

## **Depictions of Elderly Blacks in American Literature**

**Alice A. Deck**

Portraits of elderly Afroamerican men and women abound in American literature and vary from stories which present a mythic primordial character who symbolizes emotional stability, experiential wisdom and a community's cultural and historical heritage, to works in slice-of-life realistic style which dramatize the social and psychological conditions of aged blacks. Included in this second category are works which show the confrontation between old and new social standards. Coupled with this range of portraits is a variety of attitudes toward elderly blacks.

The writers who believe that with age comes wisdom usually write with an air of reverence for the elders' ability to endure and to remain altruistic in their attitudes toward family and community. Those writers who portray the darker side of life for the elderly in America—the poverty, the depression, and the low self-esteem—convey anger over the situation and pity for their characters. Stories dramatizing a confrontation between old and young come closest to presenting multi-dimensional elders, highlighting their mistakes and weaknesses in dealing with the younger generation.

A popular literary image of elderly blacks among black and white American authors is that of the primordial man or woman who functions as an advisor/storyteller and as a source of altruistic affection and experiential wisdom. Their specific role is to guide younger blacks and whites, many of whom are suffering from a sense of alienation from either their immediate physical environment or their community and family. Although there is some truth in this image of elderly blacks, it is a revered American myth.

The earliest example of an advisor/storyteller is the highly controversial Uncle Remus, a character created by the white writer Joel Chandler Harris in 1879. Harris's Uncle Remus lived alone in a small log

cabin on a Georgia plantation and was the only former slave to have remained there after the Civil War. He is portrayed as a dark-skinned, weatherbeaten old man with a ring of white hair surrounding his bald patch, spending the best part of his day telling stories about Br'er Rabbit and Br'er Fox to the plantation owner's young seven-year-old boy. Uncle Remus speaks in Southern black dialect and punctuates his stories with affectionate terms such as "honey" and affectionate gestures. As a character Uncle Remus reflected Joel Chandler Harris's view of the 19th century ex-slave who is loving and willing to forgive and forget all the atrocities committed against black people during slavery.

White readers of the *Atlanta Constitution*, the newspaper in which Uncle Remus first appeared, enjoyed him as a reminder of the antebellum days of black submissiveness and devotion to whites. He harbors no resentment. He does not express a desire to leave his plantation. He does not wish to learn to read and write. Uncle Remus was a welcomed alternative to the reality of the many ex-slaves who were entering training schools, southern politics, and small towns by the droves.

A discussion of Uncle Remus must make a distinction between the outer frame of the legends in which we see him interacting with the young white child and the legends themselves as authentic Afroamerican folklore. Harris spent four years, 1862-1866, living on the Turnwold plantation in Putnam County, Georgia, learning the printer's trade. He befriended the slaves there, especially one named "Uncle" George Terrell who was a master of telling tales. After he left the plantation, Harris held a series of newspaper jobs and swapped stories with black Americans he met in his travels or in the local towns where he lived.<sup>1</sup>

The legends Uncle Remus tells are the same ones Harris heard from blacks and reflect a black view of the world. The weaker Br'er Rabbit (with whom the slaves identified) usually overcame his stronger adversaries the fox or the bear (who represented the white master or the overseer) by virtue of his quick wit and keen insight into human psychology. Br'er Rabbit bears no resemblance to Uncle Remus, but he does resemble Uncle Julius McAdoo, another 19th century elderly storyteller created by Charles Chesnutt and presented in his collection *The Conjure Woman*, first published in 1899.

Uncle Julius represents one Afroamerican writer's response to Harris's creation. He is a "venerable looking colored man...tall and though slightly bowed by the weight of years, apparently quite vigorous. There was a shrewdness in his eyes which was indicative of a corresponding shrewdness in his character."<sup>2</sup> Although he is also the only former slave still living on an old plantation when it is purchased by John, a wealthy young white northerner, Uncle Julius does not tell his stories just to entertain. His ulterior motives in telling folktales to John and his wife

are gaining something for himself such as a new suit of clothes (in "The Conjuror's Revenge"), or something for the other black people in the immediate area such as an abandoned schoolhouse on John's property to be used as a black church (in "Po Sandy").

In terms of structure the stories in *The Conjure Woman* parallel *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings* in that there is an outer frame story narrated in standard English showing the interaction between John, his wife, and Julius. Then there are the inner legends Julius tells in dialect. Julius's stories are far more complex in terms of characterization and plot. They involve animism and conjuration as it was believed and practiced among blacks at that time, but Julius's act of telling these tales is his own way of working magic on his white boss.

There is no open hostility between John and Julius, but there is a strong conflict between their points of view on the nature of reality and truth. By virtue of his education, John represents scientific rationality and reason. He takes Julius and his stories as merely Southern rural amusements: "That is a very ingenious fairy tale, Julius, and we are much obliged to you" (159). Julius, however, represents a secular faith in magic and feels that root work (conjure) can explain more than white man's science: "W'ite folks say he die'er de fevuh, but de niggers knowed it wuz de goopher." His belief in the supernatural is a function of his black communal identity, and by adhering to his beliefs in spite of white laws forbidding them (or John's skepticism), Julius is asserting his pride in a black culture based on a long standing tradition. He asserts: "My mammy tol' me dat tale w'en I wa'nt mo' d'n kneehigh ter a hopper'-grass" (101) and "I ben hearn de tale for twenty-five yeahs en I ain't got no 'casion fer ter spute it" (128). Clearly, Charles Chesnut was forcing his readers to see the elderly former slave not as forgiving and self-effacing but as one determined to look out for his own interests.

Two important literary images of elderly Afroamerican women by white southerners who inherited a culture based on assumed white superiority are Dilsey, the house servant in William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) and Phoenix Jackson, the central character in Eudora Welty's short story "A Worn Path" (1941). Both Faulkner and Welty lived to see the beginnings of Afroamerican demands for social equality. They exhibited complex and ambiguous feelings about blacks in their fiction. Dilsey and Phoenix, nonetheless, have one clearly discernible trait—a self-sacrificing capacity to love and to endure any number of trials and tribulations in their dealings with white America.

Faulkner's Dilsey is a controversial character among Afroamerican critics like Harris's Uncle Remus. She is based on a southern white image of black people, especially elderly blacks who are devoted to the white

families for whom they work. Within *The Sound and the Fury*, a novel portraying the moral decay of a southern family, Dilsey is a gem. She is the only one who has compassion for each member of the Compson family even though they have taken her and her family for granted for years. Dilsey, the humble servant, criticizes the Compsons' inhumanity toward each other, and treats the idiot son, Benjy, with tender affection. Dilsey is the only one who can stand up to the vindictive son, Jason.

Dilsey represents Christian belief in salvation through unquestioning faith, humility, and love despite the persecution (one member of the family actually strikes Dilsey at one point), which has taken its toll on her physique:

She had been a big woman once but now her skeleton rose, draped loosely in unpadding skin that tightened again upon a paunch almost dropsical, as though muscle and tissue had been courage or fortitude which the days or the years had consumed until only the indomitable skeleton was left like a ruin or a landmark above the somnolent and impervious guts...<sup>3</sup>

Faulkner's reverence for Dilsey is undermined by this description, which is not a flattering portrait. She seems more like a spectre of a woman rather than anyone whom another Afroamerican would recognize.

Dilsey and Uncle Remus are embedded in the American consciousness to such an extent that versions of them appear on commercial products (Aunt Jemima pancakes and Uncle Ben's rice), on commercial television (Rochester on the Jack Benny Show, or Nell on *Gimme a Break*), and in the movies (Mammy in *Gone with the Wind*). White American popular culture reveres these characters for their devotion to humanitarian ideals; however, a sense of the total black community never emerges. Moreover, Dilsey and Uncle Remus exhibit not one sign of divided loyalty regarding the history of racial antagonism between blacks and whites in the United States. Their creators were obviously not familiar with Paul Dunbar's poem "We Wear the Mask" which says in part:

We wear the mask that grins and lies,  
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes—  
We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries  
To thee from tortured souls arise.<sup>4</sup>

Uncle Remus and Dilsey represent what two white American writers want to see and not what elderly blacks really are.

Eudora Welty's Phoenix Jackson is another version of Faulkner's Dilsey dressed in the stereotypical long dress, long white apron, and head rag. She is not shown serving a white family but is described as taking a slow walk into town on a winter day to pick up some medicine for her grandson who is at home ill. Phoenix has made the trip so many times that even though she is partially blind knows every twist and turn of the road and can move along at a steady pace. Similar to Uncle Remus, Uncle Julius and Dilsey, Phoenix is part of the natural southern

landscape and like the earth, she has endured and nurtured all those who were in her care.

To reinforce the Phoenix name, Welty uses red, yellow and blue imagery throughout the story to suggest flames, and included bird metaphors to describe the old black woman:

Her eyes were blue with age. Her skin had a pattern all its own of numberless branching wrinkles and as though a whole little tree stood in the middle of her forehead, but a golden color ran underneath, and two knobs of her cheeks were illuminated by a yellow burning under the dark. Under the red rag her hair came down on her neck in the frailest wringlets, still black, and with an odor like copper...She carried a thin, small cane made from an umbrella, and with this she kept tapping the frozen earth in front of her. This made the grave and persistent noise in the still air, that seemed meditative like the chirping of a solitary bird.<sup>5</sup>

This is a much more flattering description than Faulkner's description of Dilsey. The positive image, however, is undermined by two incidents.

First of all, everything about Phoenix's behavior suggests that she is senile. Although she never loses her way along the road, she mutters to herself constantly. At one point she stops to rest and thinks she sees a small boy come up to her and offer her a piece of cake. Once she arrives at the doctor's office, Phoenix sits staring at the nurse for a while trying to remember why she came to town. Secondly, Phoenix is very poor, as Welty shows when she depicts Phoenix grubbing to pick up a nickel that a white hunter let fall along the side of the road. She has to tolerate the condescending remarks of the nurses, who refer to her a charity case when they speak as though she were not even in the room. One nurse finally says: "It's Christmas time, Grandma. Could I give you a few pennies out of my purse?" (294). In response, Phoenix asks for five pennies and with her other nickel she purchases a paper windmill for her grandson. Welty's platitudinous implications are that the simplest thing can bring joy when given out of love, and Phoenix and her grandson are presumed to be content to subsist on the small handouts they can get from white society.

Welty once explained the origins of this story and what she wanted to emphasize.<sup>6</sup> She once saw "a solitary old woman like Phoenix" walking at a distance, across a wintry Southern landscape and was immediately intrigued with the question as to what would make her take a journey on such a day. She never got close enough to the woman to speak with her to judge her mental state, or to discover the woman's mission. Welty simply imagined the woman taking the trip out of love and made this the focal point of her story: "The habit of love cuts through confusion and stumbles or contrives its way out of difficulty, it remembers the way even when it forgets, for a dumbfounded moment, its reason for being" (161-162). She created a highly romantic picture of the black woman she saw that day. By not knowing who she was, nor meeting her a close range,

Welty was absolved of the responsibility to give an accurate portrait, and used the handy stereotype of aged blacks as poor, senile, and tottering.

Nikki Giovanni's "Alabama Poem" (1970) and Alice Walker's short story "To Hell with Dying" (1968) are two examples of works by black women writers which do not romanticize the characters. The basic metaphor in the Giovanni poem sets up a parallel between trees and elderly blacks based on a comparison of the length of time they have experienced living in the rural south which affords them a higher knowledge of life than anything taught at school. Giovanni is building on the type of primordial image of elderly blacks presented by Harris, Chesnutt, Faulkner, and Welty, but the two characters in the poem are neither infirmed nor senile. The speaker is a black college student who one day meets an old woman and man on her way to class. The old man said: "Girl! My hands seen more than all them books they got at Tuskegee," while the woman called out: "Sista...let me tell you—my feet seen more than yo eyes ever gonna read."<sup>7</sup> Every callous, bunion, wrinkle, and scar on their bodies represents a lesson learned and the speaker (as well as the poet) accepted and respected the two people for that.

Mr. Sweet, the old alcoholic blues singer and diabetic in Alice Walker's story "To Hell With Dying," is wrinkled, white-haired, and subject to bouts of depression, but he is cherished all the more by the black family whom he regularly visits. The narrator is also a college educated black woman who, in retrospect, explains just how important old Mr. Sweet was to her family while she was growing up. When he periodically fell ill from an attack brought on by depression and seemed to give up on life, her entire family would gather around his bed, and when her father nodded ascent, all the children would climb on the bed and proceed to revive Mr. Sweet: "...whoever was the smallest at the time would kiss him all over his wrinkled brown face and begin to tickle him so that he would laugh all down in his stomach...."<sup>8</sup> This would suffice in bringing Mr. Sweet back to life and he would resume his visits with the family—playing his guitar and singing the blues. The children took Mr. Sweet as a playmate, but the narrator recalls that he made her feel especially good about herself: "Mr. Sweet used to call me princess, and I believed it. He made me feel pretty at five and six, and simply outrageously devastating at the blazing age of eight and a half" (131-132). As a blues singer, Mr. Sweet entertained the family with "Sweet Georgia Brown" and taught several of the children how to play his steel-stringed guitar. Hence, even though he was usually drunk most of the time from drinking his own home brew, even the narrator's mother accepted and welcomed him into the house. The narrator's biggest disappointment came on the day when

she was called home from graduate school at age twenty-four, to participate in reviving the then ninety year old Mr. Sweet. There were no other young children in her family by that time so she as the youngest tried to work her old magic to no avail. "Like a piece of rare and delicate china which was always being saved from breaking and which had finally fell" (137)—Mr. Sweet died, giving her cause to think about her aging parents and her own maturity.

Mr. Sweet represented genuine affection given and received between the old and the young. He was not interested in any material gain he might make from his visits; he benefitted emotionally from being part of another family, especially after his wife and son died. Like Uncle Julius, Mr. Sweet functioned as a cultural resource by way of his blues music which he taught to the children. Like Welty, Walker has so much awe for her character that she endows him with near celestial qualities—his white hair suggesting angelic purity of heart. Yet an important difference is in the way Walker gives a full treatment of an adopted family's role in Mr. Sweet's life. The familial closeness, the belonging, nurtured the man so he could live until he was ninety. Unlike Phoenix Jackson's, Mr. Sweet's behavior is not a mindless habit. He remains clear and lucid in his thinking until his death.

A major elderly black female in recent American fiction is Miss Jane Pittman, the focal point of Ernest Gaines novel *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971). She is sought out by a young black history teacher who is certain that Miss Jane's life story can help him explain things to his students. She is not idealized in the novel. The fact that she is 110 years old, has been both a slave and a witness to the black militancy of the 1960s make her as revered by Gaines as Mr. Sweet was by Walker. There are no conflicts between Miss Jane, the centenarian and the younger generations represented in the novel.

The linking between generations is one of Old Jack Crawley's functions in David Bradley's *The Chaneyville Incident* (1981). Charged with the responsibility of initiating his best friend's youngest son, John Washington, into manhood, Old Jack taught him to fish and hunt, and to become an expert woodsman. Most of all he told John stories about his father, Moses Washington. Like Uncle Remus's situation, Old Jack lived by himself in a small cabin in a remote corner of the woods. When the young boy John came to visit Old Jack would prepare two hot toddies, light a candle, place it on a table in a pool of hardening wax, and "spin out an endless web of tales that were either true or so blatantly false as to seem true."<sup>9</sup> Old Jack was able to give John clues to his black ancestry and to the history of racial struggles in his rural Western Pennsylvania town. Old Jack had an intense compassion for his black male friends,

especially John's father, Moses, matched only by his resentment for whites: "Me, why I'd been knowed to make fun a white folks right to their faces, which was ornery. I'd been knowed to come right out an' tell 'em to buy their ticket on the express train to hell, which was surely ornery" (79). Old Jack resembles Uncle Julius in that he asserts his loyalty and belief in black culture and black people. However, Jack has his disagreements with John as he grows up. When John wins a scholarship to college, Old Jack, who is unable to read, is furious. He tells John one day when he returned to visit him years later: "Goddamnit, Johnny, you may a been to college, but you don't know nothin', you don't know where you growed up at." The old man and woman in Giovanni's "Alabama Poem" would concur with Old Jack that, for young blacks, the wisdom gained from lived experiences with whites is the key to black survival.

John's reverence for Old Jack is evident in his caring for the old man on his death bed and in his returning to live by himself in Jack's cabin after Jack dies. Even though John had left home to teach in a university, and fell in love with Judith, a white psychiatrist, he was never completely satisfied with his life until he returned to Jack's shack in the woods to meditate. Old Jack held the key to his emotional, ethnic, and familial origins.

The characters discussed above resemble one another in that they are closely associated with the earth. They are all nurturers of the younger generation, who hold them in high esteem. The authors respect them for their wisdom based on lived experiences and superhuman capacity to survive on meagre clothing, little food, and almost no money. Their simple faith in black people, mankind, God or the supernatural has and will continue to sustain them through life.

Other literary portraits of elderly Afroamericans include works which stress the social reality behind the myth of resiliency and wisdom. Short stories such as Arna Bontemps' "A Summer Tragedy" (1933), and Alice Walker's "The Welcome Table" (1972) reveal just how devastating rural poverty, racism, and isolation can be to the mental and physical health of the elderly. In these works the authors' pity rather than awe is demonstrated.

Bontemps's "A Summer Tragedy" takes place on the day an elderly couple, who had lived as sharecroppers on the same land for twenty-five years, deliberately climbed into their old T-model Ford and drove it over the cliff into the river. Jeff and Jennie's suicide seems inevitable because of their physical frailty (Jeff suffers from severe arthritis, Jennie is totally blind), and their emotional depression over their poverty. They live in perpetual debt to the landowner. All five of their adult children had died within the last two years, so they had no younger family



members to help them with the work or the debts. Unlike Chesnutt's Uncle Julius who believed in conjuration, and Faulkner's Dilsey who believed in Christian humility, Jeff and Jennie professed no belief in the supernatural nor in God. With nothing to serve as a buffer between their emotional stability and their grim situation in old age, Jeff and Jennie were finally defeated by hopelessness. The story coincides with a quotation from a national study on the mental health status of older black Americans: "As an oppressed minority, many of their mental health problems are as much (if not more) a function of environmental factors than the outcome of intra-psychic conflict."<sup>10</sup> Jeff and Jennie never wavered in their determination to end their lives—this sort of debate had taken place long before that fatal day. In fact, their suicide was for them a celebration; they decided to dress themselves up in the same moth-eaten, patched, and worn clothing that they had reserved for special occasions over the years. This last pitiful sign of their self-esteem makes the tragedy all the more lamentable, and understandable. They were too proud to ask for charity.

A death occurs in Alice Walker's "The Welcome Table" but here it is viewed as an elderly woman's just reward for having maintained her belief in Christ despite her grim social situation. The story focuses on the Sunday when an old black woman tried to enter and worship in a white church and her removal by two burly members of the congregation: "Under the old woman's arms they placed their hard fists, flexed their muscular shoulders and out she flew through the door...."<sup>11</sup> Once on the outside again, the old woman looked down the country road near the church and saw Jesus Christ coming towards her. When they met, she heard him say: "Follow me," and she did. When she was found dead along the side of the road the next day, several black people who had seen her pass said that she had been all alone on the road, "sometimes jabbering in a low insistent voice sometimes singing, sometimes merely gesturing excitedly with her hands" (87). Hence to other people the old woman appeared to be mentally unbalanced. (The white congregation thought that explained her daring act of entering their church.) Since no one in the black community had known her nor where she was from, no one had stopped her to ask if she needed help. Like the couple in Bontemps's story, this character was all alone in her old age. She does not, however, succumb to an emotional depression, but is enlivened by her belief in Christ.

Unlike Eudora Welty's depiction of Phoenix, Alice Walker does not revere her character. Instead, Walker's annoyance over the hypocritical white congregation's treatment of the old woman occupies most of the narrative space. Walker's old woman inherits a place in heaven not some

coins or a free bottle of medicine. The situation in "The Welcome Table" echoes Dilsey's situation in *The Sound and the Fury* without the empty reverence.

Some of the stories which attempt to convey the social reality behind the mythic images of elderly Afroamericans focus on the confrontation between the older and younger generation. In works such as Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*, Langston Hughes's *Not Without Laughter*, Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Toni Morrison's *Sula*, Jean Toomer's "Kabnis," and Richard Wright's *Black Boy* the older grandparent, or simply an elder member of the black community, attempts to impose values and beliefs upon the young protagonist who, in the process of maturing, thinks he or she must live by different standards.

Lena Younger and her children Walter Lee and Beneatha have a series of arguments in *A Raisin in the Sun* over just what it takes for them to get ahead in America. Beneatha for example is aspiring to be a doctor, and is very adamant in her dislike for the way the family has to live in a small, over-crowded apartment. Throughout the play she loses patience with her mother's insistence that faith in God will see them all through. One of the most poignant moments in the play is when Lena must slap Beneatha and make her repeat: "In my mother's house there is still God."<sup>12</sup> The conflict between Richard Wright and his Seventh Day Adventist grandmother in *Black Boy* stems from a similar grandchild's disbelief in his grandmother's religion. He is forced to watch his family suffer with poverty. Yet he is forbidden to take a part-time job because it would require work on Saturdays, the Sabbath Day in his grandmother's church. In Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Janie at first accepts her grandmother's advice to marry a man who is financially secure. Janie later decides that she wants to have a truly loving relationship with a man and leaves her first husband to go off in search of it. Janie's grandmother wanted her to belong to the black middle class while Janie wanted to live among the folk and enjoy life. In each of these situations, the elder represents the protagonist's heritage and the ethos of the Afroamerican community and tries to teach the young person lessons she has learned from experiences living as a minority in a white world. Unlike the situation with Old Jack Crawley, Uncle Remus or Mr. Sweet, these elders find that their ideas are not well received by the young. The younger generation (e.g., Beneatha, Richard and Janie) view their elders as living by rules which will keep black people in a subservient, bondage-type position. After several trials at following their own ideas, the younger people usually must accept the wisdom of the elder or become reconciled with it. The elder represents ethnic roots and

identity.

Jean Toomer's "Kabnis" and Toni Morrison's *Sula* are two characters who not only have a serious disagreement with their elders but who violently reject them and refuse to acknowledge the slightest relationship. Kabnis, the central character in section three of *Cane* (1922) is a southern-born, but northern-bred and educated black who returns to Georgia to teach school. He hates the southern environment—its atmosphere, landscape, black and white people—because he cannot accept the beauty and the pain that seem to coexist in it. Father John is an old black man ("Grey-haired, Prophetic, Immobile"),<sup>13</sup> who lives in the basement of a black-owned dry goods store. While other characters in the story revere John, Kabnis curses him continuously because he cannot accept the southern heritage that he represents: "Master, slave, soil, and Christianity" (107). As a middle class Afroamerican, Kabnis wants to look elsewhere for his identity: "My ancestors were Southern blue-bloods" (107).

The blood ties between the matriarch Eva Peace and her granddaughter Sula had never been enough to make them love one another. Consequently, the first thing Sula did upon returning to the bottom after a ten year absence was to have Eva put away in a rest home. Sula's act was viewed as akin to putting Eva "outdoors" by the rest of the black community, and "outdoors" as Morrison has explained elsewhere, "was the end of something, an irrevocable, physical fact...the concreteness of being outdoors was like the difference between the concept of death and being in fact dead."<sup>14</sup> Sula's symbolic murdering of her grandmother could be seen as an act of desperation because she was so afraid of Eva Peace. She told her best friend Nell in explanation: "All I know is I'm scared...I didn't know what elseto do...what *should* I do Nellie? Take her back and sleep with my door locked again?"<sup>15</sup> Sula thought of her grandmother as a threat to her very own existence. Later in the novel, when Nell goes to visit Eva after Sula had died, Nell is pained to see that the once fiesty, vigorous matriarch is nearly insane. Her granddaughter's rejection coupled with the sterile environment at the rest home contributed to Eva's break down.

In "Kabnis" and *Sula* there is no reconciliation between the old and young, no reuniting on a higher plane of awareness and mutual understanding like that in *A Raisin in the Sun*. The young protagonist in both cases is ineffectual in dealing with life after the rift. Kabnis continues to rant and rave against the south and lives in a constant state of terror. Sula dies pining away for the only man she ever loved. If she had been on better terms with her grandmother, she might have learned how to rise above such a disappointment just as Eva had survived her

husband's (Sula's grandfather) abandonment of her and her three small children many years earlier. Of course Eva did not embrace Sula and tell her stories of her past experiences either, so the fault lies with both the matriarch and her grandchild.

Morrison, Hansberry, and Hurston each point out the mistakes their elder characters make in dealing with the younger generation. They also show how shortsighted young people can be in openly confronting their elders. None of these writers (including Toomer and Wright) created the elderly characters mentioned above out of a romantic reverence for their supposed superior wisdom. The writers explored the dramatic tensions in the relationships between old and young. Social conditions are sometimes shown as contributing factors, but, for the most part, the authors examine a set of personalities.

The elderly Afroamerican appears in American literature as a character in several contexts. The important point is that no consistent image of this character dominates, rather, it varies depending on the writer's attitude towards black people as a whole, and the elderly black in particular. Although the Uncle Remus and Dilsey character images still haunt, recent writers like Ernest Gaines in *A Gathering of Old Men* and Toni Cade Bambara in *The Salt Eaters* are ready to exorcise those two demons of the American imagination.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>For a thorough elaboration of Harris's life and his views on Uncle Remus, see Robert Hemenway's introduction to *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings* (New York: Penguin Books, 1982) 7-35.

<sup>2</sup>Charles Chesnutt. *The Conjure Woman*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969) 10. Subsequent references to *The Conjure Woman* are from this edition, page numbers will be given in the course of the discussion.

<sup>3</sup>William Faulkner. *The Sound and the Fury*. (New York: Random House, 1954) 330.

<sup>4</sup>Paul Lawrence Dunbar. "We Wear the Mask." *I am the Darker Brother*. Arnold Adoff, ed. (New York: Collier Books, 1970) 86.

<sup>5</sup>Eudora Welty. "The Worn Path." *The Short Story: 25 Masterpieces* (New York: St. Martins Press, 1975) 287. Subsequent references to the "The Worn Path" are from this edition, page numbers will be given in the course of the discussion.

<sup>6</sup>Eudora Welty. "Is Phoenix Jackson's Grandson Really Dead?" *The Eye of the Story: Selected Essays and Reviews*. (New York: Random House, 1977) 161. Subsequent references to this essay are from this printing.

<sup>7</sup>Nikki Giovanni. "Alabama Poem." *Re-creation*. (Detroit: Broadside Press, 1971) 33.

<sup>8</sup>Alice Walker. "To Hell With Dying." *In Love and Trouble*. (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1973) 129. Subsequent references to this story are from this printing.

<sup>9</sup>David Bradley. *The Chaneyville Incident*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1981), 27. Subsequent references to this story are from this printing.

<sup>10</sup>James Jackson, Linda M. Chatters, and Harold N. Neighbors. "The Mental Health Status of Older Black Americans: A National Study." *The Black Scholar* Vol. 13, No. 1 (1982) 22.

<sup>11</sup>Alice Walker. "The Welcome Table." *In Love and Trouble* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1973) 84.

<sup>12</sup>Lorraine Hansberry. *A Raisin in the Sun* in *Afro-American Literature Drama*. Williams Adams, Peter Conn, and Barry Slepian, eds. (New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1970) 27.

<sup>13</sup>Jean Toomer. *Cane* (New York: Liveright, 1975) 104.

<sup>14</sup>Toni Morrison. *The Bluest Eye*. (New York: Pocket Books, 1970) 18.

<sup>15</sup>Toni Morrison. *Sula*. (New York: Bantam Books, 1975) 87.