"Why don't he like my hair?": Constructing African-American Standards of Beauty in Toni Morrison's "Song of Solomon" and Zora Neale Hurston's "Their Eyes Were Watching God"

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"How can he not love your hair? . . . It's his hair too. He got to love it."
"He don't love it at all. He hates it." (Song 315)

This last declaration, uttered by a feverish, distraught, dangerously mentally ill Hagar Dead to her mother Reba and her grandmother Pilate comes midway through one of the most heart-wrenching scenes in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*. In the passage, grandmother, mother, and daughter discuss whether Milkman, the novel's central character, "likes" Hagar's hair. By the time the scene has ended, it doesn't matter that Pilate has offered credible reasons why Milkman couldn't not love Hagar's hair—" 'How can he love himself and hate your hair?' " Pilate asks—Hagar is certain that Milkman is only attracted to women with distinctly European features and insists, with deadly finality, " 'He's never going to like my hair.' " Ultimately, all Pilate can say in reply is, " 'Hush. Hush. Hush, girl, hush' " (315-16).

African-Americans, with their traditionally African features, have always had an uneasy coexistence with the European (white) ideal of beauty. According to Angela M. Neal and Midge L. Wilson, "Compared to Black males, Black females have been more profoundly affected by the prejudicial fallout surrounding issues of skin color, facial features, and hair. Such impact can be attributed in large part to the importance of physical attractiveness for all women" (328). For black women, the most easily controlled feature is hair. While contemporary black women sometimes opt for cosmetic surgery or colored contact lenses, hair alteration (i.e., hair-straightening "permanents," hair weaves, braid extensions, Jheri curls, etc.) remains the most popular way to approximate a white female standard of beauty. Neal and Wilson contend that much of the black female's "obsession about skin color and features" has to do with the black woman's attempting to attain a "high desirability stem[ming] from her physical similarity to the white standard of beauty" (328).

But just whom do African-American women hope to attract by attaining this "high desirability"? While there is some debate as to whether the choice of one's hair style automatically signifies one's alliance with, or opposition to, white supremacy, anecdotal evidence clearly points to the straightening of black hair as a way to fit, however unconsciously, into an overall white standard of beauty.¹ What is often overlooked, however, are specific black-
male expectations where black-female hairstyles are concerned.

In much the same way that men gravitate toward certain styles, behaviors, and attitudes that are more likely to attract attention from women, male “likes” must rate, on some level, as at least a consideration when a female hair style is chosen. Of course, the reasoning a woman employs while choosing a hair style ranges much further than simply trying to attract some man. Above all, no doubt, women wear their hair in a style that pleases them. However, as Erica Hector Vital put it in a recent article about cutting off her dreads and retaining a short, natural style, certain

Toni Morrison characters, such as Hannah in Morrison’s Song of Solomon, Sula in a novella of the same name, and the girl-child Pecola of The Bluest Eye, all fall prey to dishonor and grief without the presence of the mothering voices to grant the essential reminders: Don’t let your slip show, don’t sneak off with the neighborhood boys, don’t forget to do your lesson, don’t be a fool with your hair . . . . no man likes a bald-headed woman. (11)

While Vital did go on to cut her dreads—as she certainly should have, since that was her preference—one of the questions she asked herself in those final moments in the barber’s chair was, “. . . what will the brothers think?” (12). This consideration of the black male’s “likes” is not always on the surface, but, like the black male’s regard for the black female’s “likes,” it is there, subterranean.

Morrison and Zora Neale Hurston, in their works, engage the black female’s struggle between her own hairstyle preferences and the female hairstyle preferences of the black male. These two authors offer dissimilar but compatible discussions of not only the black female’s encounters with the white-female standard of beauty, but also the black female’s difficulties negotiating her black-male partner’s conception of that standard. Morrison, in Song of Solomon, critiques the ideal by creating two characters who fall on opposing sides of the white-beauty construct. Pilate Dead, who wears her hair closely cropped, represents “Nature . . . [as she] energetically work[s] against the allure of outward appearances” (Guerrero 769). Pilate’s granddaughter Hagar, on the other hand, “fantasizes a persona that she imagines will make her more desirable to her projected lover, Milkman” (769). Hagar’s imagined “persona” is one that will include “silky copper-colored hair” (Solomon 127), because Morrison primarily uses hair in Song of Solomon to draw Pilate and Hagar as opposites where the white standard of beauty is concerned. Eventually, by revolving these opposites around Milkman, the novel’s central character, Morrison devises her own African-American standard of beauty, an alternative to the white-beauty ideal.

Hurston, in Their Eyes Were Watching God, also examines the black-female response to the white-beauty ideal, but in a markedly different manner. While both Pilate and Hagar have dark skin and “kinky” hair, Hurston gives her central character, Janie Crawford Killicks Starks Woods, all of the attributes of the white-female standard of beauty. Janie’s features conform to the black version of the white ideal, including those Neal and Wilson designate as the most important: light skin and long hair (325-26). Although Janie enjoys possessing these features, she refuses to allow her light skin and long hair to separate her from the Eatonville community. Indeed, much of the novel concerns Janie’s struggle against the community’s attempts to place her, because of her features (particularly her hair), on a social level that is above and apart from the community. In Janie, Hurston creates a character who subverts the “history of differential treatment” (Neal and Wilson 325) traditionally accorded those of her skin color and hair texture.

The person in the community primarily concerned with blocking Janie from the community’s full acceptance is her second husband, Joe Starks.
Determined to force Janie to acknowledge her “difference,” Joe insists on separating her from the Eatonville townspeople by keeping her in a “high, ruling chair” (Their Eyes 54). Like Morrison, Hurston privileges hair as the battleground of Janie and Jody’s fight over access to the Eatonville community.2

The first thing Janie does is let down her hair.

In one of the most powerful scenes in Their Eyes Were Watching God, Janie confronts Joe Starks, as he lies in bed dying:

“Listen, Jody, you ain’t de Jody ah run off down de road wid. You’se whut’s left after he died. . . . You done lived wid me for twenty years and you don’t half know me atall. And you could have but you was so busy worshippin’ de works of yo’ own hands, and cuffin’ folks around in their minds till you didn’t see uh whole heap uh things yuh could have.” (132-33)

When Janie says that Joe didn’t know her “atall,” she is referring to the way he stymied her repeated attempts to become an integral part of the Eatonville community. It is quite possible that she is also telling him he didn’t understand the importance she placed on her hair. A telling moment occurs shortly after Joe dies, when Janie walks to the dresser and looks in the mirror:

She tore off the kerchief from her head and let down her plentiful hair. The weight, the length, the glory was there. She took careful stock of herself, then combed her hair and tied it back up again. (135)

Then she “starch[s] and iron[s] her face . . ., and open[s] up the window and crie[s], ‘Come heah people! Jody is dead. Mah husband is gone from me’” (135). In this scene, Janie’s hair is exhibited as a lasting symbol of her freedom and her self-esteem. Hurston is careful to show that Janie’s examination of her hair/self-esteem is more important than immediately announcing her husband’s death.

Hurston makes it clear very early on that hair is going to be a primary issue in Janie and Joe’s relationship. It was Janie’s hair that first caught Joe’s attention. As Joe walked up the road,

He didn’t look her way nor no other way except straight ahead, so Janie ran to the pump and jerked the handle hard while she pumped. It made a loud noise and also made her heavy hair fall down. So he stopped and looked hard, and then he asked her for a cool drink of water. (47; emphasis added)

Not only is Hurston careful to identify Janie’s hair as the catalyst that brings Janie and Joe together, but she continues the hair references during their brief courtship. When Joe is trying to convince Janie to leave Logan Killicks, Janie’s first husband, he refers to her hair to help persuade her:

“You come go wid me. Den all de rest of yo’ natural life you kin live lak you oughta. Kiss me and shake yo’ head. When you do dat, yo’ plentiful hair breaks lak day.” (50)

Hurston loads allusions to Jody’s interest in Janie’s hair into their meeting and courtship, so it is not surprising that Janie’s hair becomes an issue during their marriage.

Ironically, although Janie tells Joe on his death bed that he didn’t know her at all, where her hair is concerned he may have known her only too well. Recognizing that Janie’s hair was vital to her self-esteem, Joe made sure he kept her hair under his control. Throughout their twenty years of married life, Joe insisted that Janie keep her hair tied up when she was around the store and the post office. Although “this business of the headrag irked her endlessly, Jody was set on it. Her hair was NOT going to show in the store” (86). Janie and Joe were locked in a power struggle over her hair, and for twenty years, Joe won out. Because Joe was aware that Janie’s hair symbolized her “self,” Joe began to communicate to the people of Eatonville that he “owned” Janie’s hair as a means of demonstrating that he, in effect,
"owned" Janie. And the public got the message. In the following passage, which occurs just after Joe becomes mayor of Eatonville, some of the townsfolk are sitting around talking, wondering if the power Joe wields as mayor extends to his home. The passage reveals the depth of the community's interest in Janie's hair as a feature that sets her apart from the other townswomen:

"Ah often wonder how dat lil' wife uh his'n makes out wid him, 'cause he's uh man dat changes everything, but noth-in' don't change him."

"You know many's de time Ah done thought about dat mahself. He gits on her ever now and then when she make little mistakes round de store."

"Whut make her keep her head tied up lak some ole 'oman round de store? Nobody couldn't git me tuh tie no rag on mah head if Ah had hair lak dat."

"Maybe he make her do it. Maybe he skeered some de rest of us mens might touch it round dat store. It sho is uh hidden mystery tuh me." (79)

Joe "make[s] her do it," because he is, indeed, afraid that one of the other men might touch Janie's hair in the store. One night he catches one of the men standing behind Janie, "brushing the back of his hand back and forth across the loose end of her braid ever so lightly so as to enjoy the feel of it without Janie knowing what he was doing," and Joe subsequently orders Janie to tie up her hair around the store: "That was all. She was there in the store for him to look at, not those others" (87).

The tying up of Janie's hair is clearly an exertion of power on Joe's part. Not only does he seek to send a message to the men of the town, through Janie's hair, that Janie is for him and him alone, but in the process he also sends a message to Janie that her hair is not hers to wear the way she wants. Her hair, like everything else in their lives—and, virtually, everything else in the town—belongs to him. The lack of freedom for Janie's hair, then, becomes for her a symbol not only of Joe's domination, but of her lack of freedom to join Eatonville's social circle. Joe wants to close Janie off from the world of the porch, where checkers, the "dozens," and folktales are shared among the townspeople, and his desire to separate Janie is exhibited by his insistence that she tie up her hair. Janie, conversely, wants to "let her hair down," and become part of the community. Although she manages to insert comments into porch discussions every now and then, for the most part Joe keeps her "tied up" and closed off from porch conversations.

S. Jay Walker identifies Janie's marriages by the predominant symbols that emerge from those marriages. Her marriage with Killicks might be regarded as the kitchen era, and is characterized by the apron Janie flings away when she runs off with Joe. Her marriage with Joe is symbolized by the "headrag" he forces her to wear. Janie's third marriage, with Tea Cake, is the porch era, when Janie's freedom to travel and join porch conversations, contends Walker, is represented by overalls (526). After Joe's burial, Janie's freedom from her marriage to him is only complete when she "burnt up every one of her headrags and went about the house the next morning with her hair in one thick braid swinging well below her waist" (Their Eyes 137).³

Joe's manipulation of Janie's hair must be viewed in the proper context. Certainly there are other men in the town who are interested in Janie (and in her hair) and would no doubt be tempted to try to control Janie the same...
way Joe did. For example, the envy the men feel later in the book when Tea Cake beats Janie on the muck is a strong indication that, although only certain men get the chance to attempt to dominate Janie, there are many more who would like to try:

Being able to whip her reassured [Tea Cake] in possession. No brutal beating at all. He just slapped her around a bit to show he was boss. Everybody talked about it next day in the fields. It aroused a sort of envy in both men and women. The way he petted and pampered her as if those two or three face slaps had nearly killed her made women see visions and the helpless way she hung on him made men dream dreams. (218)

Sop-de-Bottom sums up the men's feelings when he says, “‘Tea Cake, you sho is a lucky man . . . . Uh person can see every place you hit her’” (218). The irony of the above passages is that, although Janie is trying to fight through Joe's control so that she can join the black community, it appears that the overwhelming majority of the men in that community would have attempted to control Janie in much the same way Joe did. The exception (to a certain extent) is, of course, Tea Cake.

Joe's weakness, his need to control Janie, becomes even more obvious when he is compared with Tea Cake. Although Tea Cake does beat Janie, demonstrating the “controlling” aspect of his personality, he clearly has a more balanced persona than Joe does. Hurston uses Janie's hair to illustrate this balance. Early in their courtship, Janie wakes up to find Tea Cake combing her hair. Janie (understandably, after what she's been through with Joe) questions his behavior, asking, “‘Why, Tea Cake? Whut good do combin' mah hair do you? It's mah comfortable, not yourn.’” Tea Cake replies, “‘It's mine too. Ah ain't been sleepin' so good for more'n uh week cause Ah been wishin' so bad tuh git mah hands in yo' hair. It's so pretty.’” Instead of requiring Janie to tie up her hair as Joe has done, Tea Cake runs his fingers through it, saying, “‘It feels jus' lak underneath uh dove's wing next to mah face’” (157). Tea Cake is expressing his love by glorifying in Janie's beauty. He is loving her as she is—not trying to make her into a creation of his own.

Hurston effectively uses Janie's hair as a window through which her readers can view the differences between Janie's husbands. Even Killicks was fascinated with Janie's hair, and Hurston uses that fact to show the deterioration of their marriage: “Long before the year was up, Janie noticed that her husband had stopped talking in rhymes to her. He had ceased to wonder at her long black hair and finger it” (45). Hurston holds the attraction to black female hair up as a mirror, and the ensuing reflection, in Joe's case, illuminates his need to dominate his woman.

Unfortunately, it is all too common for men in this country to use hair as a site at which to control women. J. M. Lewis's study is primarily concerned with the way white American females are charged with removing "dirty" hair from their bodies—from pubic areas, on legs, under arms, between eyebrows, etc.—or else be accused of violating the cultural ideal of femininity (13). Lewis accurately pinpoints the hierarchal implications of body hair when he points out that, if U.S. culture considers body hair "dirty," then it would make more sense to encourage males to remove what the culture has prescribed as unclean, since they have so much more of it. Although Lewis's thesis centers on body hair, the conclusions drawn can be expanded to include hair that appears on the head as well:

It is suggested that the U.S. practice of female body hair removal behavior expresses an underlying concept that the female is anomalous in regard to well-defined categories. She is problematic as a full adult member of the human species. This chronic adjunct placement of the female leads to a female exclusion principle embedded in the cultural perception of gender, species, and sexual maturity. The female applies for membership by subscribing to an ideological superstruc-
ture of femininity. The anomalous treatment of females and their linkage to males for identity is deeply embedded in U.S. culture and can be demonstrated in other cultural structures such as in the language and legal system. (13)

It could be said that Janie tried to "apply for membership" in Joe's view of the "cultural ideal of femininity" by adhering, however reluctantly, to his demand that she keep her hair tied up. But the question remains: Where did Joe get his idea of what "ideal" femininity should be? Although *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is comprised only of black characters, the events of the novel are rendered in the context of the overall white-controlled society. Joe, as characterized by Hurston, embodies many of the negative aspects of that society. Clair Crabtree sees Janie's relationship with Jody as being a "form of servitude," with the headrag providing "an ironic counterpoint to the portrayal of Starks as a progressive entrepreneur, for his insistence on her covering her hair suggests his need to belittle Janie, despite his protestations of her high stature as a lady" (62). It is exactly the hierarchical stratification implied in Lewis's study that is at work here. Jody's efforts to suppress Janie by way of his insistence that she keep her hair tied up is an attempt to enforce the hierarchy he is emulating from the white superstructure.

In the same way Hurston uses Joe as an example of mock-white-male dominance, she uses the relationship between Janie and Mrs. Turner, a black woman who runs a restaurant "on the muck," to illustrate the enormous impact white-controlled society has on all-black communities. Hurston devotes all of Chapter 16 to Janie's and Mrs. Turner's conversation, the theme being white society's image of beauty. Here, along with skin tone, Hurston uses hair not only as a primary illustration of Mrs. Turner's unqualified support of the white-female image of beauty, but also to show Mrs. Turner's attempt to get Janie to join her in that support.


The narrator describes Mrs. Turner as "milky" and possessing a flat behind, but adds,

... Mrs. Turner's shape and features were entirely approved by Mrs. Turner. Her nose was slightly pointed and she was proud. Her lips were an ever delight to her eyes. Even her buttocks in bas-relief were a source of pride. To her way of thinking, all these things set her aside from Negroes. (208)

Hurston also allows Tea Cake the opportunity to describe Mrs. Turner, and, not surprisingly, his description is less gentle: "He claimed that she had been shaped up by a cow kicking her from behind. She was an ironing board with things threwed at it" (208). Also, Mrs. Turner's hair is described by Tea Cake as " 'jus' as close tuh her head as ninety-nine is tuh hundred! " (213).

But it is Janie's hair that attracts Mrs. Turner. Janie's "coffee-and-cream complexion and her luxurious hair" make Mrs. Turner want to associate with Janie, even if Janie is, in Mrs. Turner's words, married to a "man as dark as Tea Cake" (208). Mrs. Turner is obsessed with " 'lighten[ing] up de race' " (209), saying, " 'Ah can't stand black niggers. Ah don't blame de white folks from hatin' 'em 'cause Ah can't stand 'em mahself. 'Nother thing,' " she continues, " 'Ah hates huh see folks lak me and you mixed up wid 'em. Us oughta class off' " (210). Because of Janie's light skin and long hair, Mrs. Turner tries to get Janie to act as if she's above other blacks. Mrs. Turner even equates straight hair with intelligence as she attempts to get Janie to meet her brother: " 'He's real smart. Got dead straight hair' " (211).

Janie's reaction to Mrs. Turner's racial bias, however, indicates that, although Janie's hair is vital to her self-esteem, her racial identity is intact. Janie refuses Mrs. Turner's invitation to "class off" by saying, " 'Us can't do it. We're uh mingled people and all of us got black kinfolks as well as yaller kinfolks.' " Then she asks, " 'How come you so against black?' " When
Mrs. Turner replies, "'Who want any lil ole black baby layin' up in de baby buggy lookin' lak uh fly in butter-milk?'" (210), Janie is perplexed:

Mrs. Turner was almost screaming in fanatical earnestness by now. Janie was dumb and bewildered before and she clucked sympathetically and wished she knew what to say. It was so evident that Mrs. Turner took black folk as a personal affront to herself. (211)

Hurston's narrator takes the last two pages of Chapter 16 to explain Mrs. Turner's behavior, summing up Mrs. Turner's racial attitude by acknowledging that

... she didn't cling to Janie Woods the woman. She paid homage to Janie's Caucasian characteristics as such. And when she was with Janie she had a feeling of transmutation, as if she herself had become whiter and with straighter hair.... (216)

Hurston is very direct in her characterization of a woman who is thoroughly influenced by the white power structure:

Mrs. Turner, like all other believers had built an altar to the unattainable—Caucasian characteristics for all. Her god would smite her, would hurl her from pinnacles and lose her in deserts, but she would not forsake his altars. Behind her crude words was a belief that somehow she and others through worship could attain his paradise—a heaven of straight-haired, thin-lipped, high-nose boned white seraphs. The physical impossibilities in no way injured faith. That was the mystery and mysteries are the chores of gods. Beyond her faith was a fanaticism to defend the altars of her god. It was distressing to emerge from her inner temple and find these black desecrators howling with laughter before the door. Oh, for an army, terrible with banners and swords! (216)

It is obvious, from Hurston’s sixteenth chapter example, that Joe and Mrs. Turner are not so much acting on, as reacting to, Janie’s hair as they view it through white society's ideal of beauty.

Lewis contends that part of the white cultural ideal of femininity is the large amount of value placed upon the “youthful beauty concept” and argues that, if a white female is to retain her culturally prescribed femininity, she must be relegated to a “non-adult or child-like appearance” (13). Late in Song of Solomon, Milkman’s estranged lover Hagar seeks to achieve just such a “youthful beauty” in her attempt to win Milkman back to their formerly loving relationship.

Shortly after Milkman writes Hagar a “thank you” note ending their relationship, Hagar decides to murder him. The “thank you” hurt Hagar, but she only becomes murderous when she spots Milkman sitting in Mary’s, smiling at and talking to a woman whose “silky copper-colored hair cascaded over the sleeve of his coat” (127). Later, when she finds that she can’t bring herself to kill Milkman, she decides to become the woman with the copper-colored hair, reasoning that the copper-colored ideal is what Milkman really wants in a woman. When Hagar’s reasoning is viewed within the context of Lewis’s contention that females must “subscribe to an ideological superstructure of femininity” (13), it isn’t surprising that Hagar would think that the one thing that could return Milkman Dead to her is a perfect head of hair.

"‘No wonder. No wonder,’“ Hagar reasons as she attempts to determine the reason that Milkman won’t love her. "‘I look like a ground hog. Where’s the comb?’“ (308-09). After a frantic search for the comb, along with her first bath in days and a trip to the beauty shop, Hagar is intent on winning Milkman back by dressing in stylish clothes and making her hair attractive to him. It is certain that she’s attempting to let her hair work its magic on him, but it is also obvious that she’s submitting to the power males have over women and their hair. Michael Awkward directly addresses Hagar’s attempted transformation in “‘Unruly and let loose’: Myth, Ideology, and Gender in Song of Solomon.” (Although the title of Awkward’s essay refers to Morrison’s
attraction to the “unruly” [484] features of imagination, “unruly and let loose” could just as easily refer to a black women’s recently freed head of hair.)

Awkward argues that, while

Milkman comes to a marvelously useful comprehension of history, myth, and nature, Hagar’s status as bound, in both the spatial and the narrative senses of the phrase, to oppressive domestic plots ... precipitates a virtual dislocation of sensibility, and an acceptance of the bourgeois society’s views of women. This acceptance is reflected partially in her wholehearted adoption of its ideas of female beauty. (493)

Awkward’s perceptive analysis is only partially correct. While Hagar is certainly attempting to adopt the bourgeois ideal of female beauty—the “silky hair,” the “penny-colored hair,” the “lemon-colored skin,” and the “gray-blue eyes” of the black girls Milkman accompanied as a child on family excursions to Honore Island—it is a particularly male-driven sense of female beauty that the bourgeois women adopt. In other words, the Honore girls wear their hair the way they do to attract men—as well as to fulfill their class expectations.

Perhaps the most compelling argument to support the contention that Milkman had de facto control over Hagar’s hair is contained in Awkward’s assertion that Morrison purposely interrupted Milkman’s quest so that he could accept the blame for Hagar’s death:

This interruption serves to problematize a strictly celebratory Afrocentric analysis of Milkman’s achievements. Such an analysis fails to permit focus on the clear presence of (female) pain that permeates Song of Solomon’s final chapters. Male culpability in the instigation of such pain is evident, for example, in Milkman’s revelations about the motivations for his treatment of Hagar. He comes to understand that he “had used her—her love, her craziness—and most of all ... her skulking, bitter vengeance” to achieve heroism— or what the narrative refers to as “star”—status. (494)

Milkman is taking the blame for mistreating Hagar, and part of that blame must extend to the way she feels about her hair. Even if Milkman can’t be held fully accountable for Hagar’s perception of how he’d prefer his woman’s hair, his power over her as a male lover is such that he is culpable, as Awkward has suggested, to a certain extent.

Hagar eventually concedes to this power when she gives up her quest to make her hair the one attraction that Milkman cannot resist. Hagar’s hair hasn’t been manipulated physically, as in Janie’s struggle with Joe, but it has been manipulated psychologically. Hagar is trapped between her own African physical features and the white-female ideal of beauty. She is perfectly aware of the priority men like Janie’s first two husbands (and the man who was observed stroking Janie’s hair in the store) place on female hair, and Hagar is also well aware that she doesn’t quite measure up. That awareness, among other things, leads to her death.

Hagar’s attempt to appeal to Milkman through what Guerrero calls “the consumer system . . ., [using] a mad list of commodities and beauty treatments in order to transform herself into the objectified spectacle worthy of male attention and romance” (769), is in marked contrast to Pilate’s reaction to a similar dilemma years earlier. Pilate, like Hagar, reached a point where she had to come to terms with something that was interrupting her relations with men: the fact that she was born without a navel. All it took was a few horrified reactions to lead her to hide her smooth stomach. She did manage to have a relationship with one man (and from that union came her daughter), but she was only able to sustain the relationship by keeping direct light off her midsection. She refused to marry her lover because she felt she couldn’t keep him in the dark forever; eventually, she left the island where they met. As Morrison writes, Having had one long relationship with a man, she sought another, but no man was like that island man ever again either. After a while, she stopped worrying about her stomach and stopped
trying to hide it. . . . It isolated her. Already without family, she was further isolated from her people, for, except for the relative bliss on the island, every other resource was denied her. . . . Finally, Pilate began to take offense. (148-49)

Pilate took stock, just as Janie did after Joe died: “Although she was hampered by huge ignorances, but not in any way unintelligent, when she realized what her situation in the world was and would probably always be she threw away every assumption she had learned and began at zero” (149).

Pilate, as a young woman, was facing the same crossroads that her granddaughter would face thirty-four years later. The critical difference is that, while Hagar caves in to what Michael Awkward calls “the bourgeois society’s views of women” by “shamelessly” pursuing that society’s feminine ideal, Pilate takes a different route: “First off, she cut her hair. That was one thing she didn’t want to have to think about anymore” (149). In an action that recalls the scene just after Jody dies in which Janie stands before the mirror and lets down her hair, here Pilate appears to do just the opposite—cutting her hair instead of undoing it. But, psychically, the end result is the same: Both women release their hair. They deal with a turning point in their lives by putting their hands up to their head and making a positive change, a change symbolic of their newly found freedom. In Pilate’s case, the shedding of her hair, and its baggage, signals her independence from anyone who would reject her because of her navelless stomach, or for any other reason. Lewis writes that a female who willfully violates the cultural norm “challenges the category of gender.” But, unlike Hagar, Pilate doesn’t attempt to emulate the “cultural ideal of femininity” (Lewis 13). Instead, after cutting her hair, Pilate looks within for answers:

... she tackled the problem of trying to decide how she wanted to live and what was valuable to her. When am I happy and when am I sad and what is the difference? What do I need to know to stay alive? What is true in the world? (149)

Pilate’s independence, like Janie’s, is permanent. In the same way that Janie never had to keep her hair tied up again, Pilate keeps her hair short. Hagar, on the other hand, is portrayed throughout the novel as a woman whose hair, like her life, is difficult to control. Morrison subtly uses hair to foreshadow the Pilate-Hagar opposition when Ruth, Milkman’s mother, goes to Pilate’s house to confront Hagar, who is trying to kill her son. In a flashback, Ruth recalls going to see Hagar thirty-one years earlier. Pilate is sitting on a chair, and Reba is cutting Pilate’s hair with barber’s clippers, keeping it short. Hagar, however, is “four or five years old then. Chubby, with four long braids, two like horns over each ear, two like tails at the back of her neck” (131). Morrison, using hair as metaphor, reinforces Pilate’s independence/short hair by contrasting it with devil-like imagery (“horns” and “tails”) to describe Hagar’s growing murderous obsession. A few pages later, moving back to the present, Ruth wonders how “that chubby little girl weighed down with hair [could] become a knife-wielding would-be killer out to get her son” (134-35). Besides the “devilish” hair connotation and the way Hagar is “weighed down” by her hair, Morrison portrays Hagar’s physical gestures as evidence of her imbalance. When Ruth warns Hagar, “If you so much as bend a hair on his head, so help me Jesus, I will tear your throat out” (136), Morrison once again uses Hagar’s hair as telling description:

“You’re botherin me!” [Hagar replies to Ruth.] Hagar was shouting and digging her fingers in her hair. It was an ordinary gesture of frustration, but its awkwardness made Ruth know that there was something truly askew in this girl. (139)

Morrison, using hair as the common denominator, compares Pilate and Hagar—and clearly Hagar comes up lacking. Most important in the comparison is the way Pilate refuses to allow her hair to be manipulated by anyone: She controls her own hair by cutting it
herself. Not only is this a liberating act signifying her independence, but it effectively signals her determination not to be manipulated through her hair, or in any other manner.

Morrison’s placement of Hagar and Pilate as opposites is most clearly seen in Milkman’s reaction to them. At the same time Hagar is disintegrating in a futile attempt at material growth, Milkman is gaining a family history and an awareness of life outside of his own down in Virginia. Milkman’s connection with Solomon, his great-grandfather who flew back to Africa, is the catalyst that frees him to see his former self-centered ways.

The central relationship Morrison uses to show Milkman’s evolution from selfish to selfless is his connection with Sweet, the woman he stays with in Shalimar. After being bathed by Sweet, Milkman offers to bathe her. She demurs, saying the tank is too small and there isn’t enough hot water left. But he persists, saying, “Then let me give you a cool one” (285). The following passage demonstrates Milkman’s growing ability to give and take, instead of just take:

He soaped and rubbed her until her skin squeaked and glistened like onyx. She put salve on his face. He washed her hair. She sprinkled talcum on his feet. He straddled her behind and massaged her back. She put witch hazel on his swollen neck. He made up the bed. She gave him gumbo to eat. He washed the dishes. (285)

Milkman, as a result of his spiritual awakening, is in a position to see just how badly he has treated Hagar.

Again, Morrison uses hair as a way to illustrate this awakening.

When Milkman returns to Pilate’s house to tell her of his findings in Virginia, she breaks a bottle over his head, knocking him unconscious. Milkman comes to in a dark cellar where, unbeknownst to him, a green-and-white shoe box of Hagar’s hair rests nearby. Milkman tells Pilate about his revelations, and that significant scene ends with Pilate’s wondering what to do with the box of Hagar’s hair:

“If I bury Papa, I guess I ought to bury this too—somewhere.”
She looked back at Milkman.
“No,” he said. “No. Give it here.”
When he went home that evening, he walked into the house on Not Doctor Street with almost none of the things he’d taken with him. But he returned with a box of Hagar’s hair. (334)

The box of hair symbolizes Milkman’s inner unity, and also serves as what Chiara Spallino calls “Pilate’s tribal punishment: [that] he will always keep a box of Hagar’s hair as a reminder of his guilt” (518).

There is another significant reason for Milkman to keep Hagar’s hair, however. Morrison has set up two diametrically opposite viewpoints concerning black-female hair: On the one side is Hagar, who is “weighed down with hair” (134), whose hair is “like a thundercloud” (128), and whose “profile is hidden by her hair” (49). Hagar has proved susceptible to the bourgeois society’s view of how women should look and what will attract a man.

Pilate, conversely, exhibits the ultimate symbol of independence when, “First off, she cut her hair” (149) and, thereafter, “kept her short hair cut regularly like a man’s” (138). Milkman, then, is charged not only with keeping Hagar’s ill-fated head of hair to atone for his sins, but also with choosing between Morrison’s symbolic comparison of hair- and life-styles.

In the final scene of Song of Solomon, Pilate and Milkman go to Shalimar...
to bury Pilate’s father. Then Pilate dies in Milkman’s arms after she’s been shot. Earlier, Milkman has admitted that “... the consequences of [his] own stupidity would remain, and regret would always outweigh the things he was proud of having done. Hagar was dead and he had not loved her one bit” (335). Now, with Pilate’s death at hand, Milkman has his final revelation, and is able to understand which of the two women he prefers:

Now he knew why he loved her so. Without ever leaving the ground, she could fly. “There must be another one like you,” he whispered to her. “There’s got to be at least one more woman like you.” (340)

Milkman, on both the surface level and the symbolic level, has made his decision. Charged with choosing between Hagar, with her allegiance to the white ideal of beauty, and a woman like Pilate, who has rejected a pursuit of that ideal, he opts for a woman who lives outside of the expectations of the white cultural norm.

With this affirmative choice, Morrison, through her use of hair imagery and its effect on black males, proffers an alternative to the white cultural ideal of beauty. Morrison’s two-part alternative ideal of African-American beauty is symbolized, first of all, by the short, kinky hair of Pilate. Morrison’s African-American ideal is not based on the hot-combed, straightened hairstyles that were attempted by Hagar and actually carried off by the middle-class girls on Honore Island. Morrison, in her heroic portrayal of Pilate, argues for an African-American hair aesthetic that aligns itself with that of the indigenous African woman. Juliette Bowles has pointed out that women in traditional West African cultures were “pleased by the bristling, intricate texture of their hair” (18), even if these African women rarely grew what has become known as the “Afro” or “natural” in Western culture. Certainly, Morrison is not suggesting that short, kinky hair is the only “correct” way for African-American women to wear their hair. But Morrison does offer Pilate’s closely cropped hair as symbolic of the pleasure both African women and men historically took in traditionally kinky black hair.

The second part of Morrison’s African-American cultural ideal of beauty is based on racial identity. While Hagar was making a futile attempt to assume the white ideal of female beauty, Pilate and Reba tried in vain to make her understand that Milkman did, indeed, like her hair as it was. Malin LaVon Walther points out that Pilate, while trying to convince Hagar of her own innate beauty, “connects hair as an attribute of beauty to racial identity” (782):

“How can he not love your hair? It’s the same hair that grows out of his own armpits.... It’s all over his head, Hagar. It’s his hair too. He got to love it. . . . He don’t know what he loves, but he’ll come around, honey, one of these days. How can he love himself and hate your hair?” (315)

Walther correctly contends that Morrison redefines female beauty by demanding that it be grounded in racial identity. Blacks must love and desire racially authentic beauty, rather than imitating other races’ forms of beauty. To do anything less is to deny oneself. For Milkman to love Hagar’s hair is to love himself and his racial heritage. (782)

Indeed, Morrison has a lesson for Milkman, as well. It is only through the self-discovery of his journey that he comes to make an informed choice between Hagar and Pilate. His symbolic acceptance of an alternative African-American beauty ideal is, in many ways, instructive to black-male readers who view the white standard of beauty as the only “ideal” and attempt to convince their wives or girlfriends that European hairstyles have no alternative. Morrison’s novel-length transformation of Milkman is a subtle suggestion that, if other African-American males were to attempt a similar process, they, too, could take a critical,
informed look at the white-beauty ideal.

Hurston's alternative to unconsciously adopting the white cultural ideal of beauty is exhibited in the reactions of Janie Woods. By employing her racial consciousness, Janie struggles against her husbands in order to join the greater black community, and resists Mrs. Turner's attempts to get her to "class off." Janie happens to possess the physical attributes of white-female beauty, but they aren't important to her in the same way that they are important to Killicks, Joe, and Mrs. Turner. Certainly, she enjoys her long hair, as does Tea Cake, albeit not because it represents a welcome connection to white-female beauty, but because it is hers. Janie's "'We'se uh mingled people'" (210) comment suggests her understanding that African-Americans have no need to privilege light skin color and straight hair over dark skin and "kinky" hair. Indeed, Janie's assertion that "'...all of us got black kinfolks as well as yaller kinfolks'" (135) confirms her stance. Hurston has managed to create, in Janie, a character who has the physical attributes of white-female beauty but can still effectively demonstrate the destructiveness of the white-controlled society's impact on blacks.

Taken together, Morrison's and Hurston's alternative ideals of black-female beauty cover the spectrum of African-American female physical expression. Long-haired Janie and short-haired Pilate both exist as viable models for black-female readers. For black-male readers, Milkman's transformation and Tea Cake's loving attitude toward Janie are equally as viable—notwithstanding Tea Cake's troublesome "whipping" of Janie. Neal and Wilson prescribe, as therapy, a short list of readings, including W. E. B. Du Bois's *Dusk of Dawn*, Gwendolyn Brooks's *The Tiger with White Gloves*, and Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. Neal and Wilson feel that these books might act as a way to "affirm Blacks and their cultural experiences" (331). Unquestionably, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Song of Solomon* would be welcome additions to this list. As Neal and Wilson assert, "The Black woman [will] begin to realize that the white standard of attractiveness is not suitable for her own life," and the African-American man will realize that the white standard is not suitable for what attracts him. "Beauty is not skin deep or feature wide," continue Neal and Wilson, "but encompasses a Black woman's feelings about herself, her carriage, her style, and her heritage. True Black beauty is a synthesis between physical and personality attributes" (332).

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Notes

1. In his article "Black Hair/Style Politics," Kobena Mercer takes specific issue "with the widespread argument that, because it involves straightening, the curly-perm hair-style represents either a wretched imitation of white people's hair or, what amounts to the same thing, a diseased state of black consciousness" (33). Mercer agrees that "all black hair-styles are political in that they articulate responses to the panoply of historical forces which have invested this element of the ethnic signifier with both personal and political 'meaning' and significance" (37), but he "reads" that political commentary in sharply different ways than do Neal and Wilson. In his examination of the conks of the 1940s, for instance, Mercer finds that the conk "suggests a 'covert' logic of cultural struggle operating in and against' hegemonic cultural codes, a logic quite different from the overt oppositionality of the naturalistic Afro or Dreadlocks" (49). While I agree with Mercer's contention that "we need to de-psychologize the question of hair-straightening and recognize hair-styling itself for what it is, a specifically cultural activity and practice," I ultimately feel, as he puts it, that, "as part of our modes of appearance in the everyday world, the ways we shape and style hair may be seen as both individual expressions of the self and as embodiments of society's norms, conventions, and expectations" (34).

Gloria Wade-Gayles, in "The Making of a Permanent Afro," gives an interesting account of her movement from hair-straightening to "Afro." Like Neal and Wilson, she directly links straight hair with
oppression when she writes, "Straightened hair became a weight pulling my head down when I wanted to hold it up." She concludes, "An activist with straightened hair is a contradiction. A lie. A joke, really... Never again, I decided, would I alter my hair. In its natural state, my hair would be a badge, a symbol of my self-esteem and racial pride... I decided to wear an Afro" (157). This oversimplified straight/oppressed vs. "natural/race pride opposition, however, is complicated in an essay later in Pushed Back to Strength entitled "The Day I Bought a Wig: A Lesson in Gratitude."

As I will argue in the body of this paper, both Joe Starks and Milkman Dead considered the hair of the women in their lives as sites of expression for themselves. And of the two men, certainly Starks strived to ensure that Janie embodied the highest of society’s expectations. In short, if there is a side to be taken in this debate, Morrison, Hurston, and Wade-Gayles unquestionably side—as I do—with Neal and Wilson. For supporting views, on both sides, see Grier and Cobb 34-37, and Jones.

2. It should not be surprising that Morrison and Hurston should choose hair as a point of contention for their characters. The process of cutting and arranging hair has been practiced from ancient times onward, and has acquired magical, mythical, and religious significance. Barbara Walker calls hair a "repository of at least a part of the soul" (367). Both mortal and immortal women found power in their hair, she writes, and often men sought to control that power. Walker argues, for example, that "most forms of the Death-goddess showed masses of hair standing out from her head, sometimes in the shape of serpents, as in the Gorgoneum of Medusa-Metis-Neith-Anath-Athene. On the magic principle of 'as above, so below,' women’s hair partook of the same mystic powers as the Goddess’s hair. Tantric sages declared that the binding or unbinding of women’s hair activated cosmic forces of creation and destruction." Witches' hair was said to control the weather, and in the Tyrol, "it was believed that every thunderstorm was caused by a woman combing her hair. Scottish girls were forbidden to comb their hair at night while their brothers were at sea, lest they raise a storm and sink the boats" (368).

3. With this sentence, Hurston gives the independence Janie gains from Joe’s death an ironic exclamation point. The narrator writes that, after the funeral, the "one thick braid swinging well below her waist... was the only change people saw in her" (137). Although the text is unclear as to whether the braid falls down Janie’s back or curls around her neck and extends down her front, the phallic implications of a "thick" braid "swinging" below Janie’s waist are clear. The swinging braid recalls that pivotal moment when Janie publicly tells Joe, "You big-bellies round here and put out a lot of brag, but 'tain't nothin' to it but yo' big voice. Humph! Talkin’ 'bout me lookin' old! When you pull down yo' bittches, you look lak de change uh life" (123). Janie’s singular thick braid, for those townspeople who understand, is an early signal that Janie will no longer be dominated by Joe or any other man. Although the braid is the "only" change people see, it is, indeed, a significant one.

4. Recent lawsuits filed by African-American women to allow them to wear their braided hair in corporate America offer still another example of how important it is for the "cultural ideal of femininity" to be maintained in mainstream U.S. culture. See the series of Washington Post articles (Jan.-July 1988) that resulted from the suspensions of Pamela Mitchell of the Washington, D.C., Marriott Hotel and Renée Randall of Morrison’s Cafeteria in Parole, Maryland, and the forced resignation of Cheryl Tatum from the Hyatt Regency, Crystal City. See also “Braided Hair Collides with Office Norms” for a brief discussion of African-American women managers and black hair.

5. Ironically, the act of getting their hair straightened is remembered fondly by writers such as bell hooks and Pearl Cleage, who almost certainly speak for untold others. Cleage, in "Hairpeace," refers to "the golden years of those Saturday afternoon visits to the beauty shop surrounded by the hot combs and the hair straighteners and the lady taking numbers over the telephone while she clacked those curlers around my head in a rhythm as familiar to me as the movement of my own hips" (38). And hooks, in an excerpt from Black Is a Woman’s Color, sees the pressing of hair as "an important ritual. It is not a sign of our longing to be white. It is not a sign of our quest to be beautiful. We are girls. It is a sign of our desire to be women. It is a gesture that says we are approaching womanhood. It is a rite of passage" (382). Recollections of the weekly straightening of hair even evoke pleasant memories from men, including myself, who occasionally happened to be "in the kitchen" at the time. For example, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., in "In the Kitchen," writes, "There was an intimate warmth in the women’s tones as they talked with my mama while she did their hair" (40).

Although both hooks and Cleage eventually turned to, as Wade-Gayles puts it, "movement-style" hair, their enjoyment of the community of women who gathered to get their hair "done"— similar to Paule Marshall’s gathering of women celebrated in her essay “From the Poets in the Kitchen”—suggests certain important communal benefits of hair straightening that, for these authors, are felt and remembered long after they grew into other hairstyles. While the present-day braiding of African-American female hair is not so widespread as the regular hair-straightening ceremonies that took place before chemical relaxing became the norm, Karen Grigsby Bates suggests that the ritual con-
tinues: "... because even simple styles take several hours to complete ... braiding 'is more than just a hairstyle—it's a bonding ceremony' " (26).

6. Again, Mercer is useful in clarifying black hairstyle politics. He argues that 'the Afro engaged in a critical 'dialogue' between black and white Americans, not one between black Americans and Africans. Even more so than Dreadlocks, there was nothing particularly African about the Afro at all. Neither style has a given reference point in existing African cultures, in which hair is rarely left to grow 'naturally.' Often it is plaited and braided, using 'weaving' techniques to produce a rich variety of sometimes highly elaborate styles that are reminiscent of the patterning of African cloth and the decorative designs of African ceramics, architecture, and embroidery' (42).

Work Cited


