



# The “Ancestor” Figure in Langston Hughes’ Not Without Laughter: Anticipation of Feminist Theoretical Accounts in Male Representations

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**Abstract** : Shifting the focus from black women to black men novelists, this work inspired by Barbara Christian’s seminal work, *Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition, 1892-1976* (1980), studies the characterization of Aunt Hager in *Not Without Laughter*, Hughes’ Harlem Renaissance novel, against the backdrop of the struggle over the image of the black woman in literary representations. It compares and contrasts Hughes’ character with the stereotypical depictions of the mammy in Antebellum and southern representations and the emancipatory portraits of the black woman in counter-narratives from the abolitionist to the New Renaissance periods. It argues that Hughes constructs a complex character combining features of the mammy but sufficiently revising it to give birth to a new archetype that anticipates the emergence of the Morrisonian “ancestor.”

**Keywords:** black woman; image; mammy; African-American literature; ancestor; Langston Hughes; Not Without Laughter.

## Introduction

Even a cursory glance at African-American and Southern literatures will tempt us to conjecture that one of the most recurrent and striking black stock characters from the antebellum period to more or less contemporary times is the elderly black woman. Barbara Christian, in *Black Women Novelists*, shows that this character type bears different names and occupies varying positions in mainstream and African-American narratives. Indeed, she is the stereotypical mammy, the Black matriarch, the sapphire, and the ancestor. The peripheral mammy in antebellum representations of Southern life in general and southern literature in particular, she is stereotypically painted as an overweight, complacent, extremely God-fearing, unrefined, and superstitious black woman with a kerchief speaking pidgin who often takes care of the master's children and seems to love them more than her own. In abolitionist and post-abolitionist creative works that counter the previous dominant culture's representations, she is endowed with more positive attributes. In early black women's novels of the nineteenth century such as *Clotel* and *Iola Leroy*, the black woman is painted as a sophisticated, fragile, well-mannered and educated mulatta who contributes to the advancement of the race. In twentieth-century black women writings, she is depicted as a matriarch, the very pillar of the black family, when she is not a sapphire, the strong, domineering, and practical woman. At times, she is even endowed

with supernatural powers in some unconventional counter-narratives in which she is a seer or a healer. Often, the black woman is the head of an extended family composed of divorced or single-mother daughters and grandchildren. In black women writers' works, she is a true matriarch, an extremely devout Christian and a maternal figure ruling her household with an ironclad hand and ensuring the economic and social stability of the family. She also paves the main protagonists' path to development and a viable future. Contemporary cultural analysts such as Toni Morrison – we shall elaborate on this later – have called this powerful and inspirational presence the ancestor.

This stock character can be found in numerous works by male and female African-American writers. The sympathetic and maternal Aunt Hager in Langston Hughes' first novel *Not Without Laughter* (1930) represents a great illustration. Another version of this character type is Momma, the strong and inspirational matriarch in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969). Hazel, the rebellious and resistant "uptown mama" in Toni Cade Bambara's collection of short stories, *Gorilla, My Love* (1972) constitutes another urban version. The unconventional Pilate Dead in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977) also constitutes a southern version. Velma Henry, the healer in Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters* (1980) is close to this character type which can

also be found in the works of Caribbean-American writers such as Paul Marshall: she is Aunt Cuney in *Praisesong for a Widow* (1983) and Leesy in *The Chosen Place* (1969).

Countless studies have been devoted to the study of the black woman in African-American-women writers' productions, especially those published between the abolition period and the 1970s for many reasons. Barbara Christian's *Black Women Writers* paved the way, followed by many studies borrowing a feminist perspective. For instance, the character of Annie Henderson in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* has been the subject of many scholarly works. For example, there is Yolanda M. Manora's article "What You Looking at me for? I didn't Come to Stay' Displacement, Disruption and Black Female Subjectivity in Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*." Other characters such as Pilate Dead's *Song of Solomon* and Shirley Ann Williams' *Dessa Rose* have also inspired many thoughts about how black American women writers challenge the sexist and stereotypical representations of the mammy and the jezebel.

However, the representation of the black woman in past works written by male writers remains less studied. For this reason, we deemed it worthwhile devoting time to her representation in an antecedent fiction by a male writer, more specifically the characterization of Aunt Hager in Langston Hughes' *Not Without Laughter* (1930). Several factors justify the choice of Hughes' novel. First, Langston Hughes defines himself as a realistic writer not entangled in the ideological shackles of

race and politics. Indeed, in his landmark essay, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," he speaks of both the need for race pride and artistic independence of the African-American artist. This desire to achieve realism and the artist's declaration of freedom of creation is voiced in the extract below when he proclaims:

We young Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful and ugly too. The tom-tom cries and the tom-tom laughs. If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn't matter either. We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves (Cantor 29).

Another rationale behind the choice is that the poet, novelist and essayist is a leading and representative figure of African-American letters. As a matter of fact, Langston Hughes, as Glenn Jordan notes in "Re-Membering the African-American Past," forms part of the African-American intellectuals and writers of the Harlem Renaissance era who, along with W. E. B. Du Bois, Jesse Fauset, Alain Locke, and Van Der Zee, promoted the racial ideals of their community (850). Besides, his novel was published before a pivotal moment in black women writings: the years coming just before the black women writers' reclamation of their true image. Hughes produced this fiction work in an era of progressive "fall of the proper

mulatta” and before the emergence of “ordinary women” in the black women’s tradition. As a matter of fact, the shift in the re-representation of the black woman begins in the 1930s, but is more visible in the 1940s and 1950s.

This work demonstrates that Aunt Hager in *Not Without Laughter* not only self-consciously revises the stereotype of the mammy disseminated in mainstream literature and discourses of the time, but she anticipates the emergence of the ordinary black woman as a heroine in the black feminist tradition. Using the explicit and implicit characterization of the figure, it argues that Hughes even goes a step higher than the filial black women writers: he creates a new type of female character that Morrison will call the “ancestor.” To have a better angle from which to compare the true-to-life depiction of Aunt Hager to the stereotypical picture of the mammy disseminated in antebellum and southern representations, especially those written by white authors, and the counter-portrait found in African-American women writers’ representations, we’ll first make an overview of the black woman’s stereotypical features in the dominant culture’s fictional representations before presenting the countertypes found in African-American literature in general and black women’s novels from the abolition to the seventies in particular. This retrospective account of the representation of the black woman in the black women’s writings will enable us to situate Hughes’s characterization in the tradition and illustrate how the male author anticipates practices and

developments in black feminist fiction, theory and criticism.

### **Literary Review**

Postcolonial and feminist critical studies have denounced how black people, particularly black women, have been misrepresented and caricatured in literary works to support the racist and sexist theories legitimizing and perpetuating the exploitation of the sable race. For instance, Barbara Christian, in her landmark *Black Women Novelist*, discusses at length the stereotypes loaded upon black women in American literature and representations of southern life. In her view, these stereotypes have been constructed as a result of the need to disseminate ideological discourses reinforcing the supremacy of the dominant race. Taking antebellum representations of Southern life and Southern literature as illustrations, she lists the three dominant images of the black woman: the mammy, the conjure woman and the tragic mulatta. The image of the jezebel is also another recurrent image. Although we will touch upon the other images, we will focus more on the image of the mammy because it corresponds more with the character of our focus in *Not Without Laughter* in terms of age and features. A peripheral character always painted in the background of mainstream literary works, the mammy is the black woman valued for her role as a mother and a worker. Christian describes her as a superstitious, religious, overweight, and unattractive mature woman with a kerchief on her head who disregards her own offspring and devotes more time to tending the white mistress’ babies (5-

19). Robinson, in "Mammy Ain't Nobody Name": The Subject of Mammy Revisited in Shirley Anne Williams's "Dessa Rose," corroborates Christian's delineation of the mammy's features when she notes the mammy and the jezebel can be considered as the dominant types of black women in mainstream American literature. Contrasting the mammy to the Jezebel, she states that contrary to the Jezebel who was "licentious" and legitimized the sexual abuse of the slave woman, the mammy was "maternal, virtuous, devoted. She enabled to legitimize slavery as it permitted African-American women to "come as close as they possibly could to the pristine standards of white womanhood." (51).

As scholars such as Barbara Christian have already demonstrated, in early African-American literature such as enslaved people's narratives and abolitionist works autobiographical and fictional, a massive overhaul of the stereotypical representation of the black woman can be noticed. First, "orators like Frederick Douglass, William Brown, and Frances Harper were concerned with countering Southern images not only of black men but of black women as well" (19), Christian explains. Indeed, these authors refuted the images of the lewd and lascivious black woman and portrayed her under more positive shades enhancing her challenges, drudgery, courage, etc. This self-conscious or unconscious deconstruction of the negative images of black women writings is also particularly striking in abolitionist works such as Iola Leroy countering stereotypes through the depiction of the

"proper," and most of the time tragic mulattas torn between the two races. The mulatta has constituted a countertype in many black women writers' from the period of abolition to the Harlem Renaissance. Cases in point, Nella Larsen's two novels, *Quicksand* and *Passing*, respectively published in 1928 and 1929, continue to perpetuate the middle-class mulatta heroine tradition.

It is only from the early twentieth century onward, with the publication of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), of *The Street* (1946), and later of *Maud Martha* (1953), that we witness the emergence of ordinary black women as heroines in African-American women's novels. The trend continued in subsequent works of black women writers in which we notice a break away from the image of the proper mulatta and the representation of ordinary black women. Although these fiction writers may use many features of the stereotypical mammy, they revise them sufficiently to correct the false myths attached to it. Barbara Christian considers that two dominant variations of the mammy image are worth mentioning as a backdrop to the emergence of black women novelists in the sixties and seventies: the sapphire and the matriarch (77). The sapphire is the domineering, loudmouth, strong-willed, practical, independent black women, partly because she is by nature devoid of emotion and emasculating. She is not so maternal toward white folks and she is cold, hard, and evil to black men. As for the matriarch, she is strong, independent and out of necessity born of circumstance, serves as the head

and the heart of her family” (Manora 367). Thus, one can note a strong and growing tendency to deconstruct stereotypes attached to their sisters in black women writings with a rising need to move away from the master’s tools.

But where do early black male writers stand in this struggle to define the features of the black woman and reclaim her true image? How do they represent the black woman in works published before or during that period? These are some issues we will discuss in the study of the portrait of Aunt Hager in Langston Hughes’ Harlem Renaissance novel, *Not Without Laughter* (1930). The choice of this novel is not fortuitous because it came out before the publication of such novels as *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Maud Martha* that bring to the forefront ordinary black female protagonist rooted in African-American culture and countering previous stereotypes.

**Not Without Laughter as an anticipation of the black feminist discourses and practices**

Langston Hughes’ *Not Without Laughter* initiates the representational and discursive practices found in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Maud Martha*; the author constructs a new type of character coalescing the features of the matriarch and the ancestor, and anticipates contemporary theoretical developments in the black women’s literary tradition. A literary ancestor of Zora Neale Hurston and a key figure of the Harlem Renaissance who promoted the racial ideals of the era, Langston Hughes proclaimed the artistic freedom of the writer and refused to be constrained by ideological or political

shackles. As he explains in his essay, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” (1926), which had become the manifesto for many African-American writers of the Harlem Renaissance period, his concern was not to satisfy the black or white community’s tastes but rather to paint the black experience in a realistic way. Hughes’ bravado and audacity reverberate in the honest treatment of black life in his novel set in the Depression years and the characterization of Aunt Hager. The mature black woman is cut out of the author’s experience: some believe the model of Hughes fictional character was his own grandmother, Mary Leary Langston. A former slave from Montgomery, Alabama, Aunt Hager is an ordinary urban black woman in her seventies living in the segregated town of Stanton, Kansas, in the period of the Great Depression with her two daughters—Annjee and Harriet—and her grandson, Sandy. Hager lives in a mixed working class community where whites peacefully cohabit with black people even though the novel is set against a backdrop of racism, a situation recurrently satirized through the narrative voice and the comments of Harriett, Jimboy, Mrs Johnson, etc.

Aunt Hager’s name bears a sweet tone and resonates echoes of the biblical figure of Hagar, the Egyptian handmaid of Sarah who was given to Abraham to bear a child: Ishmael. Like her namesake, she works hard with her hands to earn a living and provide for her family. After the death of Pa Williams, not only did she have to educate her daughters by herself and

care for her grandson, Sandy, but also, despite her old age, she remained economic pillar of the household. Jimboy, Annjee's husband is a blues man who spends his time travelling with his guitar; Aunt Hager takes in laundry to feed her family. This passage in which she brags about her work ethic reads:

Fo' nigh on forty years, ever sence Cudge an' me come here from Omtgomery. An' I bee washin' fo' white folks ever' week de Lawd sent sence I been here, too. Bought this house washin'; and made as many payments myself as Cudge come near; an' raised ma chillens washin'; and Cudge taken sick an' laid on his back for mo'n a year, I taken care o' him washin', cause' he ain't belonged to no lodge. Sent Tempy through the high school and edicated Annjee till she marry that onery pup of a Jimboy, an' Harriett till she left home. Yes sir. Washin', an' here I is with me arms still in the tub! (142).

Hager is a complex and multidimensional character who bears some of the physical and psychological features of the mammy. As Kim Grewe notes in a two-page paper posted in academia.edu, "despite fulfilling the unflattering stereotype of mammy in several ways, Aunt Hager in Langston Hughes' *Not Without Laughter* is a complex character whose dignity and compassion elevate her to a status which transcends the pejorative stereotype" (1). A washerwoman in her late sixties, Hager is an overweight black woman with a kerchief on the head; she always wears a clean apron and loves

watermelon. Like the stereotypical mammy as well, this head of family is an extremely devout and pious woman. From the incipit of the novel, the narrative draws through direct and indirect characterization attention on Hager's love of the Christ and Christian behavior. Hager is Love and refuses to let hatred enter her heart. Despite enslavement and racial segregation, she admonished her family to love white people because not all white people are bad.

Hager can be said to be complacent and submissive towards to the racist system. As a slave working in the master's house, she was so close and affectionate towards her mistress/friend that she stayed with her through the Civil War, assisting her when her husband died in the war and only left when she died. She is not a heroic woman who battles against the prevailing racist order. On the contrary, she is rather complacent as a result of religion, as John P Shields notes so well in 'Never cross the divide:' *Reconstructing Langston Hughes Not Without Laughter;*" Aunt Hager's acceptance and submission to the racist and capitalistic system shows through her tolerance but is more clearly voiced through Jimboy's criticisms during a conversation in which they denounce the racist order which has been prevailing in America from the Reconstruction to the 1930s. Responding to Aunt Hager's warning that the Lord hears him, he says with exasperation: "I don't care if He does hear me, mama! You and Anjee are too easy. You just take whatever white folks give you coon to your face, and nigger behind your backs—and don't say

nothing. You run to some white person's back door for every job you get, and then they pay you one dollar for five dollars' worth of work, and whenever they get ready" (86).

Unlike Maya Angelou's *momma*, an almost larger-than-life figure, Hager is not a matriarch who runs her household with ironclad authority. At times, the brave woman has problems enforcing rules in her household. Despite her efforts, she is unable to keep her daughters in school: Annjee left high school to get married with Jimboy and Harriet quits school to work in a minstrel show. Her lack of authority is, however, more illustrated through her relationship with Harriet, her younger daughter. Harriet hangs out with the sporting girls of the Bottoms, a disreputable district in Stanton. She breaks all the rules established by her mother and spends her time partying with a group of friends. Hager even resorts to physical punishment to discipline Harriet. She beats her up when the adolescent goes out without her permission to a party. To top it all, Harriet runs away and joins a minstrel show. Hager's constant pleas and efforts to sensitize her younger one about the importance of education are to no avail because she drops out of school to seek part-time jobs in hotels and bars and finally joins a minstrel show performing in carnivals. Her dream is to become a blues singer. On the spiritual side, she stands as a binary opposite of her mother: whereas Aunt Hager goes to the revival and finds catharsis in religion, Harriet goes to the carnival where she dances for white people. She finds cathexis and escape in the blues (Shields

601). Harriett even becomes a renowned blues singer at the end of the novel.

Thus, unlike the matriarchs in mid-twentieth century narratives by African-American women writers, Hughes' matriarch is an ordinary Aunt Hager remains feminine despite her masculine roles. As Yolanda Manora points out, in her analysis of the character of *Momma* in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* "Black women relinquish their feminine identities and become lesser women. Rendered some- how androgynous and certainly asexual, the Black Matriarch becomes the embodiment of spiritual will, consigned to one- dimensional, thus limiting, narrative, communal, and experiential spaces" (...). Unlike *Momma* who is larger than life, Aunt Hager is a true- to- life matriarch with her strengths and weaknesses. She is not the strong, asexual and androgynous Pilate in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* who asserts power over men; neither is she the strong *Momma* in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*.

Nevertheless, even if Hughes realistically represents Hager with her limits and shortcomings, he completely revises through direct and indirect characterization the stereotype of the mammy and assigns the elderly lady the features of "ancestor." Langston Hughes was certainly conscious of the stereotypes attached to southern black woman, the issue of the stereotypes attached to people of color raged in the context of the Harlem Renaissance when artists in minstrel shows and writers such as Claude McKay were criticized for perpetuating negative images of their race. Hughes confers Aunt Hager vocal power to revise the

negative perception of the black woman in the chapter eloquently entitled “Nothing but Love.” On a summer night when she told stories to her young grandson, Hager tells her grandson:

The young ones what’s coming up now, they calls us ole fogies and handkerchief heads, and white folks’ niggers ‘cause we don’t get mad an’ rar’ up in arms like they does cause things is kinder hard, but honey, when you gets old you now they ain’t no sense in gettin’ an’ souring yo’ soul with hatin’ peoples. White folks is white folks, an’ coloured is colored, an’ neither one of t’em is bad as t’other make out. For mighty nigh seventy years I been knowin’ both of ‘em, an’ I ain’t never had no room in ma heart to have neither white nor colored. When you starts hatin’ people, you gets uglier than they is – an’ I ain’t never had no time for ugliness, ‘cause that’s where de devil comes in—in ugliness! (179).

Clearly, Aunt Hager deconstructs the myth of the contented mammy built around the black woman criticized for loving the white race more than her own and being complacent. Hager corrects misinterpretation of black women as mammies or “fogies, an’ handkerchief heads, an’ white folks’ niggers.” Grounding her position on religious teachings, she explains that hatred is evil and destructive and it makes the hater worst than the oppressor. For Hager, there is a great misunderstanding between members of the white and black race and neither one is as bad as the other one thinks. She also deconstructs the myth of enslavement as

a totally malevolent system. Through the story of her friendship with the mistress’ daughter, Miss Jeanne, she illustrates that black and white people loved each other. Through Hager’s voice, the narrative shows that the mammy was not a contented and passive creature, but rather a wise and noble person who refuses to be trapped in the destructive compartments of a system that breeds hatred (179-80). Hughes thus uses a woman’s own voice to deconstruct the myth of the mammy echoing at the same time the novel’s overall discourse of peace and tolerance between races voiced against a background of protest and softened propaganda.

In addition, Langston Hughes confers the mature lady great values that elevate her status. Through her exemplary behavior, industriousness, fear of the Lord, high morals and vision, Hager stands as a role model for the young Sandy. Since she came to Stanton with her husband Cudge forty years ago, she has worked hard to provide for the financial needs of her family and she transmits this industriousness to her grandson. Besides, true love of the Christ and practice of the lessons of the Holy Scriptures shape Hager’s daily behavior and life. Indeed, she is love and her Christian heart makes her transcend hatred and racism. Contrary to the other characters—Harriett, Jimboy, etc. - Hager maintains a loving and tolerant attitude towards all people despite all she has undergone. She advises: ““White people maybe mistreats you an’ hates you, but when you hates ‘em back, you’s de one what’s hurted, ‘cause hate makes yo’ heart

ugly-that's all it does [...] There ain't no room in de world fo' hate, white folks hatin' niggers an' niggers hatin' white folks..." (Hughes 126). John P. Shields shares the same view when he states that "religion, especially as experienced by Aunt Hager, provides a source of catharsis, a release for pent up anger. Its hope comes in the form of a promised afterlife where skin color will not be held against anyone and all will be equal before God" (601).

Aunt Hager is also a generous and caring woman serving the whole Stanton community. As a white lady testifies, calming down Sandy who was looking for her grandma, she is "good to have around when folks are sick and grieving" (Hughes 24). The omniscient narrator reinforces the lady's depiction of Aunt Hager as a generous and available woman who helps the distressed neighbors and tends to the sick: "All the neighborhood, white and colored, called his grandmother when something happened. She was a good nurse, they said, and sick folks liked her around. Aunt Hager always came when they called, too, bringing maybe a little soup that she had made or a jelly. Sometimes they paid her and sometimes they didn't" (25). Because she helps people in a disinterested way and expects no retribution, when they heard that she died, people, regardless of race, flooded the house with gifts and contributions to manifest their appreciation of her loving and generous actions towards the community of Stanton.

However, her vision and role in the main protagonist's development are what makes Aunt Hager sumptuous and

elevate her to the status of "ancestor." Her characterization anticipates the birth of a new type that Toni Morrison will name the ancestor in her landmark essay entitled "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation" (1984). Morrison explains that in assessing novelistic creations, she is very much interested in what writers do with the "ancestor," a crucial elderly figure not affected by the passage of time who often affects the other characters' lives in a positive manner and ensures the main protagonist's success. "These ancestors", she explains, "are not just parents, they are sort of timeless people whose relationships to the characters are benevolent, instructive, and protective, and they provide a certain kind of wisdom" (Evans 343). Morrison explains that she noticed in contemporary fictional works set in cities or rural areas, the success or happiness of the main protagonist depended on the presence or absence of the ancestor. Novels characterized by the absence of this figure are characterized by enormous destruction (Evans 343).

Aunt Hager is a true ancestor who plays a crucial role in the coming of age of the main protagonist, Sandy Williams. She is the one who brings up Sandy, and she guides her grandson throughout his turbulent years of adolescence, teaches him important values such as industry, fear of God, honesty, cleanliness, work ethics, and love and she paves the way to a brighter future. Using rhetorical tools similar to the ones of Booker Talieferio Washington and through transmission of memory, Aunt Hager nurtures her grandson's development. In

a period of intense racism, depression and disillusionment of the African Americans, Hager is aware that the only way out is to get a decent education that would enable them to get out of the whirlwinds of minor and poorly paid jobs. Hager believed that training and education would play an important role in the future of the black race. For this reason, she tries all she could to keep Annjee and Harriet in school in vain. She therefore placed high hopes in Sandy, his little grandson he wanted to get through school and become a race hero such as Frederick Douglass, Dubois and Washington.

But they's one mo' got through school yet, an' that's ma little Sandy. If the Lawd lets me live, I's gwine make a edicated man out o' him. He's gwine be another Booker T. Washington." ( ) "I ain't never raised no boy o' ma own yet, so I wants this one o' Annjee's to mount to something. I wants him to know all they is to know, so' he can help this black race o' our'n to come up and see de light and take they places in de world. I wants him to be a Fred Douglass leadin' de people, that's what, an' not following in de tracks of his good-for-nothing pappy, worthless an' wanderin' like Jimboy is (142).

The narrative abounds with references and allusions to key African-American figures and has a strong intertextual relationship with *Souls of the Black Folks* and *Up From Slavery*. It is a site where the discourses of W. E. B. Dubois and Booker T. Washington circulate in the form of pastiche and refiguration. Their discourses are constantly alluded

to and parodied by Aunt Hager and Tempy as an act of homage through what Gates terms "unmotivated signifying." Signifying, as scholar Henry Louis Gates defines it, describes the enterprise of reversing, revising, or parodying speech or discourse through rhetorical self-definition (*Figures in Black* 242). Whereas unmotivated signifying utilizes pastiche and refigures "as an act of homage," motivated signifying employs parody proper and seeks to erase previous texts through revision (*Signifying Monkey* xxvi). Aunt Hager's words in the narrative resonate echoes of Booker Taliaferro Washington. Washington "argued that thrift, industry and Christian morality would eventually earn blacks their Constitutional rights. The first essential step toward equality would be for blacks to learn trades so they might compete effectively with whites in the economic arena. Therefore, blacks must make, as their educational objectives, the acquisition of these practical skills that would promote their economic development" (Wintz 36-37). Similarly, Tempy's belief that blacks should get higher education but not just learn trades as Booker T. Washington's accommodationist theory preconized is closer to the nationalist philosophy of W.E. B. Dubois.

Perpetuating the African oral tradition, a tradition that was transplanted by the slaves to the New World, Aunt Hager transmits memory and perfects Sandy's education through stories. On summer nights "while the lightning bugs glowed and glimmered," she would tell Sandy stories of slavery-time, myths, folk-tales like the ones of Rabbit and the Tar baby,

stories about great historical events such as the civil war, Abe Lincoln's freedom or visions of the Lord. These stories conveyed lessons of life and constituted pretexts for the old woman to discuss issues with Sandy. Like Aunt Sue in Hughes' eponymous poem titled "Aunt Sue's Stories," sitting in the front porch, she used didactic stories engaging the past, but also addressing the present situation and a possible future to inculcate her grandson values such as love, pride, etc. Despite the destructive and hate breeding atmosphere of racism that prevails in Stanton school and in the society at large, she teaches him to judge people not by the colour of their skins but rather by the content of their characters because there are good and bad people in all races. Critic Andy Oler emphasizes the importance of stories in Sandy's development when he says "throughout the novel, Sandy's coming of age has been nurtured through the front-porch storytelling of his family and the rest of Stanton's African-American community" (94).

Sandy, as the various internal monologues demonstrate it, has memorized most of Hager's teachings and acquired many of the values her grandmother struggled to him, including perseverance, cleanliness, and hard work. Sandy's awareness of the importance of education is illustrated through a juxtaposition of dialogue and insight into his thoughts. The narrative first presents Hager's reminders he wanted him to stay nice and make something out of himself and promises that she would make a fine man out of Sandy for the glory of God and the black race. Then, it illustrates the impact

of Hager's words through Sandy's impression. In response to Hager's question if he heard what he kept saying, the narrator reveals the young man's thoughts through the comments below: "Sandy did hear her, and eh knew what she meant. She meant a Booker T. Washington, or Frederick Douglass, or like Paul Lawrence Dunbar, who did poetry-writing" (Hughes 195). Some pages further, the narrator further exhibits the great influence of the grandmother's teachings on Sandy's character in this passage describing the young boy's thoughts cleaning the spittoons in the hotel's lobby:

He liked to clean things, to make them beautiful, to make them shine. Aunt Hager too. When she wasn't washing clothes, she was always cleaning something about the house, dusting, polishing the range, or scrubbing the kitchen-floor until it was white enough to eat from. To Hager, a clean thing was beautiful—also to Sandy, proud every evening of his six unblemished brass spittoons (209).

Still through the use of the internal monologue, the narrative exhibits again the tremendous impact of Hager's constant lessons of ambition on Sandy. Hager gave Sandy's life direction, drive and motivation. As a matter of fact, Sandy had so much heard her grandma tell him that he must become a fine ambitious man, someone who would uplift his race that working as a bellboy in Drummer's Hotel he would wonder what "he would do when he was a man" and how he can succeed in life. Compassionately thinking about her old,

overworked and affectionate grandmother who prayed he would be a great man, he “wondered how people got to be great...He wondered how people made themselves great” (212). Sandy’s intimate thoughts at Tempy’s house also reveal that Hager has shaped the adolescent’s attitude towards race and helped him build a sense of tolerance and understanding over hate. “I don’t blame him,” thought Sandy. “Sometimes I hate white people too, like Aunt Harrie [...] Still, some of them are pretty decent” (Check 188). The effect of Hager’s teachings over that of his Aunt Harriet can be seen in how he tries to be understanding of both his friend’s view as well as his own view.

Aunt Hager continues to shape the courses of events and determine the trajectory of Sandy’s life even after her death. Aunt Hager had dreams of success for her dear grandson, and she had succeeded in instilling ambition in Sandy’s mind. These lessons were like engravings deeply marked on marble: even years after her death, her grandmothers’ words kept on resonating in the young adolescent’s psyche and served as a spur in moments of loss and despair. She told him so often that she wanted him to be a great man sitting on the porch in the darkness that dreaming in the little room that her mother had rented in Chicago, Sandy still hears her and promises that he won’t disappoint her. As the narrator comments, “an’ I won’t disappoint you!” Sandy said that hot Chicago summer, just as though Hager were still there planning for him” (290).

Hager did plan for Sandy, for even she did not live long enough to see him turn

into somebody, members of her family do their best to perpetuate her will, including Tempy and the rebellious Harriett. When Hager dies, Tempy takes Sandy in to allow him to pursue his studies because like W.E.B. Dubois she felt colored people should get high education. She allows the young boy to continue studying until the age of fifteen in decent conditions. Even if she is negatively portrayed as an uppity lady who suffers from a complex of inferiority in relation to white people and criticized for distancing herself from her community that she looks down upon, she does however take care of Sandy, protect him from the negative social influences in Stanton and teaches him good manners. Tempy perpetuates Aunt Hager’s will and helps achieve her dream of success for her grandson. Under her care, Sandy becomes an honor student praised for his excellent results. Before that, he had even won the second prize in the freshmen essay contest to her aunt’s great pride: “it was the first time in the history of the school that a colored people had anything of the sort, and Tempy was greatly elated” recounts the narrator.

Had it not been for Harriett, Aunt Hager’s would have died when Annjee forces Sandy to move to Chicago when Jimboy joined the US forces to combat in France. Annjee had convinced the protagonist to take a fourteen- dollars-a week job as an elevator boy to help with the rent and the house expenses. Sandy unwillingly accepted to drop out of school because his dream was to keep studying. Fortunately, who had by then become a renowned blues singer touring the states, miraculously came to perform

on State Street. Conscious of Aunt Hager's dream to turn his grandson into someone educated who could contribute to the advancement of his race; she is outraged by Anjee's decision to take Sandy out of school. Harriett glared excited at her sister: "Aunt Hager'd turn over in her grave if she heard you talking so calmly about Sandy leaving school- the way she wanted to make something out of this kid" (297). Harriett did not want her mother's dream to die out, and as she explains, she did not want her nephew to be stuck in an elevator job; consequently, she promised Anjee to send him money and gives Sandy right away a 10-dollar bill to buy his books.

Thus, the opening parallel between Aunt Hager and her biblical namesake can be stretched further if we compare Ishmael to Sandy: whereas by giving birth to Ishmael, Hagar makes it possible for the great nation of the Ishmaelites to come to life, Aunt Hager also symbolically "gives birth" to a new generation of African-American by mentoring Sandy. As a matter of fact, Aunt Hager lights the flame of ambition in her grandson and creates a dream, a dream that her family endeavors to make true. Though the narrative ends with Harriett's promise to send Annjee money on a regular basis to keep Sandy in school, all the premises making the dream come true are gathered: Sandy has grown into a bright young man with tremendous cultural knowledge and great critical consciousness of his environment and the issues at stake. He is ambitious and aware of the dangers of growing up in a poor and racist environment. Thanks to the ancestor, a future is possible for

Sandy. Langston Hughes closes his novel with a note of hope and laughter: like in a blues melody, the narrative is plaintive but it ends with a note of transcendence of the limits of the environment and the possibility of a future.

### **Conclusion**

Critics and scholars have often focused on the fictional works of black women novelists to study the representation and image of black women and the evolution of female character types to the detriment of male writers who have greatly contributed to the revision and reclamation of the true image of the black woman. Langston Hughes forms part of these male writers. Indeed, his characterization of Aunt Hager in Langston Hughes' *Not Without Laughter* (1930) not only revises the stereotype of the mammy, but it also anticipates development in black feminist theoretical accounts and the rise of a new type of woman that Toni Morrison will call the ancestor. As stated earlier, Hughes writes in a period preceding a great revision of the image of black women, a period when black women start depicting less tragic mulatta as in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and ordinary black urban woman as in *Mauda Martha*. Langston Hughes initiated such practice in his 1930 novel and even went a step higher than Hurston and Walker: he creates a true-to-life multidimensional black urban woman who bears some characteristics of the mammy but gains the contours of the ancestor.

Hager does not have any of the blown up traits or powers of the emasculating matriarchs that will develop in black

women fictions of the mid-century. A former slave, who moved to Stanton, Arkansas, after the death of her mistress, the almost seventy-year-old widow bears the physical traits of the mammy: she is overweight, wears a kerchief on the head, and an apron tied around her waist. She is an extremely devout Christian who loves white people as much as black people. She is the head and heart of her family. She lives with two daughters and a grandson, Sandy.

In the narrative, she actively deconstructs the myth of the mammy. Hughes gives her a voice to describe her true traits and destroy the reductionist prism through which the others perceive the mammy. Hager shows that the so-called mammy is a not simple-minded and submissive slave woman who accepts the system without complaint; she is rather a pious woman who refuses to cast all white people in the compartment and fall victim to blind hatred. Hager is love: she assists all the needy in her community regardless of race and walks in the lighted paths of religion. Thus, Hughes' implicit and explicit characterization of Hager elevates her to the rank of an archetype, an ideal model and a true reference who possesses an ethic of hard work, Christian values of forgiveness, of love, of compassion.

Indeed, Aunt Hager is a Morrisonian "ancestor" or a female Jungian sage distinguished for wisdom and sound judgment, a mentor who ensures the

development of her grandson and paves his way to a viable and glorious future. Walking on the steps of Dubois and Washington, Aunt Hager places a great importance on education and struggles to keep Sandy in school because she wants him to become a race hero who would uplift black people. A role model herself, Hager turns Sandy into a bright, hardworking, ethical and critically conscious young man with much potential to succeed. Sandy can thus be considered as a promising young man with a possible future. Sandy is not only an honor student, but the teachings of her grandmother and Tempy guide him through the social hurdles of the inner city. Sandy is also heavily rooted in the folk culture and black history thanks to the stories, myths, tales of Brer rabbit and Tar Baby that her dear Hager used to tell her on summer evenings. He also appropriates most of the black folk cultural capital while he works in the barbershop, an important site in African-American culture. The novel ends when Sandy is still an adolescent, but he is growing into a fine man; it closes with a strong note of hope and possibilities because Sandy will have the opportunity to pursue his studies thanks to Harriett who promises Annjee to send her money regularly. There is a chance that her nephew and prize-winning honor student will move up in life, as is the fervent wish of his grandmother. The dream is not fulfilled but its flame keeps ardently burning.

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