Evil Deity: How White Racist Christians Made God Bad

African-American literature addresses the traditional white Christian American beliefs with frequency. Within the context of slavery, blacks were often subjected to the dictates of their white masters, many of whom pushed the concept of Christianity upon the slaves, intending to teach Christ-like virtues suitable to the slave owner’s agenda. Sometimes forced to attend church, blacks listened to the indoctrination of preachers who spoke of obedience and future rewards. Understandably, black literature consistently shows a deep distrust for the teachings, includes those of Christ. While originally portraying Christ as a model, many white racist Christians exploited Christ in an attempt to force blacks into and ideology of willing servitude. The pressure to conform to an antagonistic religion produced various reactions from African-Americans, including: assimilation, subversion, and rejection of white Christian beliefs. Effectively, blacks have an exceptional difficulty coming to terms with religion in America because the white culture has twisted the role of deity, casting him as an evil force bound on binding blacks.

The trends of assimilating and subverting of Christian beliefs began upon contact between Africans and American. The imported slaves brought many of their own religious traditions, including ceremonies involving music, dance, and chants. Since the slave owners feared insurrections and rebellions, they deprived (as much as they could) the slaves the freedom to practice their traditions, instead imposing Christian alternatives. Christian preaching often stressed the ideals that best supported the agenda of the slaver owners. For instance, Lovell explains that “The white camp-meeting [a religious ceremony] was a frontier institution. The
frontiersman’s religion was one of his weapons. He enjoyed it ecstatically” (Dundes 458). Such topics as the distant promised land of the afterlife (a prominent theme throughout sacred texts) rose in importance, attempting to reassure individuals that if they could endure hardships, then untold compensation would await them in the heavens: “The sweetmesses of life were the delights of Heaven” (458). Christian proselytization also emphasized the role of obedience to superiors, as well as the concept of docility, furthering the self-interested agenda of the slave owners.

However, as the critic John Lovell Jr. states “there is practically no evidence that the slave swallowed the American philosophies of religion” (Dundes 458). Naturally, hearing of obedience while in bondage lead slaves to subtly subvert the propaganda. As Lovell concisely asks “How could the slave accept seriously a religion which he saw making brutes of those who were handing it to him?” (Dundes 459). Superficially, slaves were obliged to play the fools by passively listening to preaching. Once out of sight, however, they brought out their own beliefs. The rise of spirituals, to cite one example, bred a unique style of belief that played off both African and American religious traditions. Their private religious ceremonies adopted available Christian images, but with play and double meaning. For instance, Lovell observes “Here this slave was, tearing down a wreck and building a new, solid world, and all along we though he was romanticizing. We gave him credit for dainty little fantasies of song” (Dundes 461). The ingenuity of the slave community expressed itself in the development of their folkloric beliefs. Nevertheless, African-Americans, including later authors, wrestled continuously with the concept of God in the traditional Christian sense, due to the misrepresentation of deity since the beginnings of slavery.
One of the first instances of the black perspective of God, aside the the prepared pulpit lectures on love, was that of violence. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Zora Neale Hurston introduces the general uneasiness in black society regarding deity and violence. The very title of the text suggests that the characters have a cause to watch God, observing a peculiar behavior. The literary critic Erik Curren argues “that the title phrase, [...] demonstrates just how dependent on the master-slave dialectic and the principle of authority the Everglades folk community really is for Hurston.” This “master-slave dialectic” flared with violence. The phrase “Were watching” implies continuous surveillance and perplexity, not unlike that of a slave eyeing warily the master.

Hurston’s protagonist, Janie, agonizes through unhappy relationships until she finally encounters Tea-Cake, with whom Janie flourishes. However, shortly after a hurricane approaches flattening and flooding everything in its way. As the dark storm batters their small dwelling, Janie, Tea-Cake, and others stare at the ceiling, looking towards God, most likely questioning the destruction around them and trying to resolve a paradox of violence and benevolence, of Christ-like love and submissiveness with destruction and catastrophe. They do not come to terms with how deity could permit the disasters that befall them. They seem to receive no prophetic response. Instead the violence of the storm escalates in severity and ferocity, driving all the inhabitants out of their homes. In the commotion, a rabid dog bites Tea-Cake forcing Janie to eventually shoot him (her best friend and beloved partner). While Janie takes the horridness of the situation with composure, the sequence of violence coupled with looking towards God contains the implicit assumption that God was running the storm. “Ole Massa is doin’ *His* work now. Us oughta keep quiet” Janie murmurs (150). “Six eyes were questioning *God*” (151). Erik Curren summarizes another literary critic saying that Dolan Hubbard “attempts to illuminate the
title by relating it to the place where its words appear in the body of Hurston’s text, and analyzing it within the context of sermons and religious language.” Hubbard expounds “It [the title] is placed in the text just when Janie and the other folk bean pickers are beginning to realize the awesome power of the storm on the Everglades, and how weak they are when faced with God’s power. Hubbard finds that the title words signal a religious transcendence of white oppression.”

Indeed, the African-American community certainly believed in an all-powerful God, but there is the inner question as to whether He treated all as equals. When ordered to separate the white and black dead, Tea-Cake exclaims “‘Whut difference do it make ‘bout de color? Dey all needs buryin’ in uh hurry,’” and those in charge respond, ‘Got orders from headquarters. They makin’ coffins fuh all de white folks’” (163). While from the pulpit, pastors proclaimed the all-encompassing love of God, the white community acted as if God respected one race over another. Therefore, it appears from the text that the natural violence and death are in the hands of God, yet God himself remains utterly invisible throughout the novel, and instead only the whites give instruction about the preparation of the bodies for the afterlife. The blacks in the novel do not receive any reassurance about death or fair treatment in the afterlife. The whites suggest that God is racially biased.

Further casting deity into an evil role, white Americans have historically allude to the Bible in order to justify slavery. *Noah’s Curse* illustrates the perpetual misrepresentation of God in order to demean, belittle, and condemn their race on supposedly moral grounds. The author and editor, Stephen Haynes, sought out the history of the biblical arguments and has complied the records of twisting the divine to fit a controversial role. Haynes cites Benjamin Palmer, founder of Rhodes College, who was a bold defender of slavery. Palmer championed religious
racism with the biblical base of Ham’s curse found in Genesis (Preface v). In the account, Noah the prophet is found drunk and naked on the floor in a semi-conscious state. Ham, Noah’s son, stumbles in, sees his father, and tells the other siblings, who treat the situation more delicately. As a result, Noah cursed Canaan, Ham’s son, saying “a servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren” (KJV, Genesis 9.26). The fact that an intellectual authority justifies a questionable practice on this account proves highly troubling. First of all, the Noah’s story appears to be something of an anomaly, in which a divine spokesman atypically loses physical control of himself through alcohol. Second, the passages fail to account for the attack on what appears to be an innocent third party (the grandson Canaan). Thirdly, while the early Christian prophet placed a curse of slavery on Canaan, tracing the parental line from African-Americans to such a figure appears impossible to solidify. Nonetheless, despite the logically fallacies, Haynes has shown that the Biblical, pseudo-spiritual argument has long been made for slavery, and that that claim was deeply entrenched in white Christian thinking.

Believing that God approved and even promoted racial subjugation coupled physical bondage and abuse with the Anglo God figure in the African American’s mind. Whereas Zora Neale Hurston’s novel only contemplated God and violence in a seemingly detached manner, *Noah’s Curse* reveals the negative view that the blacks had of Christianity, solidifying a deep distrust. Essentially, the situation Haynes exposes reveals that God for the white slave owners became a trope or literary device to attempt to placate moral outrage. Christianity for the whites became a mere mythology for explaining the present practices in order to attempt to justify them. Thus Christianity fell away from the actual tenants of the faith, into a violent fairy tale narrating and redefining the situation with a hollow guise of good-will. Essentially they equated the divine with the contemporary aims of the the Americans.
Through the filter of Marx, the biblical justification clearly becomes a false ideology. Marx believed that the masses of common working individuals under capitalism suffered from exploitation and abuse in a situation not too far removed from the African-Americans. What placates the masses, allowing them to continue suffering their outrageous injustices, is a weave of ideology imposed from the rulers of the capitalist society that spreads a lie suggesting that everything is in order. The ideology serves as a cover-up to hide real material conditions of existence—or in other words, the ideological explanations attempt to define a debauched situation as good. Supposedly the people suffering terrible conditions become content to continue indefinitely.

However, Marx argues that with the hermeneutics of suspicion, people may look critically as what the social preachers say, and can then analyze and find the falsity of such claims. Indeed, triggering this critical analysis becomes the whole purpose of art, as Werckmeister (a Marx critic) claims “Looking back on art that did and does exist, the philosopher’s task, according to Marx, will be to point out its constant estrangement from its ideal or utopian perfection.” In other words, art will inspire dissatisfaction. The philosopher or critical thinker generally sees the reality of the cover-up lies, and can then rebel to overthrow the corrupted system. Causing dissent is the explicit intent of Marx. Critics agree that his “primary task [...] is to actively participate in and help direct the cultural emancipation of the masses’” (Habib 81). Therefore, a Marxist reading of the Biblical rationalization of slavery reveals that such a rationalization reduces itself to an ideological myth established in order to maintain the power of the ruling class through exploitation for monetary interests.

Langston Hughes, an influential African-American poet and intellectual, also applied elements of Marxist literary criticism, revealing that Christianity becomes an artificial construct
for the white regime. As Saddik Gohar observes “Langston Hughes, who was attracted to Marxism in the thirties [...] found in Socialist Realism an appropriate means of poetic expression.” While Hughes “did not officially join political parties [...] [he] found in the Marxist/Socialist ideology a broader horizon for black struggle against white oppression.” Having uncovered the self-serving double-standard of certain Christian principles, Hughes attempts to represent the general deception his race feels. As Mary Beth Culp states, “Langston Hughes lived basically in terms of the external world and in unison with it, making himself one with his people and refusing to stand apart as an individual,” meaning that Hughes strives to eliminate personal bias and achieve an accurate representation of the situation as a whole. As Culp continues “His poetry reflects collective states of mind as if they were his own.” Much of his poetry, as a result, has a pointed fury that both shocks and bites readers with a traditional Christian sensibility, because “In his poetry, he expresses the rising black consciousness and racial pride dismantling narratives of submission [...] undermining the traditional image of what blacks were forced to think of themselves.”

In the poem “Christ in Alabama,” Hughes undermines the hidden ideology. Culp provides context for the importance of this specific poem, saying “Hughes’ first reading of the poem at the University of North Carolina on November 21, 1931, caused threats of violence from whites. The poem itself was written to protest violence against blacks which was weighing heavily on Hughes’ mind.” Jumping into the text, the first stanza reads “Christ is a nigger, / Beaten and black: / Oh, bare your back!” Hughes shows that as a victim, blacks relate to Christ, or rather Christ suffers as do the blacks currently. However the third line shows a drastic shift of style in the narration, representing the shouts of violent whites. The aggressive, racist, and unnamed speaker yells that Christ is about to receive lashings. The second stanza furthers the
comparison: “Mary is His mother: / Mammy of the South, / Silence your mouth.” The poem begins to bite conservative Christian themes more hurtfully. Langston Hughes creates a tension or duality of interpretation in this stanza. As a political activist, Hughes opposed the idea of the mammy pacifist figure. Playing into the concept of Marx’s ideological misrepresentation of reality, the “mammy” constitutes another artificial social construct seeming to be carefully calculated in order to pacify and deceive the populace about the true, underlying condition. If this trope of the Mammy (only tangent related to the quite reverence associated with Mary) receives scrutiny, the loud-mouthed narrator the poem will interject with the harsh lines “Silence your mouth.” Through scary association, Hughes juxtaposes Mary with Mammy, then revealing that the Mammy is a sham, thereby implying the same about Mary. In other words, the sacred humility and gentleness reverenced by Christian followers no long stands as an ideal. Hughes takes the Mary off the pedestal, as well as her virtues.

Continuing through the poem, Hughes writes “God is His Father: / White Master above / Grant Him your love.” This nuanced treatment of the trinity brilliantly, if shockingly, illustrates the role whites have forced upon blacks. Again, the duality of the narrator becomes apparent, but this time the rudeness blurs in earlier, suggesting that there are not two narrators, but rather that only one person has been talking all along. “God is His Father” representing a standard, Christian statement commonly read in religious texts. However “White Master above” blatantly introduces the issue of the color line to the authority of religion. If the head of the trinity takes a side on the racial battle, the implications are that an essentialist argument (that whites are naturally superior) wins. Hughes, of course, does not accept the essentialist line of thought, thus he says in forceful, brutal fashion “Grant Him your love.” The tone in this line shifts to brutality
because it implies that a black should grant full love to his white slave master—a grotesque and repulsive image.

Finally, with the fourth and final stanza, Hughes unleashes the full brunt of his fury. He writes “Most holy bastard / Of the bleeding mouth, / Nigger Christ / On the cross / Of the South.” While on the strictly surface level it appears that Hughes criticizes and insults Christ, he actually does not. Rather, Hughes critiques the role into which blacks have been forced. He shows that the white treatment of black parallels the treatment Christ suffered. While the pro-slavery whites may hurl obscene insults at the African-Americans, those same epithets have also been thrown at the central figure of Christian belief. Those who participate in racial violence against the underdog morph into anti-Christians. While Hughes does not attempt to redefine religion, he employs it in metaphor to show how white society has collapsed, completely adulterating its own ideals and teachings.

Religion—for Hughes—abandons the blacks. The desertion, however, does not occur because Hughes or other authors claim God does not exist. No, instead it reveals that Christians have deserted religion, because they have degraded it to justify unholy practices. Instead of inspiring devotion to God, religion as applied to the slaves, attempts to inspire devotion to the slave owner. As Culp explained “He views religion in the larger context of black culture, presenting it variously as a source of strength for the oppressed, an opiate of the people, the religion of slavery, and an obstacle to emancipation.” The first two variants (as source of strength and an opiate), reiterates that Hughes’s quarrel is not attached to Christ. Culp repeats this key point citing an interview with Hughes: “I grew up,” he recounts “in a not very religious family, but I had a foster aunt who saw that I went to church [...]. There’s great beauty in the mysticism of much religious writing and great help there—but I also think we live in a world ...
of solid earth and vegetables and a need for jobs and a need for housing.” So his real fight deals with the perversion inherent to the false “religion of slavery” which becomes an “obstacle” to obtaining necessities such as employment and food.

In summary, we may synthesize the work of Hurston, Haynes, and Hughes to explain the religious identity crisis that plagues African-American author’s in Christianity. Zora Neale Hurston’s protagonist Janie proceeds throughout the entire story appearing to contemplate God, but finding no answers. She then stops looking up, and instead gets down to earth. While she does not at any point begin to accuse God of negligence, Janie does suggest through her behavior that all must press on alone without counting upon divine intervention. In the classic upbeat fashion of Hurston, Janie simply learns to express and assert herself, making the best she can of her situation. Hughes feels a deeper disconnect with Christianity, yet like Hurston, Hughes does not condemn Christian beliefs per se. Instead, what Hughes finds the most aggravating is the double standard of whites. Instead of living in peace, the whites who participated in slavery, lynching, and cultural oppression through the Jim Crow laws antagonize Christ, abandoning his philosophies to opt for self-interest. Hughes, therefore, adopts a Marxist philosophy of art, in which poetry works to expose the misconceptions and deceits of the dominant cultural influences. Black authors struggle to come to terms with a seemingly empty religion thrust upon them by a hostile and oppressive racial force driven by a biased god (lower-case), as shown by Haynes. They are unable to find solace in Christianity due to the poor performance of the believers; thus, racist white Christians made God bad because they rejected their own preached practices. They may not claim a holier than thou stance. As a prophet in a sacred text of one specific Christian denomination summarizes,
I [...] would not suffer that ye should suppose that ye are more righteous than the Gentiles [non-believers] shall be. For behold, except ye shall keep the commandments of God ye shall all likewise perish; and because of the words which have been spoken ye need not suppose that the gentiles are utterly destroyed (Book of Mormon, 111).
Works Cited


