline who is fed up with his ways resorts to violence. In a memorable scene, she takes an ax to one of his mistresses. The image of a woman carrying a weapon with the intent to kill or wound is one very representative of the Harlem Renaissance. As Stephen Knadler explains:

To the casual skimmer of the popular press's often sensational headlines, the Harlem Renaissance would [...] not only have been the era of Marcus Garvey, Langston Hughes, Josephine Baker, and the National Negro Business League, but also of a "New Negress" – a "woman with knives." As the opening list of front-page headlines from the New York Amsterdam News for five consecutive weeks at the beginning of 1928 witnesses as well, such stories of domestic violence with their frequent portrayal of "women with knives" recur as a telling complement to the more highbrow political and social commentaries of the Opportunity or the Crisis. (Knadler 2004: 99)

Articles in newspapers emphasized that black women were prone to violence by nature and that jealousy most often lead them to excesses. They were unable to control their emotional response as both belonging to a certain gender and a particular race. The goal of the dominant narrative was to return women who had acquired a level of independence to more traditional male-dominated models. In Hurston's stories Caroline's behavior seems not to be openly criticized; some critics have even read her drive in a positive light. "Caroline emerges the victor by rejecting conventional, urban, middle-class norms of femininity" (West 2021: xxxv). Her determination is not infused with a clear emotional response that would portray her as sorrowful or angry. Her violence is mostly being connected to her Southern mentality and habits (even the choice of her weapon is indicative of the place). In *The Country in the Woman*, when one of the loungers notices her ax and is told that she is not going to chop wood, he mockingly asks her: "Ha, ha! You forgot you aint back down South don't you?" (Hurston 2021: 199). She disregards him and knowingly tells him that such actions are not being executed solely in one territory. In other words, migration from rural to urban areas has not changed the essence and bad practices of the African American community. Instead of helping them adopt new modes of behavior, wealth and social mobility have only allowed for the proliferation of infidelity and abandonment and have continued to inspire and disseminate trouble narratives.

In *She-Rock* Oscar excuses his philandering with the way people experience their reality in the city. "This be great Babylon, not Sanford, moreover thou art no tea for my fever, neither are thou a B. C. for my headache, go to, cook thyself radish. Behold and see thou are still Sanford while I am Harlem" (Hurston 2021: 224). Even though he indulged in his desires earlier, he believes that the city as a space lends them a level of validity not available in the country. Oscar's pursuit is likened to a thirst, which results in a fever not easily quenched with known remedies, including his wife's body. He is on a quest for younger more captivating women who would not bind him in a long-term relationship. In this aspect he appears similar to the male protagonists in *Monkey Junk* and *The Book of Harlem*. Youth⁵ continues to pervade Hurston's narratives as an unreachable utopia as important as social sta-

⁵ The allure and promise of youth might also be traced to Hurston's life and her other literary works. For example in *Their Eyes*, Janie's most-fulfilling if not perfect relationship involves a younger man, TeaCake, while Hurston herself claimed to be younger than she was on numerous occasions. As Valerie Boyd explains: "[when she was 26 years old] Zora already had learned [...] that she could pass for much younger than she was. She also had discovered various benefits to playing the young ingénue. Starting in 1917, Zora Neale Hurston would almost always present herself as at least ten years younger than she was. Thus 1917, the year she went back to school, marked Hurston's rebirth – the moment she was reborn, by her own imaginative labor, as the woman she was to become" (Boyd 2003: 75). It is clear that the author had a personal interest in age and how it might be used to gain some specific benefits.

tus and financial means. However, its pursuit does not figure as a meaningful way to a loving relationship or a marriage. *She-Rock* concludes with a similar scene of a woman ready to use an ax. The difference is that there is a description of the encounter between the mistress and Caroline. “Then did Cal’line stand before the sweet mamma and smack her cheek and thigh. Yea verily she smote her exceeding with the fist and mocked her” (Hurstun 2021: 225). Rather than directly resort to her weapon, the heroine decides instead to shame and physically abuse her adversary so as to re-claim her role as a wife and a primary female in Oscar’s legal and personal life and stop future illicit meetings between the two of them. Notwithstanding the reason, her abuse and anger is first and foremost aimed at the Shebas rather than at the husband who actively seeks out these affairs. Some critics like Genevieve West have read Caroline’s violent acts and behavior as a way for her to show agency and to distinguish herself from the image of the proper housewife who stays at home doing chores and pondering her husband’s infidelity. “In the face of efforts to encourage rural female migrants to conform and relinquish their agency, Hurston’s Caroline characters offer strong, folk-based alternatives that simultaneously reinforce the primacy of family, maintain female respectability within the community, and still endow women with wills, voices, and axes of their own” (West 2014: 489). In other words, by eliminating the competition Caroline rebuilds and keep her family together. It should be noted that the stories leave us with an open ending: Mitchell goes out drinking with his friends, while Oscar returns South because he is unable to meet so many beautiful women and not woo them. The supposition that the family would stay together and that there would not be any more signs of infidelity is too optimistic. Caroline’s excessive efforts only deter a specific occasion but they cannot be a remedy for long-term illnesses.

Zora Neale Hurston’s newly recovered urban stories represent a fresh addition to her oeuvre. With the exception of one, they are indicative of her strong interest in southern folklore and migration. Her rich male migrants bring their old habits into the city and expect the fruits of easy love with young women – who alternatively make use of their youth to achieve financial security (at least some of them) – and the promise of virtuous commitment with virgin maidens. Older women face infidelity and abandonment. As a result, they are ready to use whatever means possible including violence to survive by either keeping their marriage together or marrying in general. Love is a secondary goal in many of these relationships, while trouble seems to govern their existence.

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