



## **Parallel Studies in Afro-American/American Literature Part III. Womanhood: Profiles in Black and White**

Curriculum Unit 80.01.05  
by Robert Johnson Moore

### ***Rationale***

This is the third in a series of units designed to point out parallels in selected writings of white and black American writers who, under the same canopy of creative and humanistic expression, share interests in the same themes, experiment with similar writing styles, and find themselves facing the same artistic conundrums. Writings of women—black and white—reveal the precarious status of women in American culture.

Because female aggression meets often with strong censure, women historically have sought passive means of attaining ends. Their actions, to escape public reprimand, must acknowledge their inferior station—their alleged vulnerability. Within this stifling atmosphere, some women have challenged the system openly, while many have found that even within this realm of vulnerability they have power to control, to move, to dominate. For black women, racism compounds the problem of sexism. “If growing up is painful for the Southern black girl,” writes Maya Angelou in *Caged Bird*, “being aware of her displacement is the rust on the razor blade that threatens the throat.”

Women-on-women writings of selected black and white writers disclose subtle nuances in the portrayal of female characters in this conflict. Students, through this course in Women’s Literature, will explore the meaning of “Sisterhood” in black and white.

Note: This course, designed for average to above average sophomores and juniors, demands a keen interest in literature.

### ***Course of Study***

Note: The narration to follow is designed to give the teacher a quick overview of the plot and theme of each story covered. All selections of white women writers come from *American Short Stories* by Current-Garcia and Patrick. Selections of black women writers are conspicuously absent in most anthologies—including those devoted exclusively to women. For that reason, the stories by black women writers come from several sources.

The attempt here is not to pair stories by black and white writers (although that may be desirable.) That,

however, will be addressed in the lesson plans. Rather, the discussion will show that women writers depict female protagonists as passive vehicles, desperate for liberation, who must because of social convention choose cautiously their modes of action.

#### *Narration:*

Both “A Respectable Woman” by Kate Chopin and “A New England Nun” by Mary E. Wilkins Freeman provide strong examples of how women must passively manipulate to assert their will. Mrs. Baroda, the protagonist in “A Respectable Woman,” falls in love with Mr. Gouvernail, “her husband’s college friend.”<sup>1</sup> She, contrary to her expectations, “rather liked him when he first presented himself” (p. 218), because “his manner was as courteous toward her as the most exacting woman could require” (p. 219). But his polite indifference perplexed and attracted her most. Their innocent encounter in the garden “beneath a live oak tree at the edge of the gravel walk” (p. 220) smolders into a clandestine romance. His “red point of a lighted cigar” and her “filmy, white scarf” (p. 220) provide almost comical Freudian metaphors for what surreptitiously transpires. Enraptured “in the tones of his voice” (p. 221), the desire to touch him overwhelms her, but she is “a respectable woman” for whom such an affair would ruin her reputation. Aware of her vulnerability, she assumes before her unsuspecting husband the posture of the dutiful wife who suffers little sacrifices for the sake of her marriage. Overcoming her initial dislike of Gouvernail, Mrs. Baroda whimsically says, “I have overcome everything! you will see. This time I shall be very nice to him” (p. 221). Under the guise of acquiescence, she coyly controls her fate.

Louisa Ellis in “A New England Nun” meekly confronts the issue of not marrying Joe Dagget, her betrothed for fifteen years. He would have surely shattered her cloistered existence with her “little feminine appurtenances” (p. 223). The conversation between Joe and his secret girl friend that Louisa overhears need not have been the proverbial straw on the camel’s arthritic spine, but it did provide the impetus for Louisa’s final decision. She bows out without betraying herself, simply because “she had lived so long in one way that she shrank from making a change” (p. 233). Dodging disgrace without wincing, Louisa salvages her dignity with the knowledge that, though vulnerable, she has the power to protect her nun-like sanctuary.

This power to protect one’s sanctuary is revealed in other stories by women. Katherine Anne Porter in “The Grave” provides Miranda with profound religious power—the memory of the silver dove she and her brother found at the family grave site—to face the hostile world; Edith Wharton in “Roman Fever” relies on the foiling of two characters’ memories of their childhood in Rome. Porter acknowledges the strength of God’s love as solace for a trouble soul; Wharton stresses that security generates from self-knowledge. Each is characteristic of means employed by women to control their fate in a world dominated by men and circumstances.

“Roman Fever” features a match of wits as two childhood friends, now women, volley for the upper hand in the resolution of an old quarrel over the same man. The narrator clues us that “these two ladies visualized each other, each through the wrong end of her telescope” (p. 323). The verbal interchange reveals that, although Mrs. Slade feels that she is clearly the winner in the love war (having married the much sought after Delphin, having forged the love note supposedly written by him causing her rival to risk illness and death at the Colosseum), she in actuality has lost. Fully in control, Mrs. Ansley, her competitor, reveals that she met Delphin at the Colosseum after all and that Barbara her daughter resulted from that fated union. The apparent tower of strength, Mrs. Slade, is toppled by a fatal blow from Mrs. Ansley, whose superior knowledge, like a trump card, lingered in her meek hand.

Kinship with black womanhood is featured in “Livvie” by Eudora Welty—a stirring tale of a young black woman

plucked away from her priceless youth by an older man who provides her only with material security. His “nice house” becomes her prison. The chance visit of the cosmetic saleswoman, Miss Baby Marie, awakens her dulled senses; the chinaberry lipstick moistens her parched spirit; Cash, the hired hand, unbridles her womanhood. Livvie has to leave; Solomon has to die. Mysteriously, Solomon interrupts his would-be murder at the hands of Cash by awakening just before the blow lands. The silver watch that Solomon gives to Livvie shares some of the spiritual significance of the silver dove in Porter’s “The Grave.” Solomon’s prayer cannot be gainsaid. Providence has liberated Livvie and to a lesser degree the strength that she has drawn from Cash. Eudora Welty provides another example of how women must rely on passive means to assert their will.

Students should see that all five female protagonists have been able, despite their vulnerability, to arrive at some degree of security: coyness suffices for Mrs. Baroda, resigned dignity for Louisa, superior knowledge for Mrs. Ansley, religious conviction for Miranda, and Providence for Livvie. These are examples that illustrate what happens to women when they fail to acknowledge their vulnerability.

In “Good Country People” by Flannery O’Conner and “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?” by Joyce Carol Oates, the female characters’ chances for survival dangle in the balance. Joy Hopewell in “Good Country People” and her counterpart Connie in “Where Are You Going?” share a smugness that blinds them to their weakness. Joy—bright, well-educated, and self-relegated to spinsterhood—uses her artificial leg and self-appointed name, Hulga, as weapons to torture her mother. Her professed atheism antagonizes her mother’s country-style religious beliefs. Manley Pointer, a country bumpkin, shatters her monotonous, circumspect existence because he sees through her tinsel defenses. Manley approaches the hayloft armed with a jug of whisky, a Bible, and a pack of prophylactics, ready for action; Joy, in gossamer armor, has fantasies of superiority. Annoyed with her refusal to cooperate, Manley shows her who is in control. He robs her of her prosthesis, her Achilles’ heel and chastity belt, mocks her smugness, her education, her being, telling her, “you ain’t so smart. I been believing in nothing ever since I was born!” (p. 600). Undone, Joy is left in the hayloft stripped of everything she thought she had. Her ultimate fate depends mainly upon what she has learned from this experience. Much of where she is going depends on where she has been.

Connie, presented by Joyce Carol Oates, like Joy, is rendered more vulnerable because of her arrogance, her lack of self-knowledge. Whereas Manley’s intent is not wholly sinister, Arnold Friend’s is: “Gonna get you, baby” (p. 659). He flatters with promise, not an idle threat. He knows Connie and all the Connies like her. Prancing around within their narrow middle-class bubbles, they see themselves as cute, unapproachable, impregnable, secure in their little asbestos boxes. Arnold knows them all well. He knows what words to say, all the secrets to shake the fragile framework of her sense of safety. His knowledge of Connie’s friends and of her parents’ whereabouts is superficial, but to Connie, off guard, it springs from some powerful demonic source. Where Connie is going now depends on where she has been. Sheltered, stunted by an environment that provides no real protection, Connie will soon share the knowledge of her vulnerability at a dear price. Like many women in our culture, she has been sold a false sense of security. Her wits, her intelligence, have not been nurtured. In the writings of Oates and other women writers is a profound plea for justice, for recognition that women should no longer suffer a bell jar existence. Theirs is a moral fiction revealing that in weakness there can be strength to endure, to control, to conquer.

### *Black Women Writers*

In the introduction to *Midnight Birds: Stories of Contemporary Black Women Writers*, Mary Helen Washington points out that only the fiction of black women has given black women a heroic image. “In the writings of black men, women are almost always subordinate to men. . . . The quest of the black man to achieve

manhood has always inspired the highest respect, but the equivalent struggle of the black woman has hardly been acknowledged—except by black women writers.” Few anthologies (even those dedicated to women writers) include works of black women. The following discussion of stories are taken from various sources.

The precarious position of southern black womanhood is clearly revealed in “The Angel of the Candy Counter.”<sup>2</sup> Tormented by the pain of “two cavities that were rotten to the gums” (p. 176), Momma has no choice but to take Marguerite to the local white dentist in Stamps. “The nearest Negro dentist was in Texarkana, twenty-five miles away” (p. 177). Hoping that Dr. Lincoln would honor the favor he owed her more than the practice of segregation, Momma prepares her daughter for a short trip across town in vain. Dr. Lincoln reminds Momma (Annie): “Annie, you know I don’t treat nigra, colored people.” (p. 179). More emphatically put: “Annie, my policy is I’d rather stick my hand in a dog’s mouth than in a nigger’s” (p. 180).

Fully aware of her position in the social/racial chain of being, Momma still cannot give up so easily. The daughters conception of what transpired after the dentist slammed the door in their faces contrasted with what happened in reality highlights the tension in a young black woman’s awareness of her “displacement.” Marguerite—bright, young, rebellious has—yet to grasp the implications of the incident. Her fantasy of her mother marching triumphantly into the dentist’s office, grabbing him by the collar, making him stand up at attention, is both a comic and painful joke on all humanity. She imagines her mother saying: “I didn’t ask you to apologize in front of Marguerite, because I don’t want her to know my power, but I order you, now and herewith. Leave Stamps by sundown” (p. 181).

But Momma’s *power* must be of another nature, one tempered with common sense and an awareness of her vulnerability. What her *power* allows her to do is to lie about the extra charge of interest on the loan the dentist made. The embarrassment the dentist feels for having been caught “thick as thieves” with his nurse in the back room gives Momma all the leverage she needs to move the world one micrometer to salvage her dignity. The dentist pays up in atonement for his nastiness. Clinging to her version of the story, Marguerite has more to learn about the true powers she must cultivate if she is to survive as a black woman in a hostile white environment.

Toni Morrison’s “1922”<sup>3</sup> provides another example of the plight of black woman in a world dominated by men—black and white. As Nel and Sula walk through town they are greeted with the same sexual innuendoes any woman would receive in Medallion’s Bottom. “When a woman approached, the older men tipped their hats; the younger ones opened and closed their thighs” (p. 42). To these men Nel and Sula, young girls, are “pig meat,” a name they cherished with guarded delight. To show more interest in sexual matters would render them targets for selfish delights. Long ago Sula and Nel discovered “that they were neither white nor male, and that freedom and triumph was forbidden to them.” Together they set out to create something else to be.

Nel seemed the stronger of the two. But in a clever, stoic indifference to pain Sula is able to scare off a group of young Irish toughs who threaten to attack them as they walk home from school. Sula slashes off the tip of her finger in full view of the awe-struck lads. With her “cherry blood” running down her hand, Sula, eyes raised to the boys quietly says: “If I can do that to myself, what you suppose I’ll do to you?” (p. 47) Sula has begun to learn how to use her wit, her inner sense of power to defend her honor. No male can do this for her. Further reading of the entire novel will show students why Sula was different from most black women of Medallion, Ohio.

“White Rat” by Gayl Jones and “The Gilded Six-Bits” by Zora Neale Hurston deal with the problem of black

women caught in the web of infidelity—a predicament usually followed by desertion, disgrace, and beatings. In both cases, however, the female protagonist is able to salvage her previous status. Maggie, a light yeller woman with chicken scratch hair, in “White Rat” seeks to free herself from a failing marriage to a man whose white appearance creates a struggle for his own racial identity. The guilt of having fathered a club-footed child by a woman he feels is beneath him triggers an explosive reaction. Maggie, enraged, confronts him with the bitter truth that “the onliest reason [he] married her was because she was the lightest and brightest nigger woman [he] could get and still be nigger.” In retaliation she runs away with J.T., who is “blackern’n a lump of coal.” Now she is said, to be pregnant by him.

Missie May, the protagonist of “The Gilded Six-Bits” allows her otherwise happy marriage to Joe to be undermined by the love of gold. On returning home early from the late shift, Joe finds his wife in bed with Otis D. Slemmons, the town’s wealthy colored man, who owns the local ice cream parlor. The gold pin and the golden half dollar that attracted both Joe and Missie to Slemmons on closer examination proves a fake. Joe shares in the guilt for having been seduced by the love of money. He forgives Missie for her weakness when she proves she will no longer be tempted by gilded counterfeit love. Their marriage is renewed and strengthened with the birth of a boy who is the “very spit” of his father. Similarly Maggie’s pregnancy in “White Rat” reunites her with her husband. Remorseful, Rat wants her back because he feels that he has been partly responsible for her running away. There is hint that the alleged pregnancy may have been arranged. After two more months, Rat notices, “I still don’t see no belly change.” Together these two stories illustrate the passive role women must take to protect their dignity. Were these same situations depicted by men writers, the outcome would have been much different.

Shirley Williams’ “Tell Martha Not to Moan” challenges the stereotype of the black woman jilted by her no-good lover. The story is much deeper than that. Time, the lover-musician, awakens Martha to a fresh sense of black womanhood. They truly love each other. Though Time she discovers racial pride; through Martha, Time discovers manhood.

Martha makes it clear that she wants nothing out of life but a sense of self: “I don’t want to have to ask nobody for nothing. I want to be able to take care of my own self.” Marriage means nothing to her: “Shit, married or single,” she believes, “they [men] still doing the same thing when they goes to bed.” Chiding Time for his lack of faith in his own dreams, Martha unintentionally provides the impetus for his leaving town for New York. Pregnant for the second time, Martha clings to her belief that Time will return, knowing that Time and she share the same dream. Despite her Mother’s doubts, the reader is tempted to side with Martha.

Humor commingled with love eases the pain of the black woman’s experience. Gwendolyn Brooks presents Maud Martha, a strong female character with a firm sense of dignity tempered with a smile. Maud appears in “At the Burns-Coopers’ ” and “We’re the Only Colored People Here.” Alice Childress in “The Pocketbook Game” presents a similar character in Mildred.

Maud begins to understand what her boyfriend Paul feels on his job when she is intolerably rebuked by her two white female employers in “At the Burns-Coopers’.” Unlike Paul, however, Maud chooses to quit her job, an option not readily available to many blacks. Quitting to Maud is like “spitting at the firing squad,” a poignant metaphor for her shallow act of defiance. In “We’re the only Colored People Here,” Brooks explores with warmth and candor the subtle tension that throbs between black men and women as they both experience feelings of alienation in a white environment. Maud reveals that while she shares Paul’s dislike for second-class treatment, her reactions are markedly different. Her dreams of one day attaining middle-class respectability are a dubious asset in a racist, sexist society. Maude is able to laugh and enjoy the movie, Paul,

and the moment, but she does not dare share her laughter with the other patrons. To do so would be an intrusion.

Mildred in “The Pocketbook Game” possesses some of Maud’s spunk and laughter. Her employee Mrs. E. out of blatant mistrust does not leave her big old pocketbook out of her sight. Mildred, the maid, retaliates comically by staging a similar show of pocketbook anxiety. Running back to the apartment from an uncompleted errand to grab her purse, she shows Mrs. E. the folly of her actions. She sarcastically answers: “That’s all right Mrs. E. . . , I understand. ‘Cause if I paid anybody as little as you pay me, I’d hold my pocketbook too!”

Within the confines of their own vulnerability, these women writers, black and white, have uncovered and shown the strength of women to endure, to control, to conquer. The strength derives from knowledge of their vulnerability and a passionate desire to define their own position in the universe. Beneath the passivity lies a growing quest for freedom and recognition.

## Notes

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1. Eugene Current-Garcia and Walton R. Patrick eds., *American Short Stories* , 3rd ed. (Oakland, NJ: Scott, Foresman, 1976), p. 218. All further references to this work appear in the text.
2. Maya Angelou, excerpt from *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* appearing as a short story in *The Scene* , Alma Murray and Robert Thomas eds. (New York: Scholastic Book Services, 1971) p. 176. All further references to this work appear in the text.
3. Toni Morrison, *Sula* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1973) p. 42. chapter presented here as short story. All further references to this work appear in the text.

## Annotated Bibliography

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Includes reading list for teachers and students\*

Adams, William (ed.) *Afro-American Authors* . Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1972. Combines a variety of works by black writers and includes “At the Burns-Coopers” by Gwendolyn Brooks.

Bethel, Lorraine and Smith, Barbara (eds.) *Condition: Five—the black women’s issue* . Brooklyn, New York: Van Brunt Station, 1980. A collection of political and literary statements of black women.

\*Cade, Toni (ed.) *The Black Woman: An Anthology*. New York: The New American Library, Inc, 1970. A collection of mixed genre—essays, poetry, short stories of black women about black women; tends to be more

political than literary.

\*Cahill, Susan (ed.) *Women and Fiction 2—Short Stories by and about Women* . New York: New American Library (Mentor), 1978. A fine collection of women writers from Europe and America. Includes one selection by Zora Neale Hurston, “The Gilded Six-Bits.” Sequel to *Women and Fiction* , published earlier.

Campbell, Barbara and Swansea, Charlene (eds.) *Love Stories by New Women* . New York: Avon Books, 1978. A collection of erotic stories by white women writers.

\*Current-Garcia, Eugene and Patrick, Walter R. (eds.) *American Short Stories* . 3rd ed. Oakland, NJ: Scott Foresman, 1976. A collection of forty-five stories written by forty American authors featuring representative examples in the evolution of the short story from Irving to the present. It includes works of noted black men and white women writers. Selection by black women are conspicuously absent.

\*Hughs, Langston (ed.) *The Best Short Stories by Negro Writers*. Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1967. A short story collection containing “The Gilded Six-Bits” by Zora Neale Hurston, “The Pocketbook Game” by Alice Childress, “We’re the Only Colored People Here” by Gwendolyn Brooks and a fair sampling of stories by other black women writers.

\* student reading list

Murray Alma and Thomas Robert (eds.) *The Scene* . New York: Scholastic Book Services, 1971. A collection of black poems, short stories, plays and novel excerpts; includes “Angel of the Candy Counter” from *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou.

Stanford, Barbara Dodds (ed.) *I, too, Sing America—Black Voices in American Literature* . Rochelle Park, NJ: Hayden Book Company, Inc. 1971. An excellent cross section of black writings presented in historical perspective.

\* Washington, Mary Lee (ed.) *Midnight Birds Stories of Contemporary Black Women Writers* . New York: Anchor Press, 1980. A sequel to *Black-Eyed Susans* , 1975, this collection features a wealth of fiction by American black women-long overdue.

## For Further Reading

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Angelou. Maya. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* . New York: Random Houselinc., 1970.

Brooks, Gwendolyn. *Maud Martha* . New York: Harper and Row, 1960.

Chopin, Kate. *The Awakening and Selected Stories* . New York: New American Library (Signet), 1976.

Hurston, Zora Neale. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* . New York: Fawcett World, 1969.

*Mules and Men* . Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1978.

Jones Gayl. *White Rat* . New York: Random House, 1971.

Morrison, Toni. *Sula* . New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. 1973.

———. *The Bluest Eye* . New York: Pocketbooks, 1970.

———. *The Song of Solomon*. New York: New American Library (Signet), 1977.

Oates, Joyce Carol. *Seduction and other stories* . New York: Fawcett Crest, 1980.

O’Conner, Flannery. *Everything that Rises Must Converge* . New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1965.

Porter, Katherine Anne. *The Collected Stories*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1969.

Walker, Alice. *In Love and Trouble: Stories of Black Women*. New York: HBJ, 1973.

Welty, Eudora. *Thirteen Stories* . New York: HBJ, 1969.

Wharton, Edith. *Roman Fever and other Stories* . New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1964.

## Lesson Plans

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A review of the basic elements of the short story is prerequisite for this course of study. The importance of theme, character, symbol, point of view, tone, humor, satire and setting should be carefully explained.

Short works covered in this course include:

“A Respectable Women” Kate Chopin

“A New England Nun” Mary E. Wilkins Freeman

“The Grave” Katherine Anne Porter

“Roman Fever” Edith Wharton

“Livvie” Eudora Welty

“Good Country People” Flannery O’Conner

“Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been” Joyce Carol Oates

and

chapter excerpts from

*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* Maya Angelou

*Sula* Toni Morrison

“Tell Martha Not To Moan” Shirley Williams

“We’re the Only Colored People Here” Gwendolyn Brooks

“At the Burns-Coopers” ’

“The Pocketbook Game” Alice Childress

“The Gilded Six-Bits” Zora Neale Hurston

“White Rat” Gayl Jones



## Note:

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The stories may be read in any order. An analysis of each one should be done in classroom discussion. Students should be able to discuss theme, character, setting, point of view, and any additional elements of the short story featured. Before an overall discussion of the role of women characters in black and white writings, all students should have read all stories presented in the narration. Teachers should feel free to substitute or add stories.

Sample questions and topics of discussion that emphasize a comparative study:

1. Based on the reading of the stories presented in this course of study what roles in society do black and white female characters share?
2. "Livvie" is the story of a black woman written by Eudora Welty, a white woman. How accurate is her portrayal? Could Livvie be a white woman? Explain.
3. What relationship between black women and white women is revealed in the works of Gwendolyn Brooks and Alice Childress. How complete and accurate is the portrayal of this relationship?
4. Examine carefully the names of the male characters in each of the stories presented (those that have male characters.) How are their names suited to their function in the story.  
Joe Dagget      Time  
Manley Pointer Delphin  
Mr. Gouvernail Arnold Friend  
Cash              White Rat  
Solomon
5. Compare the role of religious symbolism in "The Grave" and "Tell Martha Not to Moan."
6. How might the outcomes of "Livvie," "White Rat," and "The Gilded Six-Bits" been different if written by a male. What do the given outcomes suggest about a woman's perception of the problem of infidelity.
7. What devices are employed by each female protagonist to control the situation. How do these devices differ from those that a male character might use if placed in an equivalent situation?
8. In what ways are the female protagonists of white women writers protected or hindered by their environment? Compare this with that of black women writers.

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