

ABSTRACT

The Spiritual Journey to Self-Actualization
in Zora Neale Hurston's *Seraph on the Suwanee*

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Although critics pay much attention to Zora Neale Hurston's religious discourse in most of her novels, they fail to discuss religion in her last novel, *Seraph on the Suwanee*. Reflection on the aspects of religion in Hurston's previous novels provides a framework through which to understand *Seraph*, specifically concerning the character development of both Jim and Arvay. Abraham Maslow's theories of self-actualization also provide a useful framework in which to understand the spiritual dimension of Hurston's treatment of character and agency. A detailed analysis of *Seraph* reveals Hurston's specific concern in character development with the spiritual journey to achieve vision, which she explicitly explains in *The Sanctified Church*. Examining her final novel through these two frameworks reveals the significance of Hurston's understanding of spirituality in self-actualization, which enlightens the characterization of Jim by revealing that Hurston presents Jim as a self-actualized individual through whom Arvay eventually achieves self-actualization.

The Spiritual Journey to Self-Actualization
in Zora Neale Hurston's *Seraph on the Suwanee*

by

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Complicated Hurston in Context

“Given Hurston’s own propensity for ‘feather-bed resistance’ and for playing with (and to) her listeners, it would be naïve to expect anything but complication. The more information we gather about Hurston, it seems, the less definitive she becomes.”

- Karla Kaplan *A Life in Letters*

In her introduction to a collection of Zora Neale Hurston’s letters, Kaplan sums up the writing and life of Hurston in perhaps the most accurate way: complication. She even poses the possibility that Hurston could be “American literature’s most controversial writer” (26). Indeed, Hurston’s life and writing, as evidenced through the letters in Kaplan’s biography, provoke controversy. Hurston, however, seems not only to accept this reputation, but also to engender it consistently, even through the final writing she publishes. Her final novel, *Seraph on the Suwanee* (1948), provokes perhaps the most unease and consternation in criticism of Hurston. In fact, many ignore the novel’s existence, seeking instead to focus on her other works that receive more praise and discussion. As with all of Hurston’s work, attention to *Seraph*, not despite its controversy, but because of it, produces fascinating insights concerning Hurston’s writing. As Kaplan states, “perhaps Hurston fascinates us so because she [refuses] to be pigeonholed” (20). Toni Cade Bambara writes in the “Forward” to *The Sanctified Church* that “the woman just would not behave. She had a mission. Knew what her work in this world was. Pursued it” (9). The period in which Hurston writes contains many factors that contribute to the mission she pursued in her writing. Her degree of

involvement in the Harlem Renaissance in particular provides helpful information into what she later expresses in most of her novels.

Hurston's position and ideals in the Harlem Renaissance accord with her controversial character and writing style. Kaplan gives a helpful summary about the diversity of the Harlem Renaissance in her biography of Hurston, pointing out how the movement "did not coalesce around a simple or unified vision," with there existing "as many points of disagreement as there were of agreement among Harlem Renaissance intellectuals, especially over art's social role and the place of experimental aesthetic techniques" (46). Similar to other New Negro artists, Hurston shares a desire to utilize the social role of art. Although many New Negro artists of the Harlem Renaissance work to achieve "accurate representations of blacks" in order to "turn the tide of American racism," Hurston differs in how accurately detailed she desires her representations to be. Hurston and her closest friends believe "that 'accuracy' entailed a willingness to explore *all* aspects of African American life, not just those that whites were likely to accept" (46). Desiring to write the truth about her race, Hurston joins a smaller group of artists who focus on portraying African Americans in their truest light – strengths, weaknesses and all. One of the earliest forms where this appears is through Hurston's involvement in the publication of *Fire!!*, a single-issue magazine that contained content drastically different from the most popular African American periodical of the time, *The Crisis*. Hurston's presence in *Fire!!* reveals the beginning of a career that continues to subvert, to complicate, and to create questioning and confusion among her readers.

In addition to portraying African Americans accurately, Hurston expresses a desire to depict and explore the reasoning behind the actions of general humanity. In

Dust Tracks on a Road, Hurston writes that her “interest lies in what makes a man or a woman do such-and-so, regardless of his color,” expressing how “human beings...[react] pretty much the same to the same stimuli” (171). As Kaplan correctly describes, Hurston is “first and foremost a storyteller, with profound appreciation for the power of a well-crafted tale” (35). Despite culture’s attempts to impose on Hurston the need to “write about the Race Problem” (*Dust Tracks* 171), she desires to “tell a story the way [she wants], or rather the way the story [tells] itself” (*Dust Tracks* 171). Hurston admits her inability to choose her stories, crediting her inspiration to “the force from somewhere in Space which commands [her] to write in the first place,” which she says burdens her with the “agony...[of] bearing an untold story inside” (*Dust Tracks* 175-76). Therefore, despite critics’ tendency to dismiss her last novel due to its lack of black characters, Hurston’s decision to use white characters in *Seraph* accords quite accurately with Hurston the storyteller.

Critics often create unnecessary problems concerning the race of Hurston’s characters. Although *Their Eyes Were Watching God* invokes its own controversies for critics to attack, enough marked similarities exist between female protagonists Janie and Arvay to dismiss the fretfulness over Arvay’s skin color. As Lillie P. Howard accurately acknowledges, Hurston, while changing the color of her characters’ skin in *Seraph*, “does not change her themes or environment in any significant way” (134). “Like all Hurston protagonists...[Arvay]...searches for self-actualization” (Howard 134). In a letter to Burroughs Mitchell in October of 1947, Hurston explains Arvay’s struggles as “a very common ailment,” which is “why [she decides] to write about it” (Kaplan 558). From this statement, Hurston’s concerns lay more with the common ailments of humanity than

the race of her characters. Thus the unnecessary apprehension towards *Seraph* over Hurston's choice of race needs to be eliminated by understanding Hurston's desire to see individuals as "duck by duck," as "God made them," with "skins [being] no measure of what [is] inside people" (*Dust Tracks* 191). Acknowledging this motivation behind the text aids readers in understanding Hurston's implications behind her storytelling.

Another way Hurston differs from most of the writers of the Harlem Renaissance resides in her attention to the South, and her lack of concern for the North. Nathan Grant illuminates how even in her autobiography, "Hurston is mostly silent about her experiences in the North" (93). Although Hurston works hard to obtain a position and "win acceptance into Harlem Renaissance society, her letters reveal a conscious decision to live on its outskirts, choosing 'the muck,' the turpentine camps, and the bayou over the literary salons of D.C. or New York's 'Striver's Row'" (Kaplan 25). Indeed, her attention to the South uncovers concerns and tensions that Hurston expresses through almost all of her novels. Patricia Yaeger describes the New Negro Renaissance as a "gathering of black artists and intellectuals who wrote so beautifully and so freely challenged stereotypes about black resistance and intellect, rewriting old southern monologues about race" (45). Hurston falls in the middle of this renaissance, becoming the female African American voice of the time through her writings. Yaeger suggests that Hurston's writing captures a new phenomenology: "the myriad ways the southern world was changing for African Americans born just after emancipation who were still harnessed by the scarcity and immobility of the sharecropping system" (35). Indeed, the period Hurston lives and writes is unique particularly for African Americans. The culture

that exists during the decades of Modernism in the South agrees considerably with Hurston's consistent themes concerned with tension over gender, class, race and religion.

Peter Kerry Powers describes the period in which Hurston writes as a time of "tremendous upheaval in the American experience of both religion and gender" (229). He walks through the transformation on American Protestantism caused by industrialization, urbanization, immigration, debates between modernists and fundamentalists, and the diverse entertainments and opportunities of city life. Moreover, Powers asserts that African Americans felt this upheaval the most, "as both an opportunity and a cause for anxiety" (229). Many of the writers of the New Negro Art Movement "viewed the traditions of the church with some dis-ease, if not suspicion, wondering whether those traditions impeded rather than enhanced the possibility of race achieving "self-conscious manhood" (230). Hurston, unlike many of the writers of the Harlem Renaissance, grew up in the Deep South, raised by a southern preacher. Her perspective differs significantly from that of her cohorts. As Powers rightfully acknowledges, Hurston perhaps contains the "closest view of the migration and its religious pulses" (230), therefore revealing the reasoning for a closer examination of religion in her works: "Hurston's suspicions that the Christianity of her youth was a weak and tepid – not to say unmanly – answer to problems facing African Americans clarifies the degree to which this was a central feature of the discourse on gender, race, and religion during the period among New Negroes in general" (230). Powers, concerned with the relationship between gender and religion in Hurston's work, uses Harold Segel's research of modernism that evidences "an obsession with physical power and mastery," displayed in writers as diverse as Nietzsche, Bergson, and Teddy Roosevelt (242).

Powers illuminates Segel's acknowledgement that "this physical imperative issued in criticisms of organized religion, especially Christianity...as effeminate or unmanly" (242). As Powers continues this examination of the relationship between Christianity and masculinity, his research on the religious milieu at the time proves that attention must be paid to the religious implications in Hurston's works. While many religious critiques exist on most of Hurston's work, *Seraph* receives little attention in regards to its religious implications. Deemed her most problematic novel, *Seraph* either draws attention for its tensions over gender, class and occasionally race, or it repels consideration by critics due to its deviation from expectations placed on Hurston based upon her previous writing. Whether dismissing or attacking *Seraph* for its implications of gender, class and race, the majority of work on the novel fails to acknowledge or study the aspects of religion that *Seraph* contains.

The lack of attention to religious implications in *Seraph* appears surprising when considering the discussion of her other novels that so strongly focuses on religion. An overview of the critical attention to *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1934), *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), *Moses, Man of the Mountain* (1939), and *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942) reveals ideas of Hurston that correlate throughout much of her writing. Critics repeatedly discuss ideas in these novels that expose religion throughout Hurston's work in various ways: evidence of her past experience with religion; the interconnection of religion with issues of class, gender and race; the effects of modernism on the traditions and beliefs of African Americans; and Hurston's employment and subversion of language and the text of scripture through her expression of religion. All of these ideas contribute to a theme that dominates much of Hurston's work: self-actualization. The correlation of

ideas concerning religion, which leads to Hurston's concern for self-actualization, appears not only in the four previously mentioned novels, but also in *Seraph*.

Abraham Maslow's definition of self-actualization proves most helpful in analyzing the theme that appears throughout so much of Hurston's work. Although Hurston writes *Seraph* before Maslow publishes his theories of self-actualization, the study and attention to the idea exists long before even Hurston's time. Maslow acknowledges that the idea of the "tendency to growth" appears to be a concern among diverse thinkers from Aristotle to Bergson, as well as psychiatrists, psychoanalysts, and psychologists like Goldstein, Rank, Jung, Horney, Fromm, May and Rogers (*Motivation and Personality* 124). Kurt Goldstein first coins the term "self-actualization" in 1939, around the time that Henry Murray initially recognizes "achievement [...] as an important source of human motivation in the late 1930s" ("Expectancy-value Theory"). Maslow's book that describes self-actualization, published only five years after Hurston's final novel, likewise continues the concern with motivation and personality that dominates discussion by scholars of psychology during that time. Although Maslow's theories appear after Hurston's publication of *Seraph*, the fuel behind his "specific and limited" definition of self-actualization exists in the context Hurston writes most of her novels. Understanding this context explains Hurston's seeming prediction of Maslow's conclusions in the expression of self-actualization in her writing. As Herbert L. Petri clarifies, despite the variation of the theories concerning motivation and personality, "most have in common the idea that human behavior is at least partially motivated by a need to become as much as one can possibly become" ("Self-Actualization"). Maslow's helpful definition specifically regards self-actualization as embodying "the ultimate

need” of humanity, reflecting an “intrinsic growth of what is already in the organism, or more accurately of what *is* the organism itself” (*Motivation and Personality* 183). His description proves helpful when explained in full:

It refers to man’s desire for self-fulfillment, namely, to the tendency for him to become actualized in what he is potentially. This tendency might be phrased as the desire to become more and more what one is, to become everything that one is capable of becoming. The specific form that these needs will take will of course vary greatly from person to person. In one individual it may take the form of the desire to be an ideal mother, in another it may be expressed athletically, and in still another it may be expressed in painting pictures or in inventions. (*Motivation and Personality* 91-2)

Maslow’s detailed theories of self-actualization provide a helpful lens to investigate the religious implications in Hurston’s novels, particularly in *Seraph*.

In order to understand Hurston’s concerns with self-actualization and its link to religion, it is helpful first to provide a framework for both the theories of self-actualization as well as the religious language and context that Hurston chooses to write. Maslow himself connects self-actualization to religion through what he calls “peak-experiences” (*Religions* xi). Although Maslow prefers to “take the word ‘religious’ out of its narrow context of the supernatural, churches, rituals, dogmas, professional clergyman, etc., and distribute it in principle throughout the whole of life,” he recognizes that religion becomes “a state of mind achievable in almost any activity of life, if this activity is raised to a suitable level of perfection” (*Religions* xii). Maslow refers to this achievable state of mind as a way of becoming “god-like” through understanding the world as inevitably good and just, while seeing evil “as a product of limited or selfish vision and understanding” (*Religions* 64). Following this explanation, he directly connects this explicitly religious experience to how “self-actualizing people do at times

react to the world” (*Religions* 64). He provides examples and characteristics of peak-experiences that compare easily with the transformation that occurs in a self-actualized individual. For example, “the dichotomy or polarity between humility and pride tends to be resolved in the peak-experiences and also in self-actualizing people” (*Religions* 68). Maslow’s correlation of religious experiences with self-actualization further supports the collaboration that Hurston employs in her writing concerning the two areas: the spiritual transformation of self-actualization. For Hurston, self-actualization embodies and depends upon spiritual implications, as evidenced not only in *Seraph* but also in the critical discussion of her other novels.

In her writings of *The Sanctified Church*, Hurston describes various aspects of African Americans’ religion: spirituals and neo-spirituals, conversions and visions, shouting and the sanctified church. Her explanations of spirituality in these writings clearly reflect the content she includes in her novels. Although critics acknowledge the presence of religious implications in Hurston’s other novels, most fail to recognize the crucial role religion plays in *Seraph*, which blinds them to the existence of her common theme of self-actualization. Maslow’s theories provide a framework not only to examine the theme of self-actualization throughout *Seraph*, but also to recognize how Hurston employs religion in order to illustrate that theme. A detailed analysis of *Seraph* reveals a definite connection between Maslow’s theories of self-actualization and Hurston’s description of the spiritual journey to achieve vision, which she explicitly explains in *The Sanctified Church*. Examining her final novel through these two frameworks reveals the connection between Hurston’s understanding of the spirituality of self-actualization as she craftily displays it through the character of Arvey Meserve. Maslow’s understanding

of self-actualization enlightens the characterization of Jim by revealing that Hurston presents Jim as a self-actualized individual through whom Arvey eventually achieves self-actualization. Maslow's elaboration on the hindrances and threats to self-actualization prove helpful when examining Arvey's journey towards spiritual growth, which results in her self-actualization. Hurston interestingly employs religion in *Seraph* in a dualistic manner, showing how it can be both hindering as well as in sympathy with Arvey's self-actualization. The application of Maslow's theory combined with an acknowledgement of Hurston's attention to religion and its connection to other issues enlightens an interpretation of *Seraph* that more readily accords with the Hurston that appears in her other novels.

Tension Over Gender, Class, and Race

Hurston's final novel, *Seraph on the Suwanee*, invokes varied debate and proves difficult to interpret. Unlike most of her work, however, *Seraph* receives little praise and significantly more disapproval. A few of the many objections to *Seraph* involve what appears to be Hurston's abandonment of expressed values and ideals in earlier writings. Her writing of *Seraph* frustrates previous efforts by critics to categorize Hurston as an advocate for the African American race, for women, or for the working class. This criticism, which desires to categorize and define Hurston's writing agenda, receives little satisfaction as the novel's content leads in the opposite direction of its audience's expectations. These expectations, subjectively based on Hurston's previous work, complicate interpretations of *Seraph*, and often conclude in a mere dismissal of the novel.

One of the greatest faults that criticism maintains against Hurston arises from the fact that one of Hurston's most celebrated themes appears almost absent in *Seraph* due to

its focus on white characters: African American folklore and life. John Lowe points out how critics accuse Hurston of betraying her African-American roots (105) and Judith St. Clair acknowledges that other critics blame Hurston for “turning her back on her own racial heritage and feminist convictions in the novel” (38). In fact, one of Hurston’s main biographers dismisses the novel as unworthy of attention, stating that Hurston “turned her back on the source of her creativity...the celebration of black folklife” (Hemenway 307). *Seraph* appears lacking when compared to culturally rich novels like *Mules and Men* (1935) or *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937). Even Hurston’s *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942), critically debated and questioned for its lack of veracity, includes more celebration of the folk culture than *Seraph* contains. Furthermore, feminist critics who admire Hurston’s earlier work instead express disappointment towards *Seraph*. These critics who love Hurston’s protagonist Janie in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* simultaneously ignore *Seraph* because of Arvay’s character, “the whining white protagonist...[who] seems to evade the responsibilities of individuality and self-knowledge by cravenly clinging to the demeaning refuge of domestic obedience” (St. Clair 38). Additional criticism simply attributes the writing of *Seraph* to nothing more than Hurston’s need for a quick publication and some quick cash. Christopher Rieger acknowledges the reception of the work as a “much-maligned [novel]...routinely disparaged by critics...as a blatant, flawed attempt to cash in by appealing to a wider audience and even to Hollywood” (105), a viewpoint Hemenway supports through his evidence concerning Hurston’s financial needs at the time. Additional unrest arises concerning Hurston’s character development: Are readers supposed to value Arvay’s narrative? Does the text validate Jim’s views and actions? Why are the main characters

white? What is the author function in *Seraph*? Where is the experimentation in form that Hurston's other novels contain and celebrate? Other problematic issues exist with Hurston's portrayal of gender, class and race: violent rape scenes, the passivity of Arvay's character, the harmonious relationship between white master and black slave, the seemingly cyclical storyline, and the lack of Hurston's common experimentation in form all engender anxiety in criticism.

Undoubtedly, the book contains problematic issues that demand consideration, despite the tendency to "scurry across its surface in consternation" (St. Clair 39). More recent criticism seeks to reexamine and identify what Hurston's works truly reveal her values to be, rather than the interpretations earlier criticism imposes on her. As John Lowe observes, seeking to "[contribute] to a rehabilitation of the novel's reputation" (106), critics attempt various interpretations of *Seraph*, which range all across the previously mentioned issues: gender, class and race. Often, any extensive amount of work in one area requires a crossover into discussion on another area, revealing the interconnectedness of these issues. Gender issues exist on many pages of the novel, appearing primarily in marital relationships. Violent rape scenes generate an uneasiness in readers due to the fact that Hurston depicts her characters as interpreting the acts not as rape, but as part of initiating, maintaining and correcting marital relations. Although Jim acts violently and oppressively towards Arvay, other characters tend to favor him, and by the conclusion of the novel, he seems to obtain what he desires. Some critics attempt to redeem *Seraph* by redefining the novel's conclusion in regards to Arvay's character. St. Clair applauds Hurston's protagonist as "a woman who resists victimization" and "throws off oppression, [choosing] the burden that she will carry...with courage, dignity and

delight” (40). Lowe likewise views the conclusion favorably by indicating that Arvay be viewed “as a freshly empowered woman” who, “without knowing whether she and Jim will ever reconcile...feels confident in her new-found knowledge of herself” (121). Indeed, the implications of Arvay’s character development must be addressed in any criticism of the book. Attention to this character development involves Arvay’s relationship with Jim, which reveals tensions in both gender and class.

The gender implications of the novel often support arguments concerning class issues. Many problems in Jim and Arvay’s marriage derive from Arvay viewing herself as inferior to Jim. Furthermore, Hurston uses Jim as a means of increasing Arvay’s status in society. Although much critical debate already focuses on Arvay’s character development, Adrienne Akins contributes to the discussion by focusing on the implications concerning socioeconomic class. Akins explores how “Arvay’s inferiority complex is slowly replaced by a mindset that parallels Jim’s own,” moving her into the status of aristocracy (32). This transformation, Akins shows, occurs as Arvay “develops from an insecure and sometimes hateful ‘Cracker’ to a more confident and kind, but also more manipulative and condescending, ‘aristocrat’” (32-3). Through this interpretation, Akins attempts to supply an answer to gender issues in the text, particularly in regards to the rape scenes. She insinuates that Hurston’s intentions through “Jim’s violent exercise of power defines their relationship, giving his subsequent actions the appearance of kindness despite his own responsibility for the circumstances which cause Arvay to fear” (33). Although Akins mentions the kindness that already exists in Jim and the growth that takes place in Arvay, she focuses more on the condescension, manipulation and selfishness present in each of their attitudes by the end of the book. To Akins, Jim’s

actions derive from a “[demonstration of] kindness that seems mixed with a drive for power and control” (34). Additionally, her summary of Arvay’s growth resides in the conclusion that she “finally overcomes her debilitating sense of inferiority” (38). Akins translates Arvay’s reference to Ruth 1:16 as Arvay’s choice to join Jim in a New Southern aristocracy. Akins thus interprets the tensions in the novel all through a socioeconomic lens.

Christopher Rieger’s interpretation of the novel includes Akins’ focus on class, but more broadly encircles other tensions concerning race, gender, and the destruction of nature for profit. His explanation for the ambiguity of these issues resides “in the nature imagery and the interactions of Jim and Arvay with the natural world” (106). He claims that “the ambiguity dissipates as Arvay, like Janie, successfully completes a quest for personal enlightenment and empowerment” (106-107). The strength of Rieger’s argument exists in his focus on the growth in Arvay’s character. Though Rieger’s argument depends heavily upon the interconnectedness of the tensions in the book, it remains limited in its interpretation due to his agenda concerning nature.

Other criticism focuses on the implications of race throughout the book, or the lack thereof. Despite the dominance of white characters, attempted interpretations seek Hurston’s intentions behind the role of the limited African American characters in the book. The interactions between Jim and the black servants contain hints of the plantation romance story. At times, the black characters even take on the identity of the white characters. Joe refers to himself as part of the Meserve family (252). Arvay calls Belinda her daughter (115). Hurston repeatedly portrays Jim as the beloved paternal figure who helps a community of different races. The harmony between races continues

when African Americans express their gratitude and appreciation towards Kenny, who shares a piece of their culture with the world after learning it from Joe (251).

Additionally, despite the lines between races that faintly demarcate pieces of the novel, the conclusion of the story takes place in a setting Hurston portrays as ideal, where African Americans captain their own ships, implying that race does not matter in that world. In his article “Waste and Whiteness: Zora Neale Hurston and the Politics of Eugenics,” Chuck Jackson rightfully acknowledges the interconnectedness between issues by suggesting “that *Seraph*’s racial and gender problematics can open up the text to further critical assessment and cultural critique” (639). He offers that “the intertwining of race and gender with bodily and psychological impurities suggests that a turn towards psychoanalysis might assist in interpreting [*Seraph*]” (640). Other critics, such as Susan Edwards Meisenhelder, prefer reading *Seraph* as Hurston writing subversively of “a white world whose exploitative hierarchies deny full humanity to all people – male and female, black and white” (115). Her critical approach to the novel adopts an interpretation of “victims who accept their saddling and whose energy is expended only in jockeying with one another for favor with their rider” (115). In other words, the novel’s treatment of race, like its handling of gender and class, invokes unease in *Seraph*’s readers.

Although the attention to gender, class and race accords with most criticism concerning Hurston’s other novels, the absence of another common issue requires attention. Criticism that focuses so heavily on the interconnection of these three issues in *Seraph* surprisingly neglects the issue of religion. As St. Clair argues that “critics of Hurston should know her principles, processes, and publications well enough to avoid a

facile dismissal of this novel” (39), so also critics should pay attention to her portrayal of religion in *Seraph*, an issue blatantly present in her other novels. An accurate examination of Hurston’s work, which focuses on gender, class, race *and* religion, reveals Hurston’s utilization of these areas to accomplish a theme that reappears to some degree in each of her novels: self-actualization.

“*A Life-Long Concern with Spirituality*”: *Religion in Hurston’s Work*

In order to better examine religion in *Seraph* under a critical lens, it is helpful to provide an overview of the critical attention to religion in previous Hurston novels. The following works are most helpful in this endeavor: *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* (1934), *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), *Moses, Man of the Mountain* (1939), and *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942). The critical work on these novels reveals a correlation of ideas that Hurston expresses throughout most of her writing, which is evident also in *Seraph*. The criticism reveals repeated, connected ideas that echo Hurston’s past experience with religion; reveal the interconnection of religion with issues of class, gender and race; expose the effects of modernism on the traditions and beliefs of African Americans; and reveal how Hurston employs and subverts language and the text of scripture through her expression of religion. All of these ideas, as explored by critics of these four novels, inevitably contribute to an understanding of Hurston’s most dominant theme: the spiritual transformation of self-actualization.

Many critics not only acknowledge but also strongly depend upon Hurston’s past experience with religion when discussing its implications within her pages. Hurston’s first novel, *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*, shows her beginning with a familiar setting filled with familiar characters. She fictively tells a story focused on the character of John Pearson,

who strongly resembles her own father as a southern black preacher who behaves contrary to the text he so eloquently and creatively delivers in his sermons. Later stories in her autobiography, *Dust Tracks*, likewise expose similarities between John's wife, Lucy Pearson and Hurston's mother, revealing the source for some of Hurston's material in *Jonah's Gourd Vine*. In addition to pulling from individuals in her past, Hurston similarly uses religious traditions from her own childhood in her writing. To support her theory of Hurston's employment of the "gospel impulse" in *Their Eyes*, Laura Dubek provides a helpful history of Hurston's attention to spiritual traditions, as learned in her father's Baptist church (110). As Dubek points out, Hurston travels to New York and engages in debate with Alain Locke, James Weldon Johnson, and others over "the proper way to present the spirituals" (Dubek 110), revealing Hurston's specific attention to the role of religion in art. Dubek's criticism of the novel illustrates how Hurston attempts to accomplish her agenda by utilizing her religious history and spiritual traditions. George Ciuba likewise credits Hurston as creating a hermeneutical challenge in *Jonah's Gourd Vine* by drawing upon her heritage of African American preaching (119). Although critics should not rely solely on Hurston's religious past for conclusive interpretations of her work, an acknowledgement of this history provides a helpful context through which to examine the implications behind her writing. With the exception of the work done on *Seraph*, most criticism reflects this, integrating Hurston's religious past into the context of the discussion of her work.

Few critics interpret Hurston's works through only the lens of religion. Religion is merely one portion of the many-faced diamond that reflects the concerns Hurston depicts in her writing. To focus narrowly on any one of these sides, without at least

acknowledging the other issues, results in an interpretation ignorant of Hurston's full concerns and the varied expressions of her writing. Peter Kerry Powers' article, "God of Physical Violence, Stopping at Nothing: Masculinity, Religion, and Art in the Work of Zora Neale Hurston" provides a good model of how one might explore more specifically the interconnectedness between Hurston's concerns with gender and religion. He begins by addressing Hurston's ideas of masculinity, which critics largely neglect out of a desire to focus on her views of femininity. Powers argues persuasively that, in agreement with her "rejection of feminine stereotypes," Hurston perceives masculinity as something "often desirable," due to the fact that "men possess and display power" (231). This power, "whether sexual, geographic, literary, or religious," is likely something Hurston desires for herself (Powers 231). Through the lens of these ideas concerning Hurston's views of masculinity, Powers examines Hurston's literary men. Using as evidence a letter Hurston wrote to James Weldon Johnson, Powers claims that John Pearson, to Hurston, "exemplifies the very folk culture from which her creativity springs" (238). Powers' evaluation of the tension between John's moral self and natural self further illuminates how gender and religion interrelate for Hurston. Powers fleshes out his theory on gender and religion through his readings not only of *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, but also of Hurston's other novels, acknowledging how "most of Hurston's men fall into this dynamic wherein physical prowess [...] determines creative power" (240): Moses "is both a warrior and a conjure man who can make nature obey him" (240); Jim Meserve in *Seraph* is "a man who acts upon the world to change it" (241); and Tea-Cake in *Their Eyes* embodies the masculine traits Hurston indicates that she finds attractive (241). Powers' rereading of Hurston's literary men leads him to a rethinking of Hurston's

literary women, which “requires more careful cognizance of the ways Hurston’s work decomposes regnant understandings of the masculine/feminine divide in her own day” (241). This suggestion by Powers proves useful when specifically analyzing the characters of *Seraph*, Jim and Arvay Meserve. Powers’ argument accurately connects the issues of gender and religion for Hurston, offering a new perspective for interpretation of any of her writing.

Regardless of the agenda of the critic, the interconnection of religion with other issues appears to be a reoccurring tactic in exploration of Hurston’s work. Nicholas Wallerstein, suggests that Hurston retells the story of Moses to portray the “silencing and subordination that confronts Miriam” as a symbol of the silencing and subordination of African American women (103). Wallerstein exposes the interconnection of religion, gender, class and race when he summarizes that Hurston depicts Miriam as unaware “of her place within the structures of power as they exist in her society, especially as they are manifested in the areas of race, gender, and class” (105). Wallerstein shows how Hurston displays class distinction through Miriam’s response to her encounter with Pharaoh’s daughter (105). In addition, Miriam is “socially marginalized” based on both her class and race (105). In regards to gender tension, he asserts that Miriam never receives respect from Moses due to her existence as a woman. Although evidence exists that disagrees with this interpretation, Wallerstein ties all of these areas to religion by concluding that Hurston’s novel “be seen as an interpretation of the Moses/Miriam biblical story from the perspective of the Black woman’s social location throughout American history” (Wallerstein 111). This examination, although narrow in focus and

lacking sufficient evidence, once again connects Hurston's attention to religion as crucial to any suggestions concerning race, class and gender.

Another idea seen in the criticism of Hurston's earlier work involves the effects of modernism on African American beliefs and traditions. Anthony Wilson addresses spirituality and modernity throughout *Jonah's Gourd Vine*. Wilson claims that "John's spirituality encounters two major disruptive forces," which each symbolize the challenges placed on African American religion by modernity (65). The first involves the "mingling of African religion with Lucy's orthodox Christianity" (65), which functions as a transitional point to the second problem. Wilson suggests that "the encroachment of the outside world, enabling of travel, and the destruction of community embodied in the symbol of the train" likewise assaults John's African American religion (65). Wilson concludes that "modernization, to [Hurston], means that self and community must dissolve, and despite the ideals of many of her modernist contemporaries, the dissolution cannot be countered through visions and ideas" (77). Wilson's interpretation of Hurston's views of modernity requires a discourse that begins with Hurston's portrayal of religion in the novel. Wilson's explanation of the interconnectedness between spirituality and modernity additionally uncovers Hurston's attention to issues of gender, class and race. Wilson's interpretation exposes Hurston's early attention to a multitude of concerns rather than presenting a single agenda on a single issue or subject.

Erik D. Curren also focuses on modernity by exploring the negative effects specifically of a white modernist community on the traditions and beliefs of African Americans, which he suggests appears through Hurston's use of religious experience and gothic horror in *Their Eyes*. Curren claims that Hurston's use of the gothic functions as a

stand against white authoritarian ideals, which contradict and negatively affect African American folk belief and community. He further suggests that Hurston's ideal religion, as revealed through the novel, is more in touch with the natural world involving hoodoo/voodoo and Haitian roots. According to Curren, *Their Eyes* shows how folk community is not immune to the prejudices of white authoritarians during the modernist period due to the fact that, when threatened by outside forces, the folk community responds by displaying white attitudes. Curren's discussion of religion in the novel underlines what for him seems to be the greater issue of race problems. Once again, criticism on *Their Eyes* reveals the variety of issues that involves an interconnection to religion to some degree.

The idea most commonly seen in criticism of Hurston reflects a concern with Hurston's employment and subversion of language and its connection to religion. Many critics explore specifically the platforms Hurston uses to communicate and accomplish her purposes in her novels. Critics often identify these platforms, not surprisingly, as religious stages. Giving Hurston the occupational title of preacher, Ciuba draws on Hurston's knowledge of preaching to connect the importance of language with religion: "what Hurston preached was the very act of preaching, of undertaking the hermeneutical challenge to know the self by way of the spoken and written word" (119). Ciuba's interpretation focuses primarily on John's preaching and living of scripture itself. He compiles a well-rounded examination of language in the novel that includes John's mastery of language over Ned Crittenden, his expression of language that stems from the motivation of his love for Lucy, and his preaching of the Bible and attention to sermons based on the text, despite his inability to live what he preaches in his quest for selfhood.

Ciuba also pays attention to the tension between the written and the spoken word, a similar struggle Hurston faces through writing to celebrate her oral culture. John's dilemma comes through his inability to translate words into the actions of his life, which reveals how he imitates the life of the prophet Jonah: by living "at odds with the Word and his words [...] John calls for conversion but cannot achieve his own definitive change of heart" (126-27). Ciuba concludes that John "lives by neither Christian belief nor the faith of his African Ancestors" (127), a result Wilson blames on the changing world of modernity.

Karla F. C. Holloway's interpretation of *Their Eyes* recalls some of Ciuba's ideas of Hurston as preacher. Holloway points out that "Janie inherits the task of forging 'the text' of the sermon that her grandmother was unable to deliver because she was poor, black, female, and subject to abuse from each of these socio-political inscriptors" (134). Janie's ability to move past her grandmother's inability to preach through her "own text [...] ritualizes elements from Hurston's academic training, her religious convictions, and her skill as a storyteller" (128). As Holloway demonstrates, Janie's story is the "telling [of] the labor of her spiritual enablement and the transformational moment is accomplished by its evocation" (129). Ciuba and Holloway's similar arguments reflect the similarity in Hurston's treatment of religious themes across different novels.

This agreement extends to Deborah G. Plant's explanation of the structure of *Dust Tracks*. Similar to Hurston's final novel, *Dust Tracks* generates varied opinions and ideas concerning Hurston's writing. Critics argue over the degree of veracity in Hurston's so-called autobiography as they discover portions that disagree with the facts of Hurston's life. Despite the unrest over the sincerity of the novel, recent criticism

interprets *Dust Tracks* like most of Hurston's other novels - a work filled with subversion and creativity, designed and manipulated to fulfill Hurston's own purposes. As one of the critics who seeks to find coherency, Plant interprets *Dust Tracks* as Hurston's expression of the form of the folk sermon, crediting the novel's persona as being akin to the folk preacher, "a powerful individual" from the folk tradition into which Hurston was born (3). Like Ciuba, Plant asserts how "Hurston was indelibly impressed with the beliefs and practices of the Afro-American Southern Baptist religion tradition" (3). This claim supports the continual appearance of religion throughout Hurston's novels, even as it appears in her autobiography.

Plant's convincing argument begins through her evaluation of the style of the folk preacher, his calling to preach, his personality, and the structure of his folk sermon, which are all characteristics of leaders in the folk community. The characteristics of the folk preacher likewise reflect Hurston's own experiences as she portrays them throughout *Dust Tracks*. Hurston appears to validate her own calling as a folk preacher through her descriptions of her visions. The importance of this parallelism derives from the fact that Hurston "knew the forms and formulae, the why and wherefore of religious practices too well to use them totally unaware" (Plant 8). Through this examination, Plant acknowledges rightfully the link between Hurston's writing and the religious practices of the South. The coherency that Plant claims exists in *Dust Tracks* appears through her interpretation of the book as following the outline of the folk sermon. Much of the evidence for Plant's outline includes Hurston's use of ecclesiastical and biblical diction, which proves "the author's internalization of religious ritual, specifically that of the sermon," and how it "[influences] the structure and tone of the autobiography" (10).

Plant's elucidation of the folk sermon explains extensively how Hurston employs her writing platform as a means of preaching directly to her audience.

Dubek likewise identifies a different platform that Hurston uses for her expression of language and religion: jazz artist. Dubek claims that it is possible to gain a "fuller understanding of the ways a gospel aesthetic informs the literary work of writers long recognized as influenced by blues and jazz" (112). Dubek claims that Hurston "carries on the slave narrative tradition" in *Their Eyes* by "infusing it with the energies of the gospel, blues, and jazz impulses" (114). Hurston uses a tactic that also appears in her other novels, where she "[positions] and [repositions] her reader as a listener-participant in a dialogue that, like gospel music, demands to be heard and felt" (Dubek 120).

Dubek's translation of Hurston's employment of the gospel impulse joins the conversations of other critics who acknowledge Hurston's concern with language and its relation to religion.

These acknowledgements of a link in Hurston between language and religion further expose how she uses her platforms, whether preaching or singing, to retell biblical stories in a variety of ways, exposing her attention to and dependence upon scripture for the composition of her writings. *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, like many of Hurston's novels, references scripture beginning with its title. Based on Jonah 4:6-8, the title suggests the novel's content as a commentary or expansion of the scriptural reference. This biblical story provides a useful lens through which to examine Hurston's novel. After reluctantly following God's commands to prophesy to the inhabitants of Nineveh, the biblical character Jonah retreats outside of the city, sullen and bitter towards God's decision to relent from bringing judgment and disaster upon the people. After Jonah gladdens

momentarily from a plant that God provides as shade for his head, God appoints a worm to kill the plant. Jonah responds to this occurrence by preferring death over life. *Jonah's Gourd Vine* contains characters who interact with religious experiences and who use religious language throughout the entire plot and setting of the novel. Although differing interpretations exist concerning the parallelism between Jonah and Hurston's John Pearson, most critics rightfully acknowledge the need to address the obvious religious implications that Hurston expresses in her own version of *Jonah's Gourd Vine*.

Hurston's third novel likewise reveals how her writing connects to the text of scripture. *Moses, Man of the Mountain* (1939) explicitly retells the story of Moses, with some definite deviations and omissions from the biblical account. Similar to the discussion surrounding her other novels, criticism of *Moses* varies concerning issues of gender, class and race. The centrality of the biblical story undoubtedly illuminates the relation of religion to these issues. Maria Diedrich chooses to examine how Hurston's retelling of the biblical story specifically reflects black folk religion. Giving a helpful overview of the beliefs and adherences in black folk religion, Diedrich highlights pieces throughout the novel that mirror those same values. Diedrich points out that African Americans find hope in the story of Moses "by defining themselves as God's new chosen people" whose "bondage in America would soon come to an end" (176). Diedrich acknowledges the element of folklore in Hurston's first two novels, and likewise suggests that the 1939 novel is Hurston's "courageous endeavor to aesthetically re-create and document the complex theological, philosophical, and political potentials inherent in the Moses interpretation as it had developed in black folk religion since slavery times" (Diedrich 177). The framework for Diedrich's argument reflects Hurston's choice to use

a biblical story to accomplish her purposes, regardless of the degree to which she adheres or deviates from the details of scripture.

The parallelism of African Americans to the Hebrew people appears in other methods Hurston uses for retelling biblical stories. One such method involves the employment of nature as metaphorical language that links to the stories of scripture. A significant portion of criticism specifically links religion to nature, illuminating the function of trees as metaphors in *Their Eyes*. Glenda B. Weathers draws from the common practice of African Americans to use the metaphors of the Promised Land and Eden as ways to describe deliverance from the suffering of slavery. In her criticism that compares biblical trees and biblical deliverance in Hurston and Toni Morrison, Weathers examines the “knowledge-giving trees” in *Their Eyes* as conveying multiple ideas: “they posit knowledge of both good and evil,” which requires a tasting of the tree’s fruit to provide Janie with “the self-knowledge necessary for personal growth, redemption, and deliverance” (201-2). Throughout her explanation of this theory, Weathers relies heavily on references from Judeo-Christian mythologies, traditions and scriptures, revealing the connection of religion to the novel. While focusing primarily on the religious influences on the text, Weathers’ examination exposes the interconnection of religion with other issues, like gender and sexuality. She assumes that “Hurston replaces the legendary tree of knowledge, the apple tree, with an arguably more fitting symbol of the acquisition of carnal knowledge and sexual experience, the pear tree” (202). This observation accords quite well with the Hurston previously examined in *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*, who consistently mixes issues of gender with religion as she retells a biblical story. Ciuba’s criticism also contains allusions to the exodus that connect Hurston’s writing to scripture.

One example of these brief acknowledgements of retelling occurs when Ciuba interprets John's crossing the creek "as a version of the passage through the Red Sea and the flight of runaway slaves into a linguistic exodus" (122). These observations in criticism reveal the dependence of critics' interpretations on Hurston's attention to the text of scripture in her writing.

Hurston's attention to scripture, as evidenced through this overview of criticism, leads to her most dominant theme regarding self-actualization. Many critics use similarly related terms to summarize Hurston's content, but self-actualization seems to embody fully other ideas that imply growth and understanding of one's self. Maslow's theories of the term are the most elaborated and function quite usefully when considering Hurston's writing. As a part of his "Hierarchy of Needs," Maslow recognizes "the theoretical necessity for the postulation of some sort of positive growth or self-actualization tendency within the organism" (*Motivation and Personality* 124). Hurston appears to be tracing, in each of her novels, this desire in humanity for self-fulfillment. Indeed, as Maslow expresses, the specific form that these needs take differs depending on the character Hurston creates. A distinct similarity exists, however, in the content in that each seeks self-actualization throughout the course of his or her story. Hurston's novels follow this idea of self-actualization through the spiritual transformation, or lack thereof, which occurs in an individual. In his book, *Religions, Values and Peak Experiences*, Maslow broadens the idea of a religious experience as containing a "tendency to move more closely to a perfect identity, or uniqueness, or to the idiosyncrasy of the person or to his real self, to have become more a real person" (*Religions* 67). These "peak experiences," as Maslow renames them, directly connect to self-fulfillment, and can be

“considered a transient self-actualization of the person” (*Religions* 80). Maslow’s connection between peak-experiences and the self-actualization of a person appear frequently through Hurston’s novels as she identifies the spirituality of growth experiences.

Although critics use differing terms for the result of these experiences or transformations, the growth, understanding and fulfillment involved depend strongly on spiritual implications. While investigating the religious implications of Hurston’s writing in order to reach his conclusion, Ciuba’s criticism of *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* eventually moves toward the theme of the novel as something more than solely religion. He suggests that the book “ponders the very implications of orality and literacy for achieving selfhood” (120). Diedrich’s criticism of *Moses* points to a crucial aspect in beginning to interpret Hurston’s understanding of self-actualization. Her specific analysis of how Hurston portrays the character of God seems to agree with how Hurston portrays self-actualization in both *Dust Tracks* and *Seraph*. Most African Americans view God as a god of power, but as a god who “does not want to be bothered with man’s petty affairs” (Diedrich 179). She illuminates how Hurston’s book focuses not on God and his actions, but instead on man (Moses) and his actions, despite God’s degree of interaction, which often fails to exist. The novel’s concentration on Moses’ development reflects how the story “strictly follows the anthropocentric orientation of black folk religion, with one man learning to command the powers of heaven and earth, while God rests” (Diedrich 182). Although Moses refers to himself as God’s instrument, Diedrich points out that he certainly is not God’s “passive instrument” (184). Instead, Moses appears to be God’s “partner, and when they meet again to talk [...] it is a relationship of power joining

power” (Diedrich 182). Furthermore, rather than depending so much on God, Moses’ most direct influence comes from his two teachers, Mentu and Jethro. Concerning these two, Diedrich pays specific attention to a detail that most critics ignore: Hurston depicts Mentu and Jethro as being dark-skinned (181). Diedrich attributes Hurston’s novel, therefore, as an achievement that “[overcomes] the factional aspect of this folk view as it is represented in black sermons, songs and tales [...] thus [enabling] her readers to finally perceive the totality and richness of this central black metaphor, the roots of which reach much deeper than American slavery” (185). This achievement centralizes on Moses’ character development, and thus relates easily to Hurston’s other novels, which often focus on the transformation that takes place in central characters. Perhaps more explicitly than her other novels, *Moses* reflects Hurston’s choice to use ideas of religion as a strong tool in the development of her characters.

Their Eyes and *Dust Tracks* contain the most significant correlation to *Seraph* regarding the self-actualization of individuals. In her own explanation of *Their Eyes*, Hurston’s most widely read novel, Holloway usefully lists various ways that reflect the success and popularity of the work. She points out how it “has achieved what the record industry would call ‘cross-over’ success [...] read on university campuses across disciplines and discussed in suburban and urban book clubs across economic and class boundaries (127-28). Furthermore, *Their Eyes* not only is requested reading in women’s prisons but also is assigned reading in high school English classes, and “its author [...] is hailed as the foremother of contemporary black women’s literature” (Holloway 128). In addition to the fact that *Their Eyes* achieves the most success of all of Hurston’s work, it also receives perhaps the most critical attention in regards to how religion is at work

within its pages. Holloway herself claims that an understanding behind the book's popularity can be achieved through "the eschatological vision within the novel" (128):

This vision imagistically portrays the ascension of spirit and its taking up residence in a figurative upper room. The popular appeal of this novel may be in some measure a response to its figurative construction of a spiritual place that is both accessible and near. Within this perspective, the literary ancestry that Hurston has come to embody owes some of its generation to her authorship of this spiritual potential. (128)

Holloway provides an enlightening explanation for *Their Eyes* through her focus on the transformation that occurs in Janie from body or self to spirit. As Janie achieves this "metaphorical essence of spirit," the result of "her transformation is locus – a place for her own spiritual life" (Holloway 127). While explaining the source of the spiritual transformation that takes place in Janie, Holloway, like many critics before and after her, crosses over to include an explanation of the gender issues that also reflects socio-political implications in the novel. She claims that it is only through Janie's distancing of herself from the economic exchange implicit in her first two relationships that Janie "enables the development of her own voice and subsequently her spiritual empowerment" (130). In contrast to her oppressors, the key catalysts for Janie's transformation are those who love her – Nanny, Phoeby and especially Tea Cake. Holloway points out a few moments where Janie's soul is mentioned in the text in reference to how Tea Cake affects her. Holloway endows these moments as being a "poignant accomplishment for Janie," comparable to the "high drama of spiritual conversion" (129). This aspect of Holloway's criticism easily parallels with *Seraph* regarding how Hurston employs the character nearest her protagonist as the primary catalyst for spiritual transformation. As Janie receives empowerment mainly from Tea Cake, so Arvay achieves her own self-actualization through her interaction with Jim. Holloway accurately captures Hurston's

tendency to utilize imperfect, yet admirable characters like Tea Cake and Jim as the main vehicle for spiritual transformation that occurs in her protagonists Janie and Arvey.

Similar attention to religious diction in *Dust Tracks* leads Plant, like Holloway, to assume the specific theme of self-empowerment in the autobiography. She asserts that Hurston uses the structure of the sermon in such a way to set forth that theme effectively. Plant highlights lines from traditional folk prayers that appear in Hurston's writings, illuminating how "such phrases [...] subtly underscore and reinforce the major theme in the *Dust Tracks* sermon [...] a theme basic to the Afro-American religious tradition" (15). Through a comparison of images that reappear in Hurston's work, specifically those of the mountain as symbolizing strength, power and endurance in both *Moses* and *Dust Tracks*, Plant concludes that Hurston prescribes "individualism and achievement [as] the avenues to self-empowerment" (16). As Diedrich already discovers in her analysis of *Moses*, Plant acknowledges that "the focus is on the individual" (16), rather than on God. Hurston, as a folk preacher, "requires the individual to look to self [...] and work for what one wants," rather than complaining about his or her condition and praying to God for something that Hurston believes already exists within the self (16). Plant explains how this necessitates a forgetting of one's past, especially for the Afro-American, who needs "to renounce the past of slavery and Reconstruction, as sinners had to renounce their worldly ways" (160). Only then, "unencumbered by history, they, like [Hurston], could work, struggle, and direct their own destiny" (16). Therefore, *Dust Tracks* "is a projection of the author's coherent point of view and her concerted intention to realize it: a point of view which advocates defiance, self-empowerment, and self-

determination” (Plant 17). Plant’s argument can likewise be made for any of Hurston’s writing, especially *Seraph*.

Hurston’s advocacy of defiance, self-empowerment, and self-determination, as expressed by Plant, aligns with the idea of choosing one’s own destiny, which is precisely the theme Hurston sets forth in *Seraph*. As Plant so accurately shows in her examination of *Dust Tracks*, Hurston chooses to utilize her connections to religion to express a theme that consistently reappears in her writing: self-actualization. The focus of the transformation of characters threads through each of her novels and reveals strengths and weaknesses of individuals who both fail and succeed in achieving this goal. In order to achieve these character developments, Hurston utilizes the tension that exists through implications of race, gender, class and religion, undoubtedly stressing the interconnection of these four areas and their effects on an individual’s self-actualization. These intertwined effects on personal growth appear undeniable, which suggests that significant value surrounds the primary end of self-actualization despite the occasionally controversial means of arriving at that end. Therefore, in order to achieve a more completed interpretation of Hurston’s *Seraph*, significant attention must be given to the religious implications at work within its pages, while remembering the theme Hurston expresses in her other novels. As Bambara asserts, Hurston’s attention to sermons and church pieces “[works its] way into all of her novels” and “[represents] too a life-long concern with spirituality” (13). A focus on what Hurston writes about religion and how she uses her religious experiences in the novel reveals her value of self-actualization through the differing character developments of both Jim and Arvey Meserve.

CHAPTER TWO

Achieved Self-Actualization in Jim: The Catalyst for Arvay's Growth

Although most critics of *Seraph* rightfully focus on the character development of Arvay, it is helpful first to study the character of Jim. The implications of religion in Jim's character provide necessary insight to an examination of Arvay and the effect of religion on her. Jim's actions and words in the novel provoke unrest among many critics concerned with issues of gender, class and race. The majority of criticism on Jim's character declares his role as a controlling supremacist who takes advantage of individuals of the opposite gender, lower classes, and other races in order to gain his own desires of power, position and possessions. Rieger suggests that Jim's behavior towards Arvay equates to his behavior towards nature, understanding Jim as an individual who "can improve his family's economic and class standing" through labor in nature (107). St. Clair likewise interprets Jim's "cruelty, selfishness, arrogance, and condescension" as revealing him "to be a self-involved, sexist bully who manipulates the ideals of romantic love to ensure his own uncontested power" (42). Other critics, like Akins or Jackson, see Jim as merely the agent who transports Arvay from a lower, white trash class to an upper, middle class. It is important to examine Jim further, both in comparison to Hurston's male characters in other novels as well as through the eyes of other characters in *Seraph*. Taking these perspectives into consideration reveals how Hurston depicts Jim as a self-actualized individual whom she employs as the catalyst for invoking self-actualization in Arvay.

Hurston's earlier novels focus in varying degrees on male characters like John, Moses and Tea Cake. Hurston often creates her characters, both male and female, as containing both admirable traits, as Powers points out, as well as devastating, crippling characteristics that sometimes hinder them from achieving growth. Critics of most of her novels recognize that perfect, ideal individuals fail to exist in Hurston's novels and accordingly explore the complications between good and evil in her characters. When comparing Jim to her other novels' male characters, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Seraph* appear to generate the most similar interpretations regarding Tea Cake and Jim. Perhaps because the novels center mainly on the character development of female protagonists, Janie and Arvay, critics attempt to categorize both Tea Cake and Jim as either good or evil. As Yvonne Mesa-El Ashmawi observes, critics most often perceive Tea Cake "as either the embodiment of the perfect man, the prize worth winning at the end of a long quest, or as just another man who subjugates Janie, as abusive and confused as the other men of the novel" (203). Admirable characteristics easily appear in Tea Cake, as displayed in Jim in *Seraph*. Tea Cake, in contrast to Janie's previous two husbands, "pays attention to the details of Janie that others have missed" (Ashmawi 204). Similarly, Jim understands Arvay in a manner that the entire town of Sawley, including her parents, seems to take for granted. Clarence Tweedy perceives Tea Cake in a way that accurately reflects most of the criticism of Jim's character: as "violently flawed due to [his] internalization of self-hatred that is perpetually projected out as a weapon of control against the female protagonist" (118). Critics largely conclude that Tea Cake, like Jim, "cannot be considered a hero of the novel because of his violence toward Janie" (Ashmawi 205). Ashmawi offers an alternative interpretation, however, that "[embraces]

the text as a whole, rather than merely focusing on one aspect of it” (205). Approaching an examination in this manner allows for an assessment of Tea Cake “as a whole – noting both his strengths and his flaws – and not [focusing] on only one of the many parts of his personality” (205). This is an appropriate approach for Jim’s character analysis.

Although much criticism focuses on Jim’s flaws in a negative light, the present analysis endeavors to examine the characteristics that Hurston admires in Jim, which include even his shortcomings.

As Ashmawi views Tea Cake, Jim needs to be seen “somewhere on the continuum between hero and villain, between sinner and saint” (205). This approach produces a male character in *Seraph* similar to the one Hurston creates in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*: “a person like one of us – both a product of and a rebel from society, sometimes rising above society’s ills and sometimes falling short of the ideals of good character” (Ashmawi 205). This type of character accords with Maslow’s understanding of the self-actualized person as still containing imperfections despite the fulfillment and growth that occurs in him. In fact, Maslow strongly disagrees with novelists’ tendency to create perfect characters at all, which denies the truth of individuals as “the robust, hearty, lusty individuals they really are” (*Motivation and Personality* 228). Instead of employing Maslow’s perspective toward imperfect characters, critics often remain unsettled about Tea Cake due to the violence he displays toward Janie. This unrest results in arguments against Tea Cake ever “[being] considered a hero of the novel” (Ashmawi 205). According to Maslow, even self-actualized people “are by no means free from a rather superficial vanity, pride, partiality to their own productions, family, friends and children” (*Motivation and Personality* 228). As seen in

Tea Cake, temper outbursts characterize part of Jim's personality. The epitome of these outbursts appears most outrageously through his rape of Arvay; however, Maslow's description of self-actualized individuals appears to embody such behavior: "Temper outbursts are not rare. Our subjects are occasionally capable of an extraordinary and unexpected ruthlessness. It must be remembered that they are very strong people" (*Motivation and Personality* 228). Maslow acknowledges these imperfections as part of the strength of the self-actualized individual, which allows for a fuller interpretation of characters like Tea Cake or Jim that critics so often categorize as completely evil. Although Hurston's focus in *Seraph* tends to be on the self-actualization of Arvay, she depicts Jim as a self-actualized individual from the beginning of the novel with his admirable qualities as well as his strong-minded imperfections, which accords with Maslow's definition of a self-actualized person. To better understand how Hurston depicts Jim in this manner, we must explore how other individuals in *Seraph* understand his character.

The perception of Jim through the eyes of others interestingly comes from individuals who represent at least one of four categories: gender, class, race and religion. Readers of *Seraph* learn about Jim through the reactions and responses of women (particularly Arvay), families of a seemingly lower class (the Hensons and Corregios), African Americans throughout the novel (the Kelseys), and an individual who symbolizes religion (Carl Middleton). Several of the individuals representing each of these categories simultaneously fall into at least one other category. The Corregios also represent a race other than African American: Portuguese. Carl Middleton, although religious, resides in a lower class than the Meserves. Hurston depicts these characters as

existing in more than one of these categories, which follows her tendency to show the interrelatedness of gender, class, race and religion. Most of the characters share at least one thing in common: their understanding and perception of Jim. Each category contains characters who understand and respond to Jim favorably except for Carl. The individual representative of religion in the novel appears to be the only one who strongly dislikes and disagrees with Jim. Carl's position and personality appear in disagreement with Jim from the beginning of the novel to its end, revealing a tension between Jim's character and the implications of religion as embodied in Carl's character.

Other characters' perceptions shed light on the ironic disagreement Carl expresses towards Jim. Hurston portrays Jim through the eyes of women as she introduces him to her readers. The narrator of *Seraph* describes Jim as a "handsome" man who "stirred the hearts of practically every single girl in town" (*Seraph* 7). Because of his attractive appearance, "caps were set to catch the laughing stranger" (7). The description of Jim continues, admirably noting his "deep blue eyes [and] thick head of curly hair" (7-8), a characteristic repeatedly noted later during scenes of intimacy between Jim and Arvay. In addition to having an attractive appearance, Jim possesses "the gift of gab" and "the nerve of a brass monkey" (8). As proven throughout the novel, Jim sets his mind to court and marry Arvay Henson, which he certainly accomplishes. The reasoning behind Arvay's initial hesitancy to marry Jim further reveals how he appears in her eyes. Arvay perceives Jim as "the most wonderful man in all the world," for whom "she [is] not fitten" due to her understanding of him as "worth more than she [is] able to give him" (34). This observation of Jim's worth produces in Arvay the acknowledgment that to deny her desire for Jim means "turning from the noonday of joy back into the dark mole

holes that she had been living in so long” (35). Despite Arvay’s outward attempts to resist Jim, her inward acknowledgement of him as the channel in her life from darkness to light places great worth on Jim’s character. Although Arvay weakly determines that “there [is] nothing else for her to do” but revert back to life without Jim (34), he proceeds in determinedly pursuing her and obtaining her hand in marriage. This early view of Jim in relation to females in the novel portrays him as a desirable individual who not only suggests value through outward appearances, but also asserts his worth through decisiveness and determination. Despite the complications in his relationship with Arvay, Jim’s success in marrying her foreshadows his later economic and social achievements through hard work and determination.

During his courtship of Arvay, Jim’s determined nature appears through the eyes of Arvay’s family, the Hensons. From the beginning of Jim’s time in Sawley, he appears to contain the power to charm even Brock Henson, who was “known to be a hard man to handle” (8). Despite the “squat-shouldered, tobacco-chewing, rusty-haired Brock,” who displays “cutting edges on his spirit,” Jim accomplishes what the townspeople see as “a miracle in itself” by getting a job as a woodsman in a turpentine camp (8). Jim’s popularity reflects Maslow’s description of self-actualized people as “simultaneously the most individualistic and the most altruistic and social and loving of all human beings” (*Motivation and Personality* 257). Jim’s unending favor with even the most difficult people stands out to Sawley as especially rare. Brock’s approval of Jim as a woodsman extends into his own home as Jim pursues Arvay for marriage. When Arvay threatens to skip Sunday School in order to avoid Jim, Brock asserts that “if [she] had the sense that God give a june bug [she’d] feel glad that [Jim] feels to scorch [her] to and from” (13).

He continues his chiding by advocating marriage to Jim over religion when he demands, “Ain’t you never going to have sense enough to get yourself a husband? You intend to lay round here on me for the rest of your days and moan and pray?” (13). Although Brock’s hostility toward religion somewhat accords with his character, Maria’s agreement with Brock appears shocking in light of her devout observance of religion. She agrees with Brock that “Arvay ain’t acting with no sense at all” and urges her daughter to “make haste before [Jim] gits tired of waiting on [her] and leave [her]” (13-14). Despite the fact that Maria raises Arvay in the local church, she appears more concerned that her daughter obliges Jim than attend Sunday school.

The Hensons’ preferential treatment of Jim instead of religion continues as they interact more with him. The most direct interaction between the Hensons and Jim occurs early in his courtship of Arvay. Religious language dominates these scenes through the Hensons’ response to Jim’s words and actions. As Arvay attempts to produce a fit in order to ward off Jim, and Maria scurries around to put turpentine and sugar on a spoon for her, Maria’s cries begin with a mixture of pleading for both God’s divine intervention and Jim’s assistance. Although Maria begins with a clear difference between the two (“Oh, do, Jesus!...Look like she’s took worse than usual. Help me with her, will you, Mister Jim?”), the lines distinguishing her addressee begin to blur when she screams, “Oh, my Gawd, Mister Jim!” (31). After Jim takes over the administration of the medicine, Maria’s pleadings for aid eventually morph into one source: “Git that spoon in her mouth before she bites her tongue! Do, my Maker!” (32). Despite her devout religious practices, Maria quickly and easily speaks to Jim as if acknowledging divine characteristics in his nature. Her language shadows the aura Jim emits in the scene as he

calmly assumes control, all the time “studying the behavior of the girl very closely” (31). As if in answer to Maria’s prayers, Jim abruptly ends Arvay’s fit by dropping turpentine in her eye. Brock Henson’s approval accompanies his astonishment towards Jim’s actions when he declares, “Jim, you sure done worked a miracle. I never knowed that Arvay had that much life in her” (33). Brock’s statement not only reveals his respect for Jim, but also admits Jim’s superiority in the knowledge of his daughter. Jim’s response foreshadows his intentions as he casually comments that “a woman knows who her master is all right, and she answers to his commands” (33). Although this language falls short of equating Jim with God, it seems to imply that Jim contains divine characteristics.

Jim’s relationships with other individuals in the novel further illuminate the characteristics that prove his self-actualization. Maslow describes self-actualized people as being “friendly with anyone of suitable character regardless of class, education, political belief, race, or color” (*Motivation and Personality* 220). One of Jim’s closest friends in the novel is Joe Kelsey. Although critics like Delia Caparoso Konzett define Jim and Joe’s relationship as Hurston’s expression of the pet Negro system (131), Jim seems to understand the friendship as mutual: either “he had made a friend out of the Negro, or the Negro had made a friend out of him, one or the other” (43). The blurring of specific details here reflects Jim’s lack of concern over who initiated the friendship. Similarly, Jim overlooks Joe’s faults of not cleaning a few cups out well due to the fact that he “[likes] the man tremendously” (43). Joe’s “best-looking smile [...] always lit him right up” making Jim “feel like playing and joking” (43). As they joke with one another, pretending to be stern, Jim seriously responds that “maybe [he] could learn something” from Joe’s lifestyle (44). The relationship between the two men reflects both

camaraderie and mutual dependence regardless of any racial differences. As Maslow indicates concerning the self-actualized individual, Jim “seems as if [he is] not even aware of these differences, which are for the average person so obvious and so important” (*Motivation and Personality* 220). Although Joe and his family work for Jim repeatedly throughout the novel, the first scene between the two men involves Jim seeking advice from both Joe and his wife, Dessie, concerning Arvay. Because of Jim’s preference for Joe, Joe’s wife Dessie occupies a significant role in Arvay’s life, delivering her children and teaching her how to care for them. Dessie recognizes Arvay’s condition before Arvay does, commending her husband who “is all parts of a man” for getting her pregnant so quickly after their wedding (62). Once Jim finds out the news, he refuses to leave Sawley on account of wanting Dessie to be there to provide “expert aid, commanding Arvay to “Bear down! Bear down, I tell you!” (67). Dessie’s involvement in Arvay’s life reflects her own respect for Jim and the relationship between him and her husband, Joe. Although Jim and Arvay leave Sawley for Citrabelle, they eventually send for Joe and Dessie to come stay with them. Joe and Dessie quickly respond to Jim’s request by moving to Citrabelle within a fortnight. The Kelsey’s faithfulness and loyalty to Jim, his family, and his business continue for several years until Arvay runs them off of the place. Even though initially Arvay wants Joe to leave, she eventually misses the Kelsey family, like her husband, and the way they “were a part of the pattern of her life” (118). Although several more years of separation pass between the two families, Jim’s son Kenny admires and respects Joe, learning to play the box from him (138). Joe’s son Jeff and his wife Janie return to look after the place while Jim is gone. Both before and after Arvay’s decision to pursue Jim, Jeff makes it clear that “he [is] working for *Mister*

Meserve and taking orders only from him” (269). As long as Arvay and Jim are at odds with one another, Jeff “[has] little use for her” (269). It is not until she begins acting “just like Mister Jim” that Jeff expresses kindness and loyalty towards Arvay (314). This statement reveals how Jeff’s opinion of Arvay changes favorably only after she replicates Jim’s behavior of knowing “how to treat everybody” (314). Jeff, like his father Joe Kelsey, continually displays faithfulness to Jim. The mutual respect and loyalty between Jim and Joe thus extends to the Kelsey offspring, revealing a sustained relationship throughout the years despite circumstances.

The Kelsey’s departure from the Meserves’ place in Citrabelle leads to the Corregios entering Jim and Arvay’s life. Alfredo, of Portuguese descent, brings his “Georgia-born” wife and two girls to live in the home previously occupied by the Kelseys, for the purpose of helping Jim with the place (120). Arvay’s unjust disdain for the “foreigners” exposes itself to Jim as she tries to make excuses for her son Earl’s behavior (120). Despite Arvay’s assertions, Jim responds, “I’m not telling Alfredo Corregio to move out. I have a reason for wanting him around, and here he stays till I see further” (126). Despite Arvay’s assumed superiority to the “Gees” that she considers of a lower class (130), the remaining Meserve family enjoys a good relationship with the Corregios. Alfredo works hard and loyally alongside of Jim, and Mrs. Corregio enjoys cooking seafood for Jim and invites the family over repeatedly to share their meals (128). The youngest Corregio girl, Felicia, plays with Kenny and Angeline as children, and ends up later being escorted by Kenny as his date to his university’s football game and dance (208). Despite the grievance caused towards Lucy Ann by Earl’s violent attack, Alfredo decides not to “press the charges if Earl can just be found and give himself up” (148).

Alfredo's decision regarding Earl, despite the harm done to his daughter, reveals his unending respect and admiration for Jim and his family. This continues through the end of the novel, revealing a mutual respect that Jim contains for Alfredo, as he trusts Alfredo to educate him about the fishing industry and later captain his boat the *Angeline* (323). Hurston thus expands her favorable depiction of Jim through the Corregios' maintained relationship with Jim, which occurs with no concern for class differences.

An interesting relationship exists between Jim and Carl, the symbol of religion in the novel. The tension existing between Jim and Carl often occurs indirectly, since it centers on each man's relationship with Arvay. Hurston displays comparisons between Jim and Carl repeatedly throughout the novel in this manner. In contrast to Jim's provision for Arvay and her mother, Maria Henson tells Arvay that "Carl ain't made nothing worth mentioning for ever so many years" since a "long time ago folks let him know that they didn't want to hear him preach" (278). Carl's lack of effectiveness resides partly in his inability to support his family due to his poor performance as a minister. As the symbol of religion in the novel, Carl fails at the very essence of what he supposedly embodies. The result of this failure epitomizes itself in the lower class that Carl and Lorraine occupy, which seems to be the largest gap between Carl and Jim at the end of the novel. Although Jim and Carl never interact directly, a comparison between the two men exists due to the tension in Arvay's mind between her past with Carl and her present relationship with Jim. While arguing over money for Maria's funeral, Arvay responds to Carl by crediting her own ability to finance the preparations due to the fact that "I got a *husband!* He covers the ground he stands on. He ain't never let me know what a hard day means" (284). Carl's angry, insulted reaction to Arvay's words reveals

his bitterness towards Jim as Arvay's husband, which he expresses by chiding Arvay for "trying to throw up all Jim got in [his] face" (285). Arvay's response returns to her husband as she commands Carl to "keep my husband's name right out of your mouth," reminding him that "Jim ain't got *you* to study about" (285). Arvay's consistent assertions of Jim's character invoke a striking contradiction between Jim and minister Carl, Arvay's first falsely imagined love. Although critics focus on the obvious class issues at hand in these scenes, Hurston seems to utilize the comparison of Jim and Carl to express how she values aspects of Jim's masculinity that are absent from the minister, the traditional symbol of Sawley's religion. Throughout the entire novel, Hurston's construction of Jim, finally recognized by Arvay in this scene, causes readers to find his characteristics not only valuable, but also attractive.

The final scene between Carl and Arvay capitalizes on the differences between the two men, revealing an ironic gap between the stagnant religion of Carl and the spiritual self-actualization of Jim. When Carl approaches Arvay after her mother's death and demands a thousand dollars for an accident that occurred on the land Arvay now owns, he declares, "that ought not to be nothing for your high-toned rich husband to raise" (291). This reference to Jim reveals reasoning behind why Carl acts "mean and bitter" towards Arvay the day before (289). These exchanges between Carl and Arvay expose the class differences between Jim and Carl, which can be attributed to Carl's failure as a minister and Jim's success in business/labor. Hurston's presentation of Carl, as a "drab creature" (275), overweight, lazy and mean, starkly contrasts with Jim and the portrayal Hurston gives him through the eyes of other individuals in the novel, causing readers to prefer Jim over Carl. This preference appears earliest in the novel during a

church service Arvay attends with Jim. The narrator describes the sermon as “uninspiring” (22), which reflects Carl’s lack of impact on Arvay. The following interaction between Jim and Arvay starkly contrasts with the effects of Carl’s preaching:

Arvay was startled by a quick but tender pressure on her arm by Jim. She turned her head in surprise and their eyes met head on. He was looking at her in some intense and hungry way. Some common pulse began to pump something from Jim to her. Arvay noticed for the first time that Jim was made out of flesh. It was too intense, and Arvay, flushing deeply, snatched her eyes away. (22)

Whereas previously Carl occupied Arvay’s thoughts and concerns, this scene reveals Jim’s ability to stir Arvay’s soul in a way that Carl never has. Even while preaching the text of scripture, Carl fails to affect Arvay as Jim does while they are merely sitting in the church building. This not only reveals the inability of religion, as Carl symbolizes it, to move Arvay, but also Jim’s strong influence and power over her. Despite the disagreement that appears between Jim and Carl (who previously epitomizes religion for Arvay), spiritual language continues to permeate Hurston’s descriptions and associations of Jim throughout the novel. Although spiritual language may seem ironic when considering Jim’s character, Maslow asserts that this type of dichotomy exists in the self-actualized individual: “many oppositions thought to be intrinsic [merge] and [coalesce] with each other to form unities” (*Motivation and Personality* 233). Hurston depicts Jim with the exact complications that Maslow perceives in self-actualized individuals who are “simultaneously very spiritual and very pagan and sensual” (*Motivation and Personality* 233). Therefore, the language associated with descriptions of Jim reflects a spirituality that directly contrasts with the religiosity seen in Carl’s character.

Although the spiritual descriptions of Jim appear most frequently in Arvay’s opinions towards her husband, Jim’s descriptions of his self involve spiritual language.

Hurston portrays values in Jim that he expresses during his proposal to Arvey. Following the Henson's disbelief at Jim's intentions, he asserts, "I talk just like I spit. When I spit, it hits the ground, it never comes back to my mouth, does it? Well then, when my word goes forth, I never rue back on it either. And I mean to say right here that I mean to marry Miss Arvey if she will have me. That's been my whole intention" (39). Jim's definitive statements here regarding his word strongly reflect God's own description of his word in Isaiah 55:10-11: "For as the rain and snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it." The direct parallelism between Jim's words and scripture suggests Jim's understanding of the presence of divinity in his own character. Maslow makes the point that self-actualized people contain "notions of right and wrong [that] are often not the conventional ones" (*Motivation and Personality* 221). Despite his vices, which include fighting, drinking, gambling and cursing, Jim appears to reflect divine characteristics that suggest a new spirituality with new values different from the religion Arvey experiences in Sawley. Jim asserts his abilities by jokingly telling Arvey about a time that he slapped lightning, so as not "to be imposed on like that by nothing or nobody" (27). Arvey's response compares Jim to her traditional religious background as she rebukes him for "telling that big old something-ain't-so and on the Sabbath Day at that" (28). The gap between Arvey and Jim's treatment of religion reveals an irony that seeks attention from readers. Jim jokingly discusses the Bible with Arvey throughout the course of the novel. One evening while Arvey reads the story of Cain and Abel in

Genesis, Jim asks her about the story. After she recounts the story and concludes with her own opinions about Cain's murder of Abel, Jim responds by blaming Cain for lacking a sense of humor and says, "And I don't blame God neither. I'd turn against a man that didn't have no better sense than to burn a stinking cabbage right under my nose" (65). Although Jim's interpretation rightly understands the judgment and justice of God, Arvey remains infuriated by Jim's "wicked" tendency "to be looking for jokes in the Bible" (66). Even after Jim explains his own interpretation, which favors God's decision to punish Cain, Arvey categorizes Jim with "sinner-people who could make mock of holy things" (66). Although Arvey's misunderstanding reveals itself in this passage, the portrayal of Jim exposes the positive characteristics of self-actualization in Jim that Hurston values. Hurston thus utilizes Jim's portrayal and expression of self in a way that reveals the worth she finds in masculinity.

Peter Kerry Powers' observations prove helpful when considering Hurston's valuing of masculinity due to the power men often exert and maintain. These characteristics likewise reflect the strong personality of the self-actualized individual. Powers declares that "it seems clear that men and what it means to 'be a man' play a more complicated and important role in Hurston's imagination than is generally recognized" (231). Although males "are regularly oppressive" because of this power, "there is, nevertheless, something about their 'masculinity' that is also often desirable" (231). As Powers suggests, Hurston uses Jim's character partly to display this desirable trait of power in men. Powers' idea of this "viral masculinity" (234) appears in an example Hurston gives in *Dust Tracks* through her admiration of "active people like David," who "not one time...[stopped] and [preached] about sins and things," but instead

“wanted to know from God...who to kill and when, ... [taking] care of the other details himself” (40). Hurston places worth on David’s initiative to exert agency with what God gives him. Powers rightfully acknowledges that Hurston “plainly admires the main strength of David and David’s God, men who set their face toward the world and act, men who make a difference here and now” (234). Jim’s characteristics strongly reflect this description of David through his ability to set his mind to achieve creatively and effectively whatever he desires. His first achievement of Arvay as his wife foreshadows what he later accomplishes through hard work and determination. This also accords with Maslow’s understanding of the self-actualized individual as one who “shows in one way or another a special kind of creativeness or originality or inventiveness that has certain peculiar characteristics” (223). This type of creativeness often appears in a much more humble form than “composing music” or “producing artistic objects,” and “is projected out upon the world or touches whatever activity the person is engaged to” (223). Pursuing Arvay throughout the novel, attempting to make a living through the illegal practice of bootlegging, quickly and efficiently preparing the fruit groves for harvest, clearing the swamp, and succeeding in the fishing industry all illustrate how Jim’s creativeness touches whatever he determines to achieve. Because his “notions of right and wrong are often not the conventional ones” (221), and due to Arvay’s lack of self-actualization for the majority of the novel, his efforts to gain Arvay’s admiration through his creativeness fail repeatedly. Nevertheless, Hurston employs Jim’s success in these areas to reflect Jim’s healthy state of self-actualization as he confidently expresses and declares his own abilities. Hurston thus sets up the validity of Jim’s narrative through giving him God-like characteristics that she values (similar to David in the Bible), which

presents an altered appearance of religion in the book through his self-actualized character.

Hurston's validation of Jim's narrative allows readers to interpret Arvay's character transformation at least partly through Jim's eyes. *Seraph* contains significant moments where the narrator digresses from the plotline of the story in order to enter Jim's mind, revealing his thoughts concerning Arvay. Powers asserts that an observation of his "rereading of Hurston's literary men suggests the need for rethinking Hurston's literary women" (241). Due to how Hurston already validates Jim's narrative, these moments easily tempt Hurston's audience to consider the motivations and reasoning behind Jim's complicated understanding of Arvay. Exploring this understanding later in the examination of Arvay's character yet again reveals characteristics in Jim that strongly correlate with divine abilities and reflect the self-actualization already present in his being.

Although his presence from the beginning of the story embodies a healthy, achieved self-actualization, not much development occurs in Jim. Rather than focusing on Jim's lack of growth throughout the novel, Hurston appears to desire her readers to understand Jim in relation to the character development of Arvay. Her main design for Jim, other than providing him as an example of a self-actualized individual, resides more in how she utilizes him as the catalyst for growth in Arvay's life. Without Jim, Arvay might fail at achieving any growth or understanding throughout her own life. Therefore Hurston employs Jim, with all his admirable qualities and imperfections, as precisely the tool that shifts Arvay from the crippling, religious hindrances of Sawley towards a

alternative, spiritual understanding and growth, which results in Arvay's self-actualization.

CHAPTER THREE

Arvey's Journey to Self-Actualization: Understanding and New Vision

In order to analyze thoroughly the character of Arvey and the religious implications Hurston places on her self-actualization, it is helpful to provide definitions for a few particular terms. A particularly valuable piece to an analysis of Arvey in *Seraph* appears in Hurston's description of visions in *The Sanctified Church*. Through the remainder of this analysis, I connect Arvey's growth and understanding towards self-actualization to the definition of the vision as Hurston explains it in *Sanctified Church*. In addition to Hurston describing each aspect of *the* vision in *Sanctified Church*, she also uses the diction of *vision* throughout *Seraph*, providing additional purposes for the function of the word. Hurston's dual intentions provide a helpful guideline for examining Arvey's character development, and reflect her concern for self-actualization and its link to spirituality. This character development, therefore, directly suggests a spiritual transformation that occurs in Arvey throughout the course of the novel. A thorough examination of Arvey's spiritual transformation requires attention to the hindrances to Arvey's self-actualization, how Jim functions in the removal of those hindrances, and how Arvey eventually experiences a vision that results in her self-actualization.

The hindrances that Arvey experiences appear immediately and persist throughout the majority of the novel. Maslow defines hindrances as psychopathological: "anything that disturbs or frustrates or twists the course of self-actualization" (*Motivations and Personality* 340). The main hindrances to Arvey's spiritual transformation exist through her exposure to hypocrisy within religion. Lowe understands the early descriptions of the

white church in Sawley as Hurston's interpretation of "biblical myth as central for the Cracker community [...] but in a more limited and ominous way" (289). Although Lowe's explanation remains limited, it points to the truth that Hurston's descriptions reveal some of the religious hypocrisy that hinders Arvay. The opening pages of *Seraph* begin on a Sunday, when "white Sawley [is] either in church or on the way," since the majority of the white population "[belongs] to Day Spring Baptist Church" (3). The narrator continues by describing how "there [is] a large turnout" (3), centering on the courtship of Arvay Henson. The first glimpse readers receive depicts the religious setting as containing hypocrisies and counterfeit motivation. The white townspeople of Sawley attend church not to worship God, but rather to observe the latest bit of interesting gossip. The description of the yearly revival capitalizes on the first image of the hypocritical church members by describing how "most anybody [is] liable to get full of the spirit and shout in church and sing and pray. Backsliders and 'sinner-folks' crowded the mourner's-bench and got religion over and over again" (3-4). The expression of religion "got...over and over again" (4) reveals the absence of genuine conversion in the townspeople. The narrator even implies the town's dismissal of these meetings by its "local wit: Sawley wore out the knees of its britches crawling to the Cross and wore out the seat of its pants back-sliding" (4). Sawley takes pride in holding the meetings only once a year, instead of "[going] on like that" extensively as the Negroes do in their "excessive ceremonies" (4). Rather than experience discomfiture with the counterfeit nature of their religion, the white people of Sawley view themselves as superior to the idea of continual, genuine religion. Hurston craftily chooses this setting to introduce Arvay to her audience.

Comparable to the description of Sawley's religiosity, the first view of Arvay provides a history of her own hypocrisy. During one of the revivals where people "got religion over and over again" (4), Arvay "[turns] from the world" with "uncommon...religious fervor" (3). Despite their "shock and loss" due to Arvay's youth (4), the townspeople initially acknowledge that Arvay's "speech [follows] the usual pattern," admitting her as "apt to be deviled and pestered by the flesh" like any other backsliding church attendee (5). After five years pass and Arvay maintains her renunciation of "the world and its sinful and deceitful ways" (4), "the community soon [puts her] down as queer" (6). Despite the fact that Arvay appears to be genuine, the narrator functions to disclose the hypocrisy existent in her conversion. The townspeople, who really "[have] no idea who or what Arvay [is]" (9), fail to know that Arvay's reasoning behind her counterfeit conversion concerns her sister's marriage to the man she loved first (11). Arvay's choice to become a missionary rests on a heart of bitterness and anger towards her own sister. Furthermore, Arvay wards off potential suitors by faking "hysterical seizures" (6). Even though "not a soul in Sawley [suspects] this secret life of Arvay's" (12), Hurston introduces an individual who accurately observes and counters the hypocrisies in Arvay's behavior.

Jim Meserve interrupts Arvay's renunciation and "[laughs] off the notion that [she is] through with the world and [has] no use for love" (8). Jim's success in courting Arvay "in spite of all she [can] do and say" invokes interesting conversation between them (7).

Following Arvay's command for Jim to leave her be, Jim responds:

No, Miss Arvay, that I can't do at all. You need my help and my protection too bad for that, I see... You have made me see into something that I don't reckon you understand your ownself. I have to stay with you and stand by you and give my good protection to keep you from hurting

your ownself too much. No, I can't leave you be, not until you and me both can see further. (17)

Jim's emphasis on Arvay's capability to "see further" appears repeatedly throughout the novel. Hurston employs Jim's diction to emphasize Arvay's *vision* and how it contributes to her *understanding*, which is language that focuses specifically on Arvay's role in her spiritual transformation. Jim's plan to "be around to look out for [her] and point out things" (17) stresses his advanced ability to see and understand farther than Arvay. This reflects not only Jim's self-actualization but also the Biblical understanding of the immortal God and his relationship towards mortals. Like the Biblical understanding of an individual's sanctification, Arvay's spiritual transformation involves two roles: the guidance and provision of the *divine role* and the individual choice and responsibility of the *human role*. Both must function accordingly in order to achieve healthy growth throughout one's sanctification. In *Seraph*, Hurston chooses to express the divine role through the actions and characteristics of Jim, who functions as the divine tool through which Arvay obtains growth.

The first growth that occurs in Arvay's vision as a result of Jim's intervention occurs when Jim further enters Arvay's religious world by observing the home she shares with her "overly religious" mother (6), filled with "the big family Bible" and "lithographs...depicting Bible scenes tacked plentifully around the walls" (29).

Following Jim's expressed opinions concerning the "notion that [Lorraine and Carl are not] so full of religion as all that" (30), Arvay employs one of her counterfeit seizures. After Jim deliberately drops turpentine in Arvay's eye, the description of the scene that follows resembles the performance of a demon exorcism: "Then a hurricane struck the over-crowded parlor. Arvay gave a yell from the very bottom of her lungs and catapulted

her body from that sofa. She was all over the room at one time, seemingly, knocking over and upsetting things. Jim thought she was going to climb the wall like a cat, and all the time she was gasping out yells” (32). Rather than casting a demon out of Arvay, Jim not only instigates an “upsetting” of the living room, but also sends Arvay flying outdoors and away from the place cramped with symbols of her counterfeit religiosity. Jim thus puts to action his earlier words of moving Arvay into greater vision and beyond her limited understanding, which clearly involves religion. He literally blurs Arvay’s vision in the religiously symbolized setting, and begins the process of clearing her vision by declaring his intent to “give what aid [he] can in washing out her pretty eye” (32-33). The remainder of the novel continues to trace Jim’s attempts to alter Arvay’s vision by improving her understanding, despite the hindrances Arvay struggles with from her past.

Hurston creates this tension between Jim’s attempts to improve Arvay’s vision and Arvay’s struggles against growth and manifests it throughout their relationship. Arvay’s hesitancy to movement away from the religious hypocrisy of her past contributes to her resistance to Jim. Interestingly, she couches this hesitancy to accept Jim through a comparison to “coming through religion”:

Like your thoughts while you were out at the praying-ground in the depths of the woods, or being down at the mourners’ bench during protracted meeting with the preacher, the deacons and all the folks from the Amen corner standing around and over you begging and pleading with you to turn loose your doubting and only believe. Put your whole faith in the mercy of God and believe. Eternal life, Heaven and its immortal glory were yours if you only would believe. That was just the trouble...a whole heap of happiness and good luck just didn’t come to folks like...her. Now, was she to believe that this very pretty man clothed in all the joys of Heaven and earth was for *her*, and all that she had to do was to part her lips and say “yes” to have him all for herself for life? Oh, no, this was just another hurting joke being played on her. (26)

Arvay's comparison to religion here strongly reflects Hurston's description of hesitancy to spiritual transformation in *The Sanctified Church*. Although variation occurs in each vision and conversion, Hurston points out that "in each case there is an unwillingness to believe – to accept the great good fortune too quickly. God is asked for proof" (*The Sanctified Church* 85). Although Arvay never explicitly asks God for proof of Jim's love, her repeated unwillingness to believe and accept Jim displays her demand for proof. In *The Sanctified Church* Hurston tells about a man who asks for proof from God, receives the proof he requests, only to continue doubting. Arvay repeatedly displays this kind of doubt despite the proof Jim gives her of his love.

Arvay's unwillingness to believe and accept Jim resides in the misunderstanding of herself as undeserving of Jim due to her former, secret obsession with Carl (who embodies for Arvay the link to her past religion). Evidence even reveals Arvay's skewed vision of her feelings towards the town minister, as she "imagines herself to be in love" (Howard 135). Although her view of Jim leaves behind any desire for Carl, Arvay's guilt remains concerning her previous thoughts toward her sister's husband. Despite Jim's assertions of his love and intentions towards Arvay, she continues to struggle with this guilt: "She was not fitten for a fine man like Jim. He was worth more than she was able to give him. The Bible said plainly that you could sin inwardly just as much as if you had actually done the thing, and she had sinned" (34). Arvay's stream of consciousness exposes aspects of her skewed vision. She views her actions from the past as determinate of whether or not Jim should desire her. Her past, which embodies Carl and represents her religion, hinders her ability to see Jim's love for her. The definite tension between Arvay's relationship with Jim and her relationship with the God of Sawley calls attention

to how Hurston begins to employ Jim as the true extension of the divine role in Arvay's spiritual transformation.

Part of Jim's divine characteristics resides in his refusal to accept Arvay's attempts to withdraw from him. Although Arvay accepts his marriage proposal and the idea that there is "nothing to do but submit herself to her fate" (24), Jim wrestles with her lack of understanding his desires and attempts to assert them more aggressively by raping her. This scene reflects the weaknesses in Jim, yet confirms Hurston's employment of Jim, despite his weaknesses, as the catalyst for growth in Arvay. Earlier in the novel, Arvay purposely takes him to her mulberry tree in order to use "the strength that Jim [radiates]" for "a cleansing of her sacred place," removing all thoughts of Carl from what she repeatedly describes as her "temple" (37). This "temple" is precisely where Jim rapes Arvay, embodying Arvay's previous "feeling that everything had been swept away by [the] bigness" of Jim (37). Not only does Arvay view the first walk around the tree as making her "clean and worthy" of a marriage with Jim (37), but she also comes to conclude that "she [has] paid under that mulberry tree" due to the rape (57). Arvay's understanding, although containing spiritual elements, falls short of Jim's desire for her growth and instead exposes the continued hindrance of the hypocritical religion of her past rather than an acceptance of the divine characteristics Jim displays.

Arvay's continued hesitancy to find satisfaction or truth in Jim's expressed desires for her and her interpretation of the rape as the payment for her previous sin reflects her hindered spiritual vision. Lowe identifies Hurston's portrayal of Arvay's deep religiosity as "[leaning] toward a terror-ridden biblical hermeneutic" (289), which contributes to Arvay's false vision. Rather than receiving the gift of understanding that

Jim embodies, Arvay feels she must earn her marriage and life with him. Arvay describes “her first glimmering of really being Jim Meserve’s wife [as]...not anything like a full realization,” but rather “a hope, a possibility that it could be so” (114). Even after they have children, Arvay continues to feel only a possibility that “she might come to win this great and perfect man some day” (114). Arvay allows the early “crushing blow” of her sister’s marriage to Carl to “[convince her] that happiness, love and normal relationships were not meant for her. Somehow, God [has] denied her the fate of sharing in the common happiness and joys of the world. Only she knew that her renunciation had been an acknowledgement of this conviction” (10). Although Jim removes Arvay from her counterfeit renunciation, Arvay continues blinded by the thinking that inspired it, resistant to live in the salvation of self-actualization that Jim seeks to provoke in her.

The past influences of Arvay’s hindering religion also results in her skewed understanding of any suffering as punishment for her past. She labels her first child as “the punishment for the way [she] used to be” (69). Following a pathetic effort by son Earl in a fight with her daughter Angie, Arvay questions God about the horror of her past: “Oh, God, is my child going to be marked from this?” (101). For Arvay, Earl exists as a necessary extension of her past that she feels she must endure in order to stay in her family with Jim, Angie and Kenny. Likewise, since Earl represents Arvay’s past sin in her own mind, she clings to him as much as she clutches the idea that she fails to measure up to something Jim deserves. Indeed, Arvay places on Earl the epitome of her feelings, attempting through his disability to provide reasoning behind why Jim cannot love her. Even the memory of Earl in her mind illustrates her son as “a shield and buckler...very hard on her heart at times” (158). Although she attempts to use Earl to escape Jim by

returning to Sawley with her son, the absence of Jim leads her back to him. Arvay returns to Jim, leaving Earl behind momentarily, but “[resenting] her enslavement” (137) and continually struggling with Jim and her vision of herself. Her false vision reappears through dreams that Earl is in trouble, and she eventually brings him back home, exposing her true slavery to the hindrances of her past.

Although Arvay’s impaired vision manifests itself continually throughout her marriage to Jim, her comfort in prayer or scripture becomes less frequent throughout the course of their life together. After suffering for months over a misunderstanding of Jim, Arvay begins to pray to the sun, asking it to take God the message that “[she is] here praying” (102). Rather than talk to God directly, Arvay begins to use nature as a mediator. Before she even finishes her prayer, the gap between Arvay and the God of Sawley widens even further as a “shadow [comes] between her and the sun,” revealing itself to be Jim (102). Jim’s presence represents his ability to link Arvay to a spiritual transformation that occurs apart from the God of her past religiosity. Arvay struggles with this representation and often retreats from Jim in attempts to read her Bible, only to “[turn] restlessly on her side...never [finishing] a single verse” (199). Despite the fact that she no longer gains satisfaction in these rituals, Arvay continues striving to find fulfillment in the religion of her past rather than through the spirituality that Jim represents.

Despite Arvay’s tendency to cling to these hindrances, Jim’s divine characteristics continue to gain a larger presence in Arvay’s perception. Arvay increasingly describes several distinct experiences with Jim as spiritual encounters. During one of the darkest hours of Arvay’s life, Jim expands in her mind as a divine being. After attacking Lucy

Ann Corregio, Earl runs and hides from the search party. During the difficult hunt for Earl in the swamp, Arvay views her husband as “stronger than all other on earth,” taking care of “what God neglected” (152). In her despair, Arvay seems to make a conscious choice to switch her trust from the God of Sawley to her husband, identifying that “she had been praying ever since she had found that Earl was surrounded in that swamp. So far, God had not made a move so it was up to Jim” (152). Arvay places her faith in Jim to save her son, the symbol of her past. Arvay’s language and posture illustrate her desperate need for her husband’s intervention. Despite Jim’s failure to save Earl, the interchange between husband and wife reveals Jim’s power over Arvay. Arvay acknowledges the feeling of “the power of Jim coming over her” as he utilizes his own gestures and words to convince her of the reality of Earl’s death (155). Even when Arvay creates physical distance between herself and Jim, she “[feels] his arm beneath her shoulder just as plain as if he [stood] beside her” (156). Jim’s divine presence in Arvay’s vision continually increases through her process of grieving for Earl.

Despite the fact that Jim’s divine characteristics appear more clearly to Arvay, the continued impairment of Arvay’s vision appears through both her occasional acknowledgement and renewed resistance to Jim. Although Arvay observes Earl’s dead face as “inhabited at last by a peace and a calm,” she feebly attempts to maintain her hold on how he represents her past. Following Jim’s correct acknowledgment of this, Arvay “[hates] herself, because for the life of her, she [cannot] move away from Jim” (157). She likewise declares her hatred for Jim, specifically “because he [has] so much power over her” (157). Hurston continues to display the tension in Arvay’s mind concerning the spirituality of Jim when Arvay describes Jim’s kiss “as a great mercy and a blessing,” and

inwardly admits the presence of “truth” in him (158). Her words in this scene reveal one of her first conscious acknowledgements of her movement away from her past and towards her husband. Arvay begins to recognize the heightening of Jim’s power over her as she “[knows] that she could part with anything, even principles, before she could give up this man” (158). Although she later reflects on her life as containing “moments [where she stood] on the right hand side of God” (177), she stubbornly tries to see the departure from her religious principles negatively and wrongfully blames Jim for making her “near nothing as anybody could be” (159). Arvay’s conclusion resides in what she sees as a necessity to “fight against it” (159), and her growth in understanding Jim’s power over her seems to plateau at this point in her life. She threatens repeatedly to be “through with him for good and all” and never to return “to his bed again” (200), but quickly mourns the reality of her ineffective resolutions: “like lightning bugs...they met at night and made scorning speeches against the sun and swore to do away with it and light up the world themselves. But the sun came up the next morning and they all went under the leaves and owned up that the sun was boss-man in the world” (200). Even though Arvay threatens suicide at one point, she ultimately knows that no one truly “[believes] in the reality of death in the presence of vibrant life” (219). Although Arvay resists her husband, a definite passivity exists through her unwillingness to release her past despite her acknowledgement that she dwells in the “presence of vibrant life” with Jim. Arvay appears determined to maintain as much of her past as possible, fearing the risks that might occur with any intentional growth in her vision.

Despite all of these hindrances of Arvay’s past religiosity, Jim repeatedly attempts to help Arvay achieve self-actualization. According to Maslow, Jim fulfills the role of

Arvey's psychotherapist. He defines psychotherapy as "any means of any kind that helps to restore the person to the path of self-actualization and of development along the lines that his inner nature dictates" (*Motivation and Personality* 341). Jim displays his own superior understanding of Arvey early in their courtship, and he steadily observes and attempts to assist Arvey in her vision despite her resistance. The narration reveals moments of confusion and frustration in Jim as he hopes to lead Arvey subtly towards a better understanding. He encourages her in moments by sharing how he "knew from the very first time [he saw her]...that [she] was all heart" (115). These words suggest Jim's recognition of how "self-actualization is growth motivated rather than deficiency motivated" (*Motivation and Personality* 183). Rather than fear that Arvey lacks what she needs, Jim believes she simply needs to grow what she already contains. Jim's words also express his determination to focus "on the ends rather than on means" (*Motivation and Personality* 221), another characteristic of self-actualized people. Certain conversations lead Jim to believe that "Arvey [is] finding her way," but he continues to struggle with how to "make her understand that there [is] a way and that it [is] necessary for her to find it" (116). Jim's determination on what Arvey could achieve (the ends), reveals some of the reasoning behind his struggles with how to help her grow (the means).

Jim's desires for Arvey's self-actualization likewise reflect his own self-actualization and the healthy, raw love he displays for her. Maslow claims that self-actualized people display "the affirmation of the other's individuality, the eagerness for the growth of the other, the essential respect for this individuality and unique personality" (*Motivation and Personality* 252). This attitude appears in Jim as he places value into

allowing Arvay to develop her own understanding, rather than attempting to force upon her his own vision. Even when Arvay asks him to explain certain things to her, Jim replies to Arvay in a carefully crafted response: “that way wouldn’t do me no good. Just search around inside yourself and some day you will understand what I mean” (203). Jim relentlessly continues his pursuit of Arvay, but consciously chooses to stimulate a change in Arvay’s vision that arises from within herself, rather than impose a vision upon her. Jim recognizes the potential power that Arvay’s vision contains and desires to see her own self-actualization arise from within it. Multiple times Jim studies the “mysterious green light” that appears in Arvay’s blue eyes, and how it mimics “the waters of the sea at times and at places” (106). Despite the way Arvay’s eyes “bind” Jim, she fails to “know her own strength” (106). Rather than considering himself weak under Arvay’s gaze, Jim celebrates what he recognizes as Arvay “having powers that few women on earth [have]” (106). The greenish tint that appears momentarily in Arvay’s eyes always arises when Jim stirs her, and appears to represent her potential vision, if only she might come to recognize it. Jim’s description of the “greenish infusion” likewise illustrates how it “[creeps] in and [mingles],” only briefly glancing at him from behind the “mask” that Arvay wears continually (219). Jim desires to awaken in Arvay this “eternal and compelling mystery” (219). The glimpses he sees throughout their life together provide hope that Arvay might realize and exercise the vision that already exists within her. Although Jim recognizes the potential power that arises from Arvay’s vision, rather than scaring Jim, Arvay’s eyes attract him to her all the more. As a self-actualized person, Jim contains “in unusual measure the rare ability to be pleased rather than threatened by the partner’s triumphs” (*Motivation and Personality* 252). Even though he fails to make a

deliberately acknowledged comparison, Jim's attraction to the sea seems to stem from his attraction to Arvay's eyes. He retreats often to the ocean in order to surround himself with the water that takes on a "blue-green" (224). The "seemingly infinity of form" fascinates him: "no matter how much you saw, the sea had still other marvels of shape and color. He would never, never tire of the sea" (224). These observations easily imitate his affectionate awe towards Arvay, and his desire for her to recognize and embody fully, like the sea, her own vision.

The dynamic between Arvay's false visions and Jim's attempts to move her past those false visions reflects the essence of the problem that threatens Arvay's self-actualization. This threat restricts Arvay to remain in passivity, encouraging her withdrawal from the life Jim gives to her. Maslow defines threat in a way that explains the essence of Arvay's problem:

An ultimate definition, no matter what else it might include, must certainly be related to the basic goals or needs of the organism...we must ultimately define a situation of threat not only in terms of species-wide basic needs but also in terms of the individual organism facing its particular problem. Thus frustration and conflict both have frequently been defined in terms of external situations alone rather than in terms of the organism's internal reaction to or perception of those external situations. (*Motivation and Personality* 162)

Arvay's false visions stem from how she as an individual faces the particular problems of her past. Her unique perception of external situations directly contributes to the impairment of her vision. A vivid illustration of this appears through the literal visions Arvay begins to see after Earl's death. The images of the tolling of the bell hinder Arvay in her movement towards self-actualization. Lowe illuminates these images as a result of Arvay's "terror-ridden biblical hermeneutic...to think typologically" (289). Her "imagined scenes of doom and sin often have their base in the images of Revelation"

(Lowe 290). The memory of Earl, whom Arvay feels represents her past and the punishment for her sins, continues to impede on Arvay throughout the novel. In a particular moment when Arvay exercises the potential of improving her vision, she “[feels Jim’s] searching gaze” and almost simultaneously begins to see “passionate pictures formed on her eyelids” that “[fade] and [are] instantly replaced by others” (168). Although some of the images recall moments of happiness, and reveal aspects of her life and the course it takes, the pictures stop with the image of “Earl in his coffin” (168). At this reminder of her past, Arvay hears the “bell...tolling and tolling” that rings out when Earl dies (168). Arvay’s old religiosity shapes this encumbrance by reminding her of the past and enforcing a vision of death on her. Only when Arvay finds refuge in Jim does she begin to see the potential life that exists despite the death of her past. By a simple look, Jim clears Arvay’s visions and encourages a fuller understanding in her:

She looked up suddenly at Jim for help and he was there at the head of the table and the tolling ceased in her head. The same way that her agony had been bearable that day when she had looked from the dead face of Earl to Jim up on the porch by the door. Yes, Jim Meserve in his flesh was really there at the table with her. This was a miracle right out of the Bible. For some reason, still and as yet not revealed to Arvay, this miracle of a man had married her. She had been blessed beyond all other women of this world. How on earth had she ever risked losing his presence? Jim was there, but at any moment he might vanish from her sight, never to be seen again. (168-69)

In this observation Arvay raises Jim to a divine level and recognizes the life she experiences with him, expressing in her own mind the gratitude she feels for her marriage to him.

Although the potential exists here for Arvay to seize her own self-actualization and to embrace life fully, it appears only briefly. She instead allows the false vision of her past to hinder her movement forward in understanding her current potential with Jim.

As Howard observes, “though [Arvay] genuinely desires love and happiness [...] she does everything in her power to make that love and happiness impossible” (135). The threat of losing Jim, despite his faithfulness to her, continues to block her eyes with fear, hindering her vision from understanding the truth of what already exists within her. In the middle of a university dance where Kenny plays in the orchestra and Jim admires outwardly his wife’s beauty to those surrounding them, Arvay, instead of enjoying the atmosphere and Jim’s admirations, begins to retreat from the “exciting activity” around her (211). Arvay again hears the tolling of the bell, this time accompanied by only horrifying images of Earl and the night he attacks Lucy Ann. Arvay “[feels] haunted” as she continually hears the “tolling, tolling, tolling sound of the bell...Dead-and-gone! Dead-and-gone! The bell struck out with halting tongue” (212). Despite Arvay’s feeble attempts to “shake it off...the heavy, slow-talking clapper [seems] to be beating against her very skull,” causing her to “[wait and suffer] between strokes” (212). Although Jim tries to encourage Arvay to remain at the dance, he finally speeds home with her and expresses his anger towards her through another rape scene. This scene, like the rape under the mulberry tree, evokes considerable anxiety in critics, particularly in those concerned with the gender issues of the book. One explanation for Jim’s actions resides in Maslow’s description of the self-actualized individual: “The tastes, values, attitudes, and the choices of self-actualizing people are to a great extent on an intrinsic and reality-determined basis, rather than on a relative and extrinsic basis. Frustration level and frustration tolerance may very well be *much* higher in self-actualizing people” (*Motivation and Personality* 378). This explains part of the reasoning behind Jim’s display of anger, disappointment and intolerance for the lack of growth in Arvay.

Another explanation for Jim's actions appears through Maslow's observation that self-actualizing people are often "fixed on the ends rather than on means," and "[subordinating] the means to these ends" (221). Jim's actions reflect his fixture on the end result of Arvay achieving self-actualization, and thus he subordinates the means (the rape) to that end. Furthermore, although gender dynamics appear at work here in Jim and Arvay's relationship, criticism pays little attention to a seemingly redemptive element of the scene: Jim's attempts to provoke growth in Arvay by removing hindrances to her achieving the spiritual transformation of self-actualization. The obviously problematic aspect of Arvay's character resides in her inability to shake the tolling of the bell and the horrific images of Earl's death, which ultimately influences Arvay's actions at the dance, causing Jim to respond in the manner he does by rushing Arvay home. Furthermore, the narration calls specific attention to the fact that in their bedroom that night, Arvay's concerns reside not with the tolling of the bell, but with reunion with Jim: "Felicia and the Corregios fell off Arvay's shoulder like a loose garment in her anxiety for reconciliation with this man who stood like a statue of authority beside the bed. No bells tolled; no memories could find a place with her then" (217). Despite Jim's manner of achieving this understanding in Arvay, which contains unsettling implications for gender concerns, he indeed clears her vision from the images that haunt her. His actions possibly reveal a temporary weakness in his previous resolve to stimulate understanding in Arvay rather than force it upon her. For a brief moment, however, Jim indeed refocuses Arvay's vision towards the potential growth in her current life, rather than allowing her to remain stuck in the hindrances of her past.

Jim's efforts, whether by force or by subtle stimulation, continue to fall short of achieving the vision he desires for Arvay. Scenes occur that repeatedly illustrate Arvay's conscious choice to remain with "the demon of waste and desert places and take him for her company" (239). She falsely sees the "enchantment of [her] porch" as something "from which she [is] now expelled," rather than something from which she expels herself, retreating to her past religiosity and mournfully comparing herself to the biblical "John on the island of Patmos" (239). The culmination of her false vision surfaces through her lack of response when the snake attacks Jim. Although seeing "the imminent danger to her husband, her great love, the source of all the happiness that she had ever known, the excuse for her existence, ...she [goes] into a kind of coma standing there" (255). Jim's "agonizing gasps" for Arvay's help stimulate a healthy vision in Arvay's consciousness where she "[flies] to Jim and [slays] the snake and [holds] Jim in her arms like a baby" (255); however, the vision in Arvay's mind never translates to action. She fails to respond outwardly and remains in her passivity, hindered by fear and unable to grow. This failure epitomizes the countless times throughout the novel that Arvay not only falls short of understanding her husband's ways, but also chooses to remain ignorant and passive, rather than actively pursuing self-actualization through and with Jim. Jim's risky behavior toward the snake reflects his self-actualization and attempts to provoke Arvay to join him. His actions display "a healthy selfishness, a great self-respect, a disinclination to make sacrifices without good reason" (*Motivation and Personality* 257). Rather than understanding Jim's attempts to "win admiration out of [her]" (261), Arvay repeatedly fails to see how Jim shrewdly and successfully manages his businesses (81), why he chooses to fight (94), why he chooses to clear the swamp (193), and why he

wrestles the snake (261). Although Jim hopes that “maybe it will come to [her] someday,” Arvay’s failure to help liberate Jim from the snake pushes her husband to one final attempt to clear her vision: he leaves her. Jim riskily employs the subtlest method he knows in order to allow Arvay either to discover her self-actualization alone or to remain trapped in her false vision forever. His final hope abides in removing himself from her life.

Jim’s decision to leave once again reveals the divine role he plays in the spiritual transformation of Arvay’s vision. In several stories of *The Sanctified Church* Hurston relates how individuals ask God for signs repeatedly. In every case, God tolerates their doubt momentarily, but eventually threatens to condemn their souls to hell if their disbelief continues. Jim’s temporary absence in Arvay’s life reflects this threat of eternal damnation for Arvay. By giving her exactly one year to return to him, which demands Arvay’s improved vision, Jim communicates to Arvay the severity of her doubt and promises the judgment of complete separation if she continues in her disbelief.

The growth that eventually happens in Arvay following Jim’s departure depends heavily on the setting of the town of Sawley. Howard acknowledges that Arvay “must break with her past before she can live her life” (141). As the representation of her past, the town of Sawley epitomizes the threats that hinder Arvay’s vision. In *The Sanctified Church*, Hurston stresses the importance of the number three, deeming it “the holy number,” considering that “the call to preach always comes three times” and “is never answered until the third time” (86). Her description of this call proves useful when considering Arvay’s life: “The man flees from the call, but is finally brought to accept it. God punishes him by every kind of misfortune until he finally acknowledges himself

beaten and makes known the call. Sometimes God sends others to tell them they are chosen. But in every case the ministers refuse to believe the words of even these (*The Sanctified Church* 86). The minister is called to fulfill his divine purpose of preaching, which is what God designed him to do. Therefore, an acceptance and fulfillment of that calling reflects the man's self-actualization. Hurston appears to employ in *Seraph* this experience for the call to preach by correlating it to the call to self-actualization. An analysis of Arvay's experiences in and with Sawley reveals how her calling correlates to the preacher's calling. The novel includes three separate occasions that Arvay spends time in Sawley, and all three contain significant moments of movement away from its false visions and towards the vision of discovering within herself the self-actualization she already contains.

The first growth that occurs in Arvay's relation to Sawley requires her removal from the setting. Maslow advocates the "good consequences of excluding or ostracizing [...] especially if the culture is a doubtful one or a sick or a bad one" (*Motivation and Personality* 374). He continues that "ostracism from such a culture is a good thing for the person, even though it may cost much pain" (*Motivation and Personality* 374). Although Maslow indicates that "self-actualizing people often ostracize themselves by withdrawing from subcultures of which they disapprove" (*Motivation and Personality* 374), Arvay's lack of self-actualization prevents her not only from removing herself from Sawley, but also skews any ability for her to see the setting as containing bad influences. Her removal depends on Jim's ability to see the setting based on his own self-actualization. Without his intervention, Arvay likely remains in Sawley forever, never gaining growth from the setting.

Although the spiritual transformation that occurs in Arvay depends upon her ostracism from Sawley, it also heavily requires a brief return to it. This perception of Sawley as containing polarities of both good and evil appears in Hurston's description of the setting in the first few pages of the novel. Despite the fact that the Suwanee River's north side contains "cultivated fields planted to corn, cane potatoes, tobacco and small patches of cotton," the ignorance of the townspeople results in "few of these fields [being] intensively cultivated," as they occupy themselves with the production of "turpentine and lumber" (1). Hurston's portrayal of Sawley's landscape thus displays the horror of ignorance and misuse despite the opportunity that exists for growth through cultivation. Although the people of Sawley know that the Suwanee "[furnishes] free meat," they also know that it "[furnishes] plenty of mosquitoes and malaria too" (2). Hurston likewise illustrates the opening setting of Arvay's childhood as containing benefits as well as dangers. Therefore, it is not surprising that Hurston employs the same setting as containing both hindrances and moments of growth to Arvay's vision. Although she fails to realize it at the time, Jim's rape of Arvay underneath the mulberry tree, a seemingly horrific event, marks her first step away from Sawley and towards growth. Later in the novel when Arvay returns to the mulberry tree alone, she reflects on how she would have never "escaped from [the] ugly and lonesome place if Jim had not come along and just seized upon her and carried her off to the light" (134-5). Her description of Jim's rescue loudly echoes the biblical language of salvation. She even ironically prays earlier in the novel for two things: "for the saving of [Jim's] soul [and] that he be moved to hurry up and take her way from the vicinity of Sawley and keep on loving her" (71). Despite Arvay's request for Jim's salvation, her latter reflections under

the tree lead readers to believe that she actually prays for *Jim* to save her *own* soul. Even though Arvay's temporary rebellion against Jim motivates her return to Sawley this second time, the experience provokes growth in her and a movement back towards Jim: "the call of Jim could no more be resisted than the sun-flower can help turning its face to the sun. Her heart, her body, everything about her cried for the presence of that man" (136). The setting that hinders Arvay in many ways also serves to push her forward on her spiritual transformation, spurring growth in her vision. Although Arvay returns to Jim and continues to cling stubbornly to the hindrances that skew her vision of Jim, her second visit to Sawley results in a slight improvement to her vision that provokes growth, no matter how small it is.

All of these moments of growth happen as a result of Jim's attempts to improve Arvay's vision by moving her towards self-actualization. The first growth experience in relation to Sawley requires Jim's desire and decision to remove Arvay from its culture. The second growth experience in Sawley requires the setting of the magnolia tree to spur Arvay's remembrance and fresh understanding of the salvation that Jim provides when he removes her from Sawley the first time. The third and most significant point of growth requires Jim's threat essentially to leave Arvay forever the way he found her – as she was in the beginning, in Sawley. Arvay begins to understand this once she returns to Sawley for the death and funeral of her mother. Arvay continues in her false vision until the moment she arrives in Sawley, believing that the letter she receives about her mother is evidence that "God was taking a hand in her troubles" in order to direct her "to go back home" after "her [own] kind" (271). Once she returns to the setting of Sawley, however, Arvay begins to look out from beneath the veil of religious hindrances she previously

allows to block her vision. Although initially excusing herself from the fallacy that “for the life of her, [Arvay] could not seek out and discover what Jim expected” (268), a literal return to her past in Sawley causes her to admit how she “[scorns] off learning as a source of evil knowledge” (272). Arvay begins to recognize her conscious choice to refuse knowledge out of fear, a value she learned in Sawley. This trip to Sawley increases Arvay’s revelation as she observes the town’s choice to remain passive. The taxi man correctly remarks that “they hate like sin to take a step forward” (274-75), ironically revealing to Arvay the problematic religion in Sawley. These observations engender a questioning in Arvay about her own changes in comparison to her sister’s family. Almost subconsciously, Arvay repeatedly declares her own identity as defined by her relation to Jim as his wife, the very aspect of her life she resists until this point. She emphatically claims that “she [comes] prepared to do whatever [is] necessary to be done” for her mother’s funeral, due to the fact that she has “a *husband*...[who] covers the ground he stands on” (284). This statement recalls Hurston’s admiration of King David in *Dust Tracks*. The viral masculinity that she admires in King David appears also in Jim, an expression of his self-actualization. Arvay’s own recognition of this viral masculinity (represented in Jim) continues to grow following her mother’s funeral. Arvay concludes that Jim Meserve makes the difference in her life, “[putting] her ahead” not only “of Lorraine and the other girls who had come along with her” (298), but also of the traditional religious views that she for so long allows to restrict her. During Arvay’s temporary separation from Jim, Hurston thus utilizes him to pull Arvay towards a better understanding of her own self-actualization.

The results of this growth in Arvay's understanding occur almost immediately, clearing her vision in multiple ways. Arvay begins to see that "fault could be in her" (300), rather than always blaming Jim. This conclusion aids Arvay in realizing that "immortal glory [is] where she ought to be" (302), which abides not in her past religion of Sawley, but in a life that exemplifies her self-actualization and requires her to move forward with agency, embodying some of the characteristics in Jim that Hurston values. This marks a significant moment of change in Arvay. Instead of refusing stubbornly to cling to the hindrances of Sawley, Arvay instead begins to pursue true vision for the first time. Hurston describes the experience of conversion in *The Sanctified Church* as a moment when "the vision is sought" (85). She stresses that "the individual goes forth into waste places and by fasting and prayer induces the vision" (85). Hurston acknowledges that the significance of these waste places comes from the likelihood of the setting containing "some emotional effect upon the seeker" (85). She gives examples of cemeteries or swamps, which contain "the possibility of bodily mishaps" (85). Although Arvay lives most of her life with Jim near a swamp, a place whose danger according to Hurston offers the potential for cleared vision, she refuses to utilize it. When Arvay first points out the Big Swamp to Jim, he responds with the healthy observation that "that's the finest stretch of muck outside the Everglades," and continues to remark on the resources available within the area (79). Arvay perceives the Big Swamp, however, as "dark and haunted-looking and too big and strong to overcome" (80). Rather than understand the value and the richness of a place that represents danger, she remains frightened by it. This difference in perspective reflects both Jim's self-actualization and Arvay's hindering fears that restrict her growth.

Although Arvay refuses to pursue an improvement in her vision through the Big Swamp, she does begin to seek a new vision in the wasteland of Sawley. The mulberry tree proves to be the setting that evokes the most emotion in Arvay. Underneath the mulberry tree, Arvay affirms that “here, in violent ecstasy, [began] her real life” through her encounters with Jim (305). After imagining the “tender green leaves” that would soon create “a great, graceful green canopy rolling its majesty against the summer sky” (305), Arvay eventually turns to focus on the waste place before her eyes. For the first time, Arvay “[looks] at it with a scrutiny,” identifying the hindrances that it embodies: “it was a sanctuary of tiny and sanctioned vices. Its walls were smoked over with the vapors from dead souls like smoky kerosene lamps (306). Arvay’s ability to scrutinize the location of her upbringing reflects her growth in vision. While examining voice and vision in *Their Eyes*, Deborah Clarke observes that, “by having her characters watch God in darkness,” Hurston implies that “one comes to God not through light but through the ability to see in the dark” (609). Applying this idea to *Seraph* likewise suggests that Arvay achieves spiritual growth once she exercises the ability to see in and through the waste of Sawley. Maslow points out that “self-actualizing people often ostracize themselves by withdrawing from subcultures of which they disapprove” (*Motivation and Personality* 374). Although self-actualized Jim removes her from Sawley in the beginning of the novel, Arvay now sees and understands herself the dangerous threats of the culture of Sawley, as epitomized in the house. Arvay furthermore identifies the house as the exact hindrance that stands “between her sign of light and the seeing world” (306). In addition to experiencing this vision, she chooses agency by actively burning the house and what it represents: “an evil, ill-deformed monstropolous accumulation of time and

scum...soaked in so much of doing-without, of soul-starvation, of brutish vacancy of aim, or absent dreams, envy of trifles, ambitions of littleness, smothered cries and trampled love” (306). Concerned with class issues, Akins claims the house as “the last connection to [Arvay’s] cracker past” (41). Included in her cracker past is Arvay’s false, hindering religion. The burning of the house accompanies the destruction of the false vision Arvay clings to throughout the novel. Arvay later remarks to the Kelseys that she “done seen and felt things that [she] don’t want to never see and to feel no more” (314). She understands that her past “blinded her from seeing and feeling throughout the years” and thus makes the active choice that finally allows Arvay to reach a “peaceful calm” (307). As she begins to “[pick] herself over inside,” Arvay recognizes why “it [is] the first time in her life that she [is] conscious of feeling” as she does: “the physical sign of her disturbance was consuming down in flames, and she was under her tree of life” (307-8). Ironically, Arvay’s growth occurs not in a revival meeting of the town’s church building, but instead underneath the mulberry tree. For the third significant time underneath the tree, Arvay experiences the vision that accompanies her conversion towards self-actualization.

Her understanding of this self-actualization arrives before she ever returns to Jim, revealing the success of his decision for their temporary separation. Although she worries at the possibility that it “[is] too late to take in the slack” with her relationship with Jim, she finds fulfillment in “[knowing] her way now and ... [seeing] things as they [are]” (308). Maslow describes the need of self-actualization in an individual as the understanding that “what a man *can* be, he *must* be” (*Motivation and Personality* 91). He refers to the individual’s “tendency for him to become actualized in what he is

potentially,” despite the satisfaction of all his “basic needs, safety needs, [and] love needs” (*Motivation and Personality* 91-2). Although Jim meets Arvay’s basic needs throughout her life, she fails to understand until this point in the novel not only what she is, but what she is capable of becoming. She finally acknowledges fulfillment in her own life alongside of Jim as a wife and mother because that is what she desires. Arvay defines her success not in her relations with Jim, but in the self-actualization that she now knows as a result of the change in her vision. Arvay’s choice to burn the house of her past removes the obstruction in her vision, allowing her to grow in understanding many of the things she fails to see earlier in her life.

These understandings initially peak out of Arvay’s character in subtle ways that reflect Maslow’s observations concerning the self-actualized individual. Maslow understands self-actualizing love as containing a “healthy acceptance of the self and of others” (*Motivation and Personality* 244). Arvay certainly fails to exercise this healthy acceptance of her self and of others throughout the majority of the novel. This point in the novel marks a definite change in Arvay. As Christopher Rieger rightly acknowledges, “Hurstun makes a point to show [Arvay] as more decisive, more considerate and simply more aware of the world and people around her (121). As she returns to Citrabelle from Sawley, Arvay’s behavior towards Jeff and Janie Kelsey indicate her new vision. Before her trip to Sawley, Arvay declares Jeff an “impudent, scoundrel beast” who she wants removed from the place. After she returns from Sawley, however, Arvay perceives Jeff and Janie not “impudent, biggity niggers” (272), but as “new money in town” (311). She explains to them the change that Sawley invoked by stating her resolve “to cut [herself] and let...any narrow-hearted littleness in [her]...run

out” (314). Her actions support her words as she sits and visits with them, clearly wanting nothing but their company. Directly, after recovering from the pleasant shock of Arvay’s behavior, Jeff remarks that Arvay is “just like Mister Jim” (314). Because of her new vision, Arvay’s attitude towards other people now strongly resembles her husband’s behavior. Arvay’s self-actualization allows her not only to accept herself but also to follow in her self-actualized husband’s example to accept others fully.

The proof of Arvay’s new vision continues through her decision to visit Jim at the coast. Every detail of her preparation indicates Arvay’s determined agency rather than her previous passive nature. This characteristic also accords with Maslow’s description of self-actualized people “as relatively spontaneous in behavior and far more spontaneous than that in their inner life, thoughts, impulse, etc.” (*Motivation and Personality* 208). Arvay’s spontaneity exposes itself in these areas of her life through her decision to pursue Jim. She resolves to live in the moment rather than “anticipate [or] fear the outcome of her journey” (317). Although she acknowledges “she might not win Jim back,” she actively determines “it was not going to be because she never tried” (316). She sees her place in Citrabelle alongside of Jim as “her life and she [loves] everything about it” (314). Arvay’s thought process shows that her fulfillment resides not in whether or not Jim receives her, but in her pursuance of a role that she embodies alongside of Jim.

The fullest manifestation of Arvay’s new vision arrives during the first hours aboard the boat with Jim. Despite increasingly loud grumbings from the thunder of the bar and the Mate requesting that the boat turn around, Jim resolves to keep the boat on its course (328). When the danger involved leads the Mate to “wrap his arms about Jim’s left leg,” Arvay responds “almost instinctively” by “[leaping] upon the Mate and

[grabbing] him by his hair to pull him away from Jim's leg" (329). She accompanies her actions by commanding, "Let go my husband's leg!" (329). Arvay's active response here directly contradicts her failure to respond in the snake scene earlier in the novel. She finally succeeds in aiding him by participating in the "knowing and doing kind of love" that Jim earlier accuses her of cowardly neglecting (262). Arvay's self-actualization no longer allows her to stand by passively, but instead enables her to love both in word and in deed.

Jim's main words in the scene take the conversation of her decision a step farther. The Mate responds to Arvay's attack by praying, which leads Jim into an explicit rebuke of the hindering religion that Arvay releases in Sawley:

Pray, you goddamned white-livered bastard, you! Pray! I'm crossing this bar if I land you slap in Hell! Pray! Oh, you can pray on my damn boat, eh? Why you didn't pray last night while you were crawling that barrel of whores? Why you didn't pray while you were guzzling rotgut likker? You didn't have time to pray then, did you? All right now, pray your damn prayer now! Pray, goddamn you, pray! (330)

Jim's discourse possibly accomplishes two things: he not only openly rejects the false religion that Arvay used to hold faithfully, but also seems simultaneously to probe Arvay to see if she truly understands and rejects it alongside him. Arvay expresses her devotion to Jim in her vision by finally recognizing that Jim takes "that awful chance so that [she can] see the sunrise out [there] on [her] first sight of the ocean" (331). Maslow describes healthy people falling in love "the way one reacts to one's first appreciative perception of great music – one is awed and overwhelmed by it and loves it" (*Motivation and Personality* 253). Arvay's reaction to the sunrise on the ocean correlates to her love and devotion for Jim. She acknowledges "the sea vastness, the unobstructed glory of the rising sun, the delicate and forming colors on horizon and sea" and how the "new

sensations” she feels from the sea make “her eyesight ... better” (331). The longing Jim felt earlier at sea for Arvay’s embodiment of her own potential vision foreshadows the self-actualization she achieves in this scene. Jim describes the risk of the sea, declaring it “the biggest thing God ever made. It’s pretty...and then it can be ugly. It’s good and it’s bad. It’s something of everything on earth” (330). Through his words, Jim implies the complexities that accompany the life he lives and that Arvay appears to choose to live with him. The ocean, representative of Arvay’s new vision, continues to engender in her the desire to maintain her choice. She tells Jim, “I just can’t get over the ocean. It’s too big for me to even imagine. And night or day, it’s something wonderful to look at. I feel like I never want to go away from it no more. Seems like I been off somewhere on a journey and just got home” (333). Her perspective continues to reflect what Maslow describes as “the wonderful capacity to appreciate again and again, freshly and naively, the basic goods of life, with awe, pleasure, wonder, and even ecstasy” (*Motivation and Personality* 214-15). Following Jim’s description of how water returns to the sea, Arvay observes that “maybe it’s like that with everything and everybody. If it’s in there, it will return to its real self at last” (334). Jim affirms her statement by explaining the differences between his character and Arvay’s character: “Some folks are surface water and are easily seen and known about. Others get caught underground, and have to cut and gnaw their way out if they ever get seen by human eyes” (334). Jim’s comments acknowledge the differences in he and Arvay, while simultaneously expressing the ability that each of them contain to share the same vision in order to achieve self-actualization.

The final pages of the novel reveal an interesting aspect of Arvay’s new vision. Uniquely shaped by her own experiences, Arvay returns to biblical characters, this time

in a healthy manner, to interpret or direct her steps with Jim from this point onward. Arvay's mind expands with the knowledge that comes from good and evil alike. Weathers explains this value of Hurston in her critique on literary landscape in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by illuminating the necessity for protagonist Janie to taste the fruit of trees, which "posit knowledge of both good and evil," in order for the development of "self-knowledge necessary for personal growth, redemption, and deliverance" (201-2). Arvay, likewise, appears to understand the good and the evil present in both herself and the individuals of scripture, and thus learns accordingly from the combined knowledge. She refuses to "be looked upon as a Jonah" (339), which leads into the admiration of the masculinity in her husband. Significant contemplation leads Arvay to understand further the truth behind Jim's previous observations of her: "She had been weak and cowardly in the past, never realizing what he had done for her, and making not anything of being his wife" (342). When prodded by the thought of another woman standing next to Jim in her place, Arvay musters up "more fighting blood than [she] thought she had in her," as she resolves "to deal with things" by "going overboard with the drag and sweep the very bottom" (343). She actively "[accepts] the challenge" and declares, "That woman would have to beat what she could do and be, and that was going to be a gracious plenty. If and when she got hold of Jim, it was not going to be as a gracious gift from Arvay" (344). Arvay's choice of words here reveals the self-embodied agency that comes from her self-actualization. Rather than struggle against a life with Jim that contradicts the hindrances of her past, she chooses to take and use what God gives her to the best of her advantage. She reflects on more Biblical characters in order to craft her words to Jim, and decides upon "what Ruth said to Naomi" (344), extending

her own agency in her fate. Arvay rejects the religious hindrances of Sawley, and instead begins to shape her new vision in a healthier way, recognizing the spiritual truths of scripture that encourage agency and claiming them for herself.

Arvay actively continues to express her new vision by utilizing her agency towards her husband through physical intimacy. She initiates interaction with him by first leaving her door open and then summoning him to her (345-46). Despite her hesitancy and fear for lack of practice, Arvay insists that Jim listen to her. When Jim questions her “giving orders to the captain of a ship,” Arvay reminds him of his role as her husband, and “[mounts] to the pulpit...[taking] her text” from his observations (347). The words and actions that ensue between them reveal not only Jim’s insecurities, but also Arvay’s newly realized power. “All these years and time, Jim had been feeling his way towards her and grasping at her as she had been towards him” (348). Their mutual struggles create a deeper bond between Arvay and Jim, which helps them grow together towards a more fully self-actualized love. Maslow says that the benefits of this type of relationship do not require a necessity “to be guarded, to conceal, to try to impress, to feel tense, to watch one’s words or actions, to suppress or repress” (*Motivation and Personality* 239-40). The freedom that comes with this understanding allows the individuals to “feel psychologically (as well as physically) naked and still feel loved and wanted and secure” (*Motivation and Personality* 240). Arvay’s awareness of Jim’s insecurities encourages her to grow with Jim toward the self-actualizing love that contains “an absence of defenses,” with “an increase in spontaneity and in honesty” (*Motivation and Personality* 239). With these understandings, Arvay recognizes fully the role created for her, as an individual, to assume, and she now considers it as “her glory”

rather than “her cross” (351). Hints towards Arvay’s role as mother appear subtly throughout the novel in her feeling of protection towards her own children (252), her surprise at the dependency of family back in Sawley (295), and her joy in watching the grown crewmen play indulgently on the ship (341). Arvay finally assumes the role God creates her to fulfill.

This aspect of the story most fully expresses Arvay’s self-actualization. Although Jim responds to Arvay’s assertions in the captain’s bedroom by emphatically stating that she “[is] planted here now forever” (349), commanding her to do all he says, the narration reveals Arvay’s direct choice to be where she is rather than Jim’s enforcement of it. Maslow defines self-actualized love as “a fusion of great ability to love and at the same time great respect for the other and great respect for oneself” (*Motivation and Personality* 257). A self-actualized love allows individuals to “remain themselves and remain ultimately masters of themselves as well, living by their own standards even though enjoying each other intensely” (*Motivation and Personality* 257). Arvay joyfully submits to her husband’s desires since that embodies her role as she now understands it. Before this understanding, the hindrances from Arvay’s past agree with Maslow’s understanding of the individual who needs self-actualization: “a new discontent and restlessness will soon develop, unless the individual is doing what he is fitted for” (*Motivation and Personality* 91). Once Arvay recognizes and begins to embody what she is fitted for, the discontent and restlessness disappears. Again, the narration provides a direct correlation between Arvay and the sea. She recognizes that the sea “[is] acting in submission to the infinite, and Arvay felt its peace. For the first time in her life, she [acknowledges] that that [is] the only way” (349). Although many critics concerned with

gender issues interpret these words as Arvey submitting to her husband, evidence exists to suggest that Arvey submits in a broader sense to the natural order of things as God designed it, which differs for each individual. Maslow describes that the need for self-actualization “will of course vary greatly from person to person” (*Motivation and Personality* 92). For Arvey, the need for self-actualization takes the form of motherhood. Hurston uses Jim’s character earlier in the novel to assert the idea of God’s natural design: “in place of looking things in the face, you took and blinded your eyes...with that old missionary foolishness to make you believe that you was much too nice to feel natural. I was your man...just like you was my natural woman. It’s a mighty good idea to let God run things. He ain’t give nobody a thing He didn’t expect ‘em to use” (263). Arvey now refuses to blind herself any longer, and instead to understand that “all that [happens] to her, good or bad, [is] a part of her” (349-50). Rather than struggle against how God made her, Arvey studies herself “with wonder and deep awe like Moses before his burning bush,” declaring that the knowledge of everything inside her “would be all the religion that anybody needed” (350). Joined to Jim, she reflects on the “wonders” that surface from between them, “full of mysteries and a wonderful and unknown thing” (350). Arvey realizes how she previously prevents herself from understanding both Jim and her own self, but in her newly assumed role, Arvey “[meets] the look of the sun with confidence. Yes, she was doing what the big light had told her to do. She was serving and meant to serve. She made the sun welcome to come on in, then snuggled down again beside her husband” (352). Arvey’s actions and thoughts at the conclusion of the novel leave readers with a very distinct picture of an individual actively choosing not only to

submit to the life God destines for her, but also to make the most of what that destiny is by working with how God created her.

Many critics dismiss Hurston's conclusion as catering to the white audience by providing a typical happy ending. As St. Clair acknowledges, "Zora Neale Hurston was a woman of courage, vision and commitment, but her motives were often unclear" (56). When considering *Seraph's* religious implications, however, a brief return to Hurston's reflections on the subject matter reveals more in the novel that lines up with the Zora that so many admire. As mentioned previously, Hurston's work repeatedly places value on self-actualization, which *Seraph* certainly discusses and examines. Within this value, Hurston illustrates the complexities involved. Although she never uses the term self-actualization, Hurston writes about its concept in relation to religion in *Dust Tracks*:

I do not pretend to read God's mind. If He has a plan of the Universe worked out to the smallest detail, it would be folly for me to presume to get down on my knees and attempt to revise it...So I do not pray. I accept the means at my disposal for working out my destiny. It seems to me that I have been given a mind and will-power for that very purpose...Prayer seems to me a cry of weakness, and an attempt to avoid, by trickery, the rules of the game as laid down...I accept the challenge of responsibility. Life, as it is, does not frighten me, since I have made my peace with the universe as I find it, and bow to its laws...Why fear? ...I am one with the infinite and need no other assurance. (225-26)

Hurston's ideal treatment of religion that she values so in *Dust Tracks* appears explicitly through the growth in Arvay's character and seems to align more accurately with the final scene of Arvay that Hurston leaves with readers. Before Arvay leaves the burnt remains of the house in Sawley, Miss Hessie promises to remember to pray for her. Arvay's response mimics Hurston's own words in *Dust Tracks*: "Do that, Miss Hessie, and I'll do all in my power to take care of things my ownself. No need of wearing God out" (310). Arvay's words foreshadow the actions that later reflect her self-actualization. She

chooses to accept the means at her disposal for working out her destiny. Although filled with complexity, this choice implies agency in Arvey rather than the mere passive submission that most critics bemoan in *Seraph*. The submissive aspect exists, but certainly is not passive. Hurston develops Arvey's character as an individual dealing with the common struggles of humanity, and Hurston endows value upon a choice of submission that requires agency, revealing the achievement of Arvey's self-actualization. Arvey's new vision of religion affects this self-actualization and redefines the manner in which she chooses to live. Maslow relates that "self-actualizers have no deficiencies to make up and must now be looked upon as freed for growth, maturation, development, in a word, for the fulfillment and actualization of their highest individual and species nature" (*Motivation and Personality* 256). This is the state of potential Hurston leaves Arvey at the end of the novel. Hurston writes accurately in *Seraph* about the spiritual journey of a character that relates to Hurston herself, and undoubtedly to countless other individuals (Kaplan 558): Arvey, scattered with imperfections and complexities, determines to fight the hindrances of her false religious past, gains a new vision, and chooses to live in the truth of that vision. Arvey's spiritual transformation reflects her growth toward a new understanding and vision that embodies self-actualization. She becomes what she was inherently created to be.

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