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# Daddy May Bring Home Some Bread, but He Don't Cut No Ice: The Economic Plight of the Father Figure in Black American Literature

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# PADDY MAY BRING HOME SOME BREAD, BUT HE DON'T CUT NO ICE: THE ECONOMIC PLIGHT OF THE FATHER FIGURE IN BLACK AMERICAN LITERATURE

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The writer has been spending a delightful and exciting year collecting Black folklore, and would like to begin by sharing with the reader one version collected of a popular tale in Virginia — not often found in previously published collections of Black folklore, but which some of the readers come across in Cecil Brown's novel *The Life and Loves of Mr. Jiveass Nigger*.<sup>1</sup> I present the tale exactly as I collected it from Mrs. Marie Hunter of Richmond, Virginia.

On the side of a mountain once, the Lord summoned three people to help him with a project, one being a Black man, one being an Italian, and the other Jewish. And the Lord said, "I am simply looking for people to follow simple directions." And he said, I simply want the three of you to go out and bring me back a stone, or as much stone as you'd like." And so the Black man, thinking that it was a timed thing, rushed right back with a pebble. The Italian took a couple of hours and finally he came back with a wheelbarrow piled with crushed stone. And they waited until midnight. Finally they heard a rumbling. And the Jew was shoving a mountain. So the Lord in his patience blessed the stones and said, "These stones I will now turn into bread." Well, the Black man had a biscuit. The Italian had a wheelbarrow filled with loaves of bread. And the Jew had a *bakery*, of course. So the next day, the Lord said, "Same gentlemen, same assignment. Go out and fetch stones." Well, the Black man was *extremely* happy for a second chance. So sometime later that evening, the Italian was the first one back, with his same wheelbarrow filled with stones. And the Jew took very long to come, but here he is with this mountain. And they waited until midnight. The Black man didn't show . . . 2 a.m. . . . 3 a.m. . . . 4 a.m. . . . Well, just about dawn they heard a rumbling sound. And a whole avalanche of mountains and boulders

— just everything — was being hurled at the Lord. And finally the Lord said, "Upon *these* rocks I'll build my church."

This tale is a forceful and eloquent commentary on the American economic system which conspires to make it impossible for the Black man to acquire anything more than a mere biscuit, no matter how he plays the economic game. If he plays according to the rules, the rules are changed rather than reward him with his just due. If he fails to play according to the rules, others are rewarded for their efforts and he is punished for his failure. He's damned if he does, and he's damned if he doesn't. Everyone knows enough about the history of this country from slavery through reconstruction to the present moment, to be aware of the economic castration suffered by the Black male whatever his reaction — whether he took his little biscuit with a servile smile and a humble "thank you," or whether he vigorously fought for a loaf. We all know also that any man who is unable to protect and provide for his family, any man denied the opportunity to compete with other men for the kinds of jobs that bring a sense of fulfillment and pride, will inevitably be psychologically emasculated. I harp on the word *emasculated* here advisedly, for as we look at the literary portraits of the Black male, we see that the symbolic effect of his economic deprivation is *emasculation*. The sexual ramifications of this whole situation are as much real as they are symbolic. This point is forcefully affirmed by James Baldwin in his account of a situation in which a powerful white man in a Southern State during the integration crisis, was, Baldwin writes, "groping for my cock."<sup>2</sup> Baldwin notes the formidable political power of this man which extended to determining whether a Negro lived or died. The economic implications of this kind of power need no further reaffirmation. Baldwin continues, "Therefore one had to be friendly; but the price for this was your cock."<sup>3</sup> The point, Baldwin suggests, is that "The slave knows . . . that he is called a slave because his manhood has been, or can be, or will be taken from him."<sup>4</sup> Later Baldwin succinctly capsules the situation. He writes: "Every black man walking in this country pays a tremendous price for walking; for men are not women, and a man's balance depends on the weight he carries between his legs. All men, however they may face or fail to face it, however they may handle, or be handled by it, know something about each other, which is simply that a man without balls is not a man . . ."<sup>5</sup>

Thus it is that in a symbolic and often real sense, this economic

system in denying the Black man the loaf which he has won, at the same time, castrates him, or if I may coin a word relative to Baldwin's analysis, it "deballs" him. This situation is forcefully portrayed in Richard Wright's absurd comedy, "Man of All Work," where Carl, his Black protagonist, unable to find work to support his family, finally resorts to dressing as a woman and securing a position as a maid. This ludicrous situation reaches its apogee when, in the humorous but highly significant scene, the white woman discovers her husband trying to rape their new maid, and shoots Carl.

The fathers created by Black American writers have attempted to deal with their economic plight in numerous ways. In any number of these literary works the father is absent from the home — for a variety of reasons — almost always resulting from sundry ploys of the American economic system. In some, as a result of the institution of slavery, he was sold away from his family. In others, beaten and humiliated by his inability to provide for his family, he deserts them; frequently he anticipates that his absence will be only temporary, and he flees to some Northern city where he hopes to earn a better living. In still other instances he is driven away by the welfare laws which force him to leave for the economic survival of his family. In many works, his absence is simply a given, with little or no explanation necessary. In the early novel by Sutton Griggs, *Imperium in Imperio*, the only comment made of the father of the hero, Belton Piedmont, is the one sentence, "Mr. Piedmont had abandoned his wife and left her to rear the children alone."<sup>6</sup> There is a great deal of irony in the situation in this novel where the fatherless hero serves admirably in every role except as father. Belton, the brave and brilliant protagonist who fights courageously all of his life for human justice, suffering the loss of his jobs and several threats on his life, and who goes on to become one of the key figures in a national organization designed to protect the lives and welfare of Black Americans, walks out on his family, and there is no suggestion that he ever does *anything* for his child.

Paul Laurence Dunbar treats another runaway father in a rather lighthearted but beautiful and touching story, "Jimsella." In this story a Southern couple moves North to better their economic situation and find conditions there so bad that their frustrations drive them to berate each other. The man, finally unable to support his wife despite hard work, becomes less industrious and more bitter towards her. Eventually he begins leaving home for long periods. When he returns after one lengthy disappearance, determined this time to leave for good, he finds a baby born during his absence,

named Jimsella for him. He tries to ignore the baby and insists that he is leaving, never to return, but in a touching and humorous scene, he is motivated to go out again and get another job to support his family, thus giving this story a happy, if not too realistic ending.

Langston Hughes' Jimboy in *Not Without Laughter* is a seemingly ne'er-do-well, who intermittently leaves his family and runs about from city to city. A close reading convinces us, however, that he is a highly moral, loveable, strong man, who is constantly in quest of that impossible — a job where he can hold his head up and support his family. He was a hard-working man until he became frustrated with the back-breaking, unrewarding kinds of positions available to him. Unfortunately he is consistently held up to his son by other members of the family as a lazy, good-for-nothing tramp, and so as his son grows up, one of his worst fears is that he will be like his daddy. Despite this, there are also suggestions of the boy's love for his father, and, in at least one instance, of his respect for his father, indicated during an incident when he is hurt more by Jimboy's reprimand for dishonesty than by the punishment meted out by others. At the end of the novel Jimboy has gone to war to try his luck in the army. A lengthy silence suggests his possible death.

One of the most poignant treatments of the fatherless son is found in Ronald L. Fair's accurately titled novel *Hog Butcher*. Here the little ten-year-old protagonist, Wilford, is trying to learn to be a man in a fatherless home and in a society that does everything possible to destroy his manhood before he grows up. The father that he never knew is in jail for an offence of which he is innocent, but being Black and poor, he must suffer the consequences, not of his acts, but of his circumstances. In Wilford's more tender moments he poignantly dreams of what it would be like to have a real father in the home. His mother has a boyfriend who would like to marry her, but the welfare laws made it inexpedient for them to wed and much more practical to merely live together. The plot of the novel centers around the senseless murder of a bright, lovable young boy by two policemen, an act which was witnessed by Wilford, his friend Earl, and a storekeeper. To protect his job and his family's economic security, Earl's father forces Earl to deny any knowledge of the crime. Mr. Jenkins, the storekeeper, in order to protect his store (his economic security) is forced to lie as well. Wilford's mother is beaten and her welfare payments stopped because Wilford refuses to lie and protect the policemen. In touching scenes during their persecution, Wilford dreams how his father could protect them if he were there. Wilford is confused and frightened, but he has taken all of America's voiced ideals to heart, and he can't bring himself to tell the lie or to conceal

the truth where a wrong has been committed. The mother, physically beaten and impoverished, is heartened by her son's manhood — by his insistence upon standing up for right while all the Black men around her fear to take that risk. And she thinks with pride that he will grow up with dignity — something the grown men around her lack. She tells him as he walks to the witness stand where others have cowered piteously, "Son, . . . We ain't got nothin' left but us. You wanted to do what was right and I want you to, so you be a man, son. You be a man right here and now and no matter what happens from here on you'll be a man the rest of your natural life."<sup>7</sup>

Wilford's bravery triggers a revolution in the Black policeman who had become a pawn in the system, and who was determined that the death of one Black boy meant nothing — even if it were a mistake. As this policeman looks at Wilford's friend Earl, who was not allowed to testify, he thinks, "That poor kid. His father's got no guts at all. And already the kid's finished. A bright kid like that and we had to crush him to make our lie a truth."<sup>8</sup> Then this same Black policeman looks at Wilford, and thinks, "He's a brave little black bastard. The only goddamn man in the whole place,"<sup>9</sup> and he then knows that he cannot continue to be a part of a system that deballs Black boys before they become men. Then it is that he performs the bravest and most daring, and dangerous act of his life. At the risk of his hard-earned economic security, he decides to tell the truth when American demands the lie. It is certain that Wilford saves this policeman and that he will be a better Black father to his infant child, but the policeman also saves a disillusioned Wilford. The novel ends, after this earth shattering revelation of the truth:

Wilford wiped the tears of joy away from his face with the back of his hands. And he began constructing another fantasy. That's just the way my ole man woulda done it, he thought. My ole man woulda been just that great! Hot dog, my ole man . . .<sup>10</sup>

The list of fathers run away from home largely as a result of their frustrations at their economic castration could go on and on, citing such works as *The Uncalled*, *The Outsider*, *Sissie*, *The Amen Corner*, etc., etc. The plight of the families deserted by these fathers — usually at critical moments — is material for another full paper. But a succinct comment upon their situation found in two verses from Langston Hughes' tragi-comic blues poem certainly warrants inclusion here. Note the economic implications in the imagery of this deceptively simplistic poem:

In the middle of the winter,  
Snow all over the ground.  
In the middle of the winter,  
Snow all over the ground —  
'Twas the night befo' Christmas  
My good man turned me down.

Don't know's I'd mind his goin'  
But he left me when the coal was low.  
Don't know's I'd mind his goin'  
But he left when the coal was low.  
Now, if a man loves a woman  
That ain't no time to go.<sup>11</sup>

Now let us view the portraits of the fathers who remain at home. Their reactions vary, but they suffer no less from economic castration. In Lionel Elder's *Ceremonies in Dark Old Men* we find Mr. Parker, unable to support his family with a job that allows him dignity and unable to accept degrading work and conditions, weakened to the point that he has allowed his wife to kill herself trying to support her family, and that he now allows his daughter to support him. One of the most pitiful effects of this sad situation is that his sons are growing up thinking it is the woman's duty to support the man.

There are many portraits of other fathers who attempt to compete in a white oriented society by accepting all of the tenets and values of that society, thereby becoming in effect white Negroes. They may bring home some bread, but they cannot exert a positive influence on the development of the self identity of their children. Such are several of the father figures in Charles Chesnutt's works, many of whom go so far in their acceptance of white standards as to accept all of the doctrines of that society, including racial prejudices. The degree to which some of them have allowed themselves to become unmanned by their ridiculous acquiescence to white society is farcically suggested in Amiri Baraka's "Great Goodness of Life," where a Black father, a typical oreo type, who works in the post office, kills his own Black son at the directions of a white judge, and then happily brags, "My soul is as white as snow."<sup>12</sup> Another similar figure is portrayed by Ron Milner in the person of a Black college dean who is so accustomed to being "white" that when he wants to act like a Black man and put on his testicles, he and his wife cannot find them though they search diligently. Finally, frustrated, she tells him that she doesn't think he has any "balls" left.

On the other hand, those fathers who, one way or another, are

able to compete in the system and bring home the bread, but refuse to accept the deballing of society, are usually destroyed in other ways. In the second novel by an American Negro, Frank J. Webb's *The Garies and their Friends*, there are several black families who achieve economic security despite the many obstacles in their paths. Their victory over an oppressive economic system is one of the motives behind the instigation of a riot, during which one interracial couple is killed, and all of the wealth taken over from their children by the white man who contrived their deaths. In another instance a very strong Black father figure, a Mr. Ellis, economically stable and a positive influence on his children, has his home and possessions destroyed, his fingers chopped off, and is rendered a helpless, insane invalid. Similar situations occur in numerous works where Blacks, having wrested economic security and material possessions, are forced to sell their property, cheated out of it, or have it destroyed by greedy whites, or where members of their family are threatened or harmed. Such incidents occur in Richard Wright's *The Long Dream* and Margaret Walker's *Jubilee*. The rule seems to be that a Black man who succeeds despite the system, and who maintains his pride and manhood, must be punished. Conversely he may be rewarded if he is stripped of all pride and humanity, as may be seen in the case of Ralph Ellison's *Trueblood*. *Trueblood*, who had been destroyed by an economic system that literally drove him to incest, can be rewarded for proving his animality to the whites. He tells how he had once owned land and fruitlessly endeavored to get help with his farming, how he could not secure a job, could not receive any help, could not get fuel, and how he and his wife and daughter were finally driven by economic hardships to sleeping together to keep warm. But once he had impregnated his daughter, the whites gave him so much help and clothes that he was better off than he had ever been or dreamed of being in his life.

Another group of men, seemingly beaten by the white world from which they must wrest their livelihood remain as abject and submissive in their homes as they apparently must be in the white world. They provide some bread in their homes, but they exert little influence over their family and the development of their children. Their homes are usually ruled by a domineering wife who plays the part in their home life that Mr. Charlie plays in their work world. One of the most extreme examples of this type of father-figure is Mr. Judson in Dorothy West's *The Living is Easy*. Without a complaint Mr. Judson works to provide every foolish whim of his wife and her family until he is driven into bankruptcy. Not only does he seem not to exert any influence over his daughter, but he serves absolutely no



role in his home — neither husband, father nor companion. His only function seems to be to hand his paycheck over to his wife. He is a sad, pitiable, shell of a man, deballed by both society and his wife.

To all appearances Matt Lovejoy, the father in John Oliver Killens' *Cotillion* seems to be a similar figure. He is a hard working man, providing economic security for his family, apparently accepting without complaint; his fair wife's outspoken contempt of his color, his hair, his religion, and his ignorance. Mrs. Lovejoy frequently reminds her daughter not to make the same mistake she made in marrying a "common, ordinary black negra,"<sup>13</sup> whom she admits she married because she thought he was "beneath me and would bow down to me."<sup>14</sup> Despite the humiliation and debasement he suffers at the hands of his wife, Matt, however, never degenerates into the weakling he might at first appear to be. And we find at the end that he has exerted much positive influence on the development of his daughter and even on his apparently hopeless wife.

Another group of Black father figures react in just the opposite way from this submissive group. Bitter at having to bend to the white man, they take out their frustrations on their families and become cruel tyrants in their home, proving their manhood by their oppression of their wives and children. Such is Gabriel Grimes of James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, a man who struggles hard to maintain his family, albeit on the borderline of starvation. He is filled with a murderous rage and bitterness for the white system that so cowers and denies him, but he is too cowardly (perhaps practical is a more precise term) to direct this bitterness towards any but his helpless wife and children. He thus fills them with hatred for him, and his only influence is a negative one.

In the popular *Five on the Black Hand Side*, Charlie Russell portrays a similar tyrannical father figure in the person of Mr. Brooks, a self-centered egotistical whitewashed fool who is dedicated to the principles of white American capitalism. He is such a tyrant that he forces his wife to call him Mr. Brooks, dictates her every movement, and refuses to allow her to even enter his barber shop. His dictatorial manner, his unquestioning acceptance of the white economic system, and his insistence that his children follow in his whitewashed footsteps, alienate him from them and make him a very negative influence on his family.

Many of these tyrannical figures are sexual tyrants as well. Their frustrations from their economic emasculation find an outlet in their assertion of sex as an indication of manhood. Their credo is found in the following lines from Rap Brown's rap:

Man, you must don't know who I am.  
 I'm sweet peeter jeeter the womb beater  
 The baby maker the cradle shaker  
 The deerslayer the buckbinder the woman finder  
 Known from the Gold Coast to the rocky shores of Maine  
 Rap is my name and love is my game.

Similar verses are commonly found in Black folklore. The speaker usually defines himself in terms of his sexual power, glorifies in the sexual conquest of the woman, the frequent use of the woman for material benefits, and the spawning of bastards; but he never suggests any sense of responsibility for them.

The superman sexual figure as father finds its most conspicuous expression in Hal Bennett's *Lord of Dark Places*, an exciting, complex, and highly symbolic work, in which Bennett treats exhaustively the emasculation and rape of the Black man by white American society, and the Black man's substitution of the myth of sexual superman to make up for this. At the beginning of the novel Titus Market witnesses the lynching of his father, who is significantly hanged in a dress, and (again, significantly) has his sexual organs cut off by a man who treats him with great affection during the hanging. Vowing to protect his son from a similar fate, Titus goes on to assert his manhood by ..... his wife to death. He tells his son after this act: "I thought for a minute before I got up. I thought, *'You're a real man, Titus, you killed her with your tail.* I was sorry, but I couldn't help feeling a little proud, too, doing something like that. There's very little a man can feel proud of nowadays . . ."16

Significantly, after his wife's death, Titus begins a religious sect, making the Black male body a part of its religious symbolism, and having his son Joe disrobe and exhibit his "holy objects" to the faithful. As Joe grows older, those who desire more than a view of those holy objects can get further satisfaction in a variety of ways following the services. Joe grows up, like those around him, worshipping his own penis, seeing it as some kind of savior of people. Bennett writes of him in one significant scene: "[Joe] walked on happily, throwing his left leg to show off the growing bulge of his peter against his thigh. *Thou art Peter.* Well, he was, wasn't he? And Titus had built a church upon his rock."17 As he walks on thinking with pride of how everyone desires him, he thinks, "Look at me, all you peterhungry motherfuckers. Feast your eyes on my peter. Let your mouths run water and your pussies and assholes pop. But don't nobody get none of my peter today. Yeah . . . *And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is my peter*

and ME."18 (45-46) It is truly ironic that at this very moment Joe is on his way to be literally raped by a white girl under the most humiliating and degrading circumstances.

Later, as Joe moves away from the religious bag to a patriotic one, he still continues to define himself in terms of his penis, and he begins calling it Christopher after Christopher Columbus. Pride in his strength, which is his sexuality, constantly runs into the reality of the weakness of the Black man in America, however. In one scene he witnesses the electrocution of a Negro preacher. But as he watches this execution with all of its racial overtones and political and economic implications, he can take pride in one thing: "He died with a hard on," Joe said proudly. He thought it really meant something, a Negro preacher dying like that. Like some old western cowboy dying with his boots on."19

The helplessness of the Black man, suggested when Cheap Mary, an old ugly white woman again rapes Joe, forcing him into even more degrading sexual acts, seemingly allows the Black man only one or two options: he can secure his revenge by ..... women to death, and Joe later does indeed .... Cheap Mary to death; or he can kill his sons so that they will not be castrated by American society. Joe does that also; he kills his son Christopher, proudly named for his patriotic penis. In this novel where the American sexual myth goes wild, ludicrously accepted by whites and Blacks alike, and where sex symbolizes everything — with *everybody* ..... *everybody* else, two and three at a time, the most disturbing thing is that the Black father inevitably ..... his Black son, too. Titus's first deed after killing his wife is to perform the act that the mother has protected her son from — Titus ..... Joe. and Joe, before killing his son, in essence ..... him too.

I do not wish to close, leaving the impression that there are no strong Black fathers portrayed in American literature, who bring home the bread and exert a positive influence on their children, and who are also capable of love and understanding. The third novel written by an American Negro, Martin R. Delany's *Blake* has a protagonist who is strong, intelligent, handsome, and brave. He struggles to free his son and wife from slavery; but we never really see him as a father figure within his family, since he is portrayed as a revolutionary, traveling through America and Cuba to organize a slave rebellion and to relieve the plight of slaves wherever he can. Ted Poston's father figure in his short stories, *The Dark Side of Hopkinsville*, is another positive portrait, but he remains a little vague, since he is never a central character in the tales. The father in several of Ann Petry's stories in *Miss Muriel and Other Tales* is

obviously a good provider and a positive influence, but again, he is rarely a central character in the tales. Toni Cade Bambara, who has written some of the most touching and real and human portraits of the Black American family that I know of, has many positive father figures, but they remain in the background for the most part, undeveloped and unimpressive. James Baldwin, who has been obsessed with the father destroyed by an economic system that transforms him into a deranged tyrant at home, has finally created a strong, loving father in the person of Joseph Rivers of *If Beale Street Could Talk*. The strength and courage and love of a father severely beaten but not destroyed by the American economic system, is portrayed in Joseph A. Walker's *The River Niger*.

These few relatively positive father figures are much too limited in number, however, when compared with the large number of negative figures who can't seem to bring home the bread and cut the ice — who find the struggle in the American economy destroying them as men, husbands, and fathers. I offer no cure all for this frustrating problem of the economic and psychological castration of the Black American male, but there are two proposals which I vigorously assert as steps in the right direction. Let us no longer be blinded by white sexual myths regarding Black people and let us assist Black men in realizing that the size of their paycheck is at least as important as the size of their penis in affirming their manhood; and that being a baby maker is not nearly so assertive an act as shaping and developing that baby into a strong human being through their positive masculine influences. Finally, let us never cease to fight for an equitable economic system, where the Black man is able to compete for the kind of jobs that will bring him dignity, comparable rewards, and security. I suppose the answer is very simply capsuled in that old folktale that I neglected to tell you the ending of. You recall that the Black man worked all day and most of the night to bring all those rocks back to the Lord. And then the Lord told him, "Upon these rocks I'll build my church." But the Black man retorted, "I be damned if you will. You gon' make *bread* today!"

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## FOOTNOTES

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The reader should be aware of the fact that *bread* may be interpreted literally, but that it is also a slang expression for money. "Cut no ice" is slang, of course, meaning "exerts no influence."

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1. Variants of this tale appear in Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men*; Richard M. Dorson, *Negro Folktales in Michigan*; and Roger D. Abrahams, *Positively Black*.
2. James Baldwin, *No Name in the Street* (New York, 1972), p. 61.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 62.
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*, p. 64.
6. Sutton E. Griggs, *Imperium in Imperio* (Miami, 1969; reprint of 1889 ed.), p. 5.
7. Ronald L. Fair, *Hog Butcher* (New York, 1966), p. 168.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 180.
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*, p. 182.
11. Langston Hughes, "Midwinter Blues," *Selected Poems* (New York, 1969), p. 151.
12. LeRoi June, "Great Goodness of Life," *Four Black Revolutionary Plays* (Indianapolis, 1969), p. 63.
13. John Oliver Killens, *The Cotillion; or One Good Bull Is Half the Herd* (New York, 1971), p. 108.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 219.
15. H. Rap Brown, *Die, Nigger, Die!* (New York, 1969), p. 27.
16. Hal Bennett, *Lord of Dark Places* (New York, 1970), p. 19.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 45.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 45-46.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 192.