



ZORA NEALE HURSTON'S *SERAPH ON THE SUWANEE* IS A RELIGIOUS NOVEL

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ABSTRACT

Seraph on the Suwannee is the last work of Zora Neale Hurston. It was published in 1948, unfortunately it did not receive much appreciation and has often been termed as an awkward novel perhaps this is so, because Hurston chose her characters to be Southern whiter rather than her usual African American characters. Hurston through Seraph critically examines the white culture and society and exposes its hollowness. Seraph on the Suwannee is a story about poor Southern whites or “crackers” who are constantly struggling to improve their economic conditions. The protagonist is a white female Arvay Henson living in the town of Sawley. Arvay secretly fantasizes about her brother-in-law Carl Middleton who is married to her elder sister Lorraine. At the age of sixteen she decides to become a missionary. Arvay is a beautiful girl but purposely keeps her suitors away by throwing hysterical fits at whoever tries to approach her.

INTRODUCTION

When Arvay is twenty-one, a high-class Irishman Jim Meserve arrives in the town. Jim not only pursues Arvay, but also seduces and rapes her just before their marriage. This induces a feeling of guilt in Arvay which continues to haunt and trouble her throughout her life. In this process, she keeps her feelings confined only to herself and is unable to passionately love Jim as he wants her to do. They both are unable to communicate their feelings to each other. After twenty years and three children, Arvay realizes her mistake. She apologizes to Jim and finally finds her true happiness in domestic bills with Jim.

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1P a g e



Seraph on the Suwanee is a complex and highly symbolic novel. It can be studied as a critique in social geography, racism as well as class. However, large numbers of critics have found Seraph to be an utter failure on the part of Zora Neale Hurston. The main complaint of these critics is that Hurston had forsaken black characters and culture which was the redeeming quality of her work. Alice Walker, Hurston's greatest champion writes:

It is reactionary, static, shockingly misguided and timid... especially true of Seraph on the Suwanee, which is not even about people, which is no crime, but is about white people for whom it is impossible to care. (xvi)

Religion is major theme in the novel. In her earlier works, Hurston had explored the theme of religion in context of African American communities, but In *Seraph*, she looks how religion plays apart in the lives of white people. At the very beginning of the novel, Hurston depicts that for people in Sawley, Baptist Church plays an important part in their lives. It is not only a place of religious importance but also a social center for meeting each other. Religion and Church plays an important role in Arvay's life, who "played the organ the Sunday school, and she took an active part in church work"(603). She even decides to become a missionary and spend the rest of her life as a nun. It is against the back drop of Church that Arvay and Jim's courtship begins. Jim meets Arvay for the first while going to the church. Before meeting Jim Meserve, Arvay fanaticizes about her brother-in-law Carl Middleton, who is pastor at the same church.

The Bible acts as a guiding principle for Arvay in her life. "Arvay had thought of herself since the childhood as soldier in the army of the Lord. A soldier of the cross, and a follower of the Meek and Lowly Lamb"(817). She regularly the reads

The Bible and finds solace in it. At one point of time, she even fights with Jim over the Bible. Arvay scolds Jim, "You Must be crazy or awful wicked one, to be looking for jokes in the Bible." (658). Yet she considers Jim to be a miracle that God has sent for her, "This was miracle right out of the Bible"(750). When Arvay's daughter Angie marries Hatton Howland without Arvay's knowledge, Arvay once again finds solace in the Bible. Arvay compares herself to the biblical character of enslaved Hager. Bible once again becomes the point of reference for Arvay, when she thinks of the Corregios. According to Arvay, the Corregio family can best be described as "godless". Arvay compare Felicia and Mrs. Corregio as Herodias and Salome, When she feels that they both, are preying on his youngest son Kenny. Arvay thinks, They were no different from that awful Herodias and her daughters Salome who had got John the Baptist killed for nothing. They had been put in the Bible to warn folks against just such sluts as Felicia and her Mama. Babylonian females with no God in their



hearts, and no weapon against evil in their hands. Just out to bring ruin and destruction on widows and orphan-children.

Though Arvay is deeply religious but she is always in conflict with her impure thoughts. In the beginning, we see that she secretly lusts after her brother-in-law Carl Middleton though she knows it is an immoral act. She often asks God for forgiveness and when Earl is born with deformity, she thinks that God has punished her for her sin of lusting for her elder sister's husband. Arvay thinks, "This is the punishment for the way I used to be, I thought that I had done paid off, but I reckon not. I never thought it would come like this, but it must be chastisement I been looking for"(662). At the end of the novel, Arvay finally realizes the true importance and worth of religion and God's greatness, beyond theological books. Sharon L. Jones writes in this regards:

At the novel's close, Arvay returns to a purer sense of religion as she nears the acceptance of a sense of self....At this point Arvay begins to rediscover the divinity in herself and in her relationship with her husband. (158)

Arvay is finally at peace with herself. She realizes that God has assigned her a role to perform that is to be wife of Jim and mother to his children, "God had made her a mother to give peace and comfort around"(918). Arvay compares her life with "Moses before his burning bush"(918) and her marriage with Jim as compared to the relationship between Rebecca and Issac in the Bible. Arvay even sees birth of her children as God's message to her. The birth of Earl was meant to "purge her out" (918) While birth of Angline and Kenny came to her like the "Resurrection"(918).

In the end, Arvay finds divinity in her motherhood. Hurston writes, "Holly Mary who had been blessed to mother Jesus had been no better off than she was. She had been poor and unlearned" (919). Hurston wrote about Religion in her autobiography *Dust Tracks on a Road*: But certain things have seemed to me true as I heard the tongues of those who had speech, and listened at the lips of books. It seems to me to be true that heavens are placed in the sky because it is the unreachable. The unreachable and therefore the unknowable always seems divine hence, religion. People need religion because the great masses fear life and its consequences. Its responsibilities weigh heavy. Feeling a weakness in the face of great forces, men seek an alliance with omnipotence they rely upon is a creature of their own minds. It gives them a feeling of security. Strong and self-termining men are notorious for their lack of reverence. (225)



Jim Meserve is a total worldly person. In the beginning he goes to church Only because Arvay goes there. After marrying Arvay, religion takes backseat for Jim. For Jim, providing for his family becomes his foremost priority. He even sometimes argues with Arvay on her religious inclinations. The title of the novel, *Seraph on the Suwanee* is symbolic having religious connotations just as Hurston's other works The seraph or angel referred to in the title of the novel is Arvay Henson Meserve. Referring to Arvay as a Seraph is highly symbolic. Seraph is "One of an order of celestial beings conceived as fiery and purifying ministers of Jehovah"(Gates and Appiah34). Just as a seraph hovers over God, Arvay cares for her husband and children, "Mothering and hovering" (919) them. In the end, Arvay Arvay becomes Jim's "Seraph and accorded Jim the paradoxical status he has demanded, that of God to be worshipped and child to be hovered" (Meisen helder 107). The name of Arvay's daughter is also symbolic. The name Angeline refers to angel. It suggests divine quality of Arvay's daughter who "resurrects" her. In a way Angeline brings back happiness and peace into Arvay and Jim's life which had become absent after the birth of their first child, Earl who was deformed. Name of Jim Meserve is also symbolic. Ironically his surname "Meserve" speaks for himself. Hurston gives him a name Meserve which actually means "Me-Serve" or serve me. His name, Meserve, suggests domination and possession. (Jones 160)Throughout the novel, he dominates Arvay and demands her submission. In the end, ironically, Arvay finds that her real happiness lies in "serving and meant to serve"(920). "Jim's effect on the black characters in the novel is equally pernicious and insidious"(Meisen helder 113). Other black workers serving unders Jim have symbolic name. One of Jim's shipmates is Stumpy- suggesting a black character who is stunted in the white culture. Another black character is Cup-cake, who cooks for Jim just as his name symbolizes. A Black character, Titty-Nipple, suggests the maternal role black men play for white men in the absence of their white women.

Seraph on the Suwanee is a highly symbolic novel. Hurston has used many complex symbols in the novel. One another symbol present in the novel is that of the burning of the house. Arvay goes back to Sawley, for her mother's funeral and later puts fire to the old house of her family. This burning of house has a great symbolic meaning for Arvay. She is immensely happy at her act. Hurston writes:

Looking at the conflagration, exultation swept over her, followed by a peaceful calm. It was the first time in her life that she was conscious of feeling that way. She had always felt like an imperfect ball restlessly bumping and rolling and bumping. Now she felt that she had come to a dead and absolute rest. The dry old house dead and absolute rest. The dry old house burned furiously, and as Arvay watched the roaring and ascending flames, she picked herself over inside and recognized why she felt as she did now. She was no

longer divided in her mind. The tearing and ripping and useless rending was furnished and done.(879).

With the burning of the house, Arvay finally comes to peace with herself. She burns away all her impure thoughts, emotions and guilt, which she had been carrying as a burden throughout her life. She is purged out of all the evil thoughts about her sister Lorraine and Carl. She also understands her true worth. She is now able to love Jim without any restrictions and inhibitions. To quote Rita C. Butler:

She has created a space that honors the best of what she can salvage from her past. Hurston, adept at understanding then nuances of discrimination that can begin at an early age in one's own family, Suggests that Arvay is neither weak nor in healthy mean but rather that her undesirable behavior in the past reelected a lack of insight into the deep-sighted insecurities she harbored about herself and her place in the world. In contrast to a paternal legacy that includes emotional abuse and dormant genetic flaw that causes havoc, Maria, the long- suffering mother, becomes the force that enables Arvay to experience a degree of self-esteem and social power.(135)

The burning of the house can inextricably be linked to the title of the novel. In the Bible, there is a story that when Isaiah sees God on a throne, under hovering seraphim, he cries out loud that he is last because he is man of sin. One of the seraphim flies and puts a hot coal in Isaiah's mouth. He is instantly purged of all his sins. Similarly, when Arvay sets fire to her old house, in a way she is repeating the action of biblical seraphim. By burning her house she purifies herself of all her sins.

So Seraph on the Suwanee is a highly complex novel by Hurston. In *Seraph* she uses complex symbols and rich imagery to accentuate her plot. And most importantly, she brilliantly achieved what she wanted, to shatter the white establishment, once again affirm a woman's independence even though in a covert way.

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