

“I MAKE MYSELF WOOD”: THE GREEN WORLD ARCHETYPE IN THE LITERATURE OF BLACK AMERICAN WOMEN

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In the analysis of Black American women's literature, critics have tended to center their attention on topics which have been considered as specific to the black culture, such as the idea of sisterhood, the importance of motherhood or the sense of community. Nevertheless, there are other symbols and metaphors common to the work of these writers which could conceivably be included in a larger context of women's literature.

Metaphors, symbols, signs or archetypes have proved to be such ambiguous and limited concepts that, for the purpose of the present paper, I have considered the definition of archetype explained by Annis Pratt to be the most elucidating:

Archetypes constitute images, symbols and narrative patterns that differ from stereotypes in being complex variables, subject to variations in perception.¹

This means that each reader “lives” and “experiences” a book according to his or her personal experience and consciousness and that, logically, the interpretation will be conditioned by the specific cultural background of both reader and text.

One of the most striking features in the literature of Black American women in the green world archetype which Annis Pratt defines as

The woman turns away from her lover and towards a natural reality that she finds less threatening to her selfhood than love.²

This archetype has been developed and taken on a different meaning in the works of Black American writers, depending on their various protagonists and topics and according to the writer's own ideology and experiences.

Under the burden of male control, abuse and discrimination, sexism and racism, in their private lives as well as in society, black women have had to search for a reality that is not as threatening, at least to the same extent. In an active

struggle against the cruelty of both men and society, they turn to Nature and try to achieve an alliance with the universe that surrounds them, fully aware of its power to alleviate pain, to show them the way to self-expression in a society that provides only suffering and sadness, denying them the right to be themselves.

Annis Pratt cites a Greek legend in which Daphne, daughter of river Peneo and the Earth, turns into a laurel bush, that is, retreats into the green world, to escape from Apollo's advances, and gives examples indicating that this green world archetype is founded in mythologies of other early civilizations as well. A version of this same image is seen in Celie, the protagonist of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, who expresses the idea of evading men's cruelty by turning into a tree everytime Mr. —is about to beat or whip her: "he beat me like he beat the children... I make myself wood. I say to myself, Celie, you a tree. That's how come I know trees fear man".³

A more explicit reference to the legend is found in Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters*: Velma has attempted suicide to escape from a life full of cruelty and despair. While she is at a healing session, a doctor watches her and the healer and wonders if "the two women had arranged a secret rendez-vous in the fields and if going there he would find them both transformed, the older woman in full lotus under a blanket, the younger a laurel bush, as in some legend."⁴

There are many natural images in this literature used to convey this turning to Nature to alleviate grief or loneliness, but, among them, trees are the most outstanding. Philosophers and other scholars⁵ have considered the tree to be a symbol of "ascension" linked to the human wish to rise in power and knowledge, but in the case of black women's literature it is associated with very different meanings. In *The Salt Eaters*, for example, an old tree, where the Loa lives (and it is worthy of mention that the most important God or Loa in the voodoo tradition is Papa Legba and all the rites and sacrifices linked to him, as the God that "opens gates", are associated with a particular tree), is the representative of a changing situation in a black community, from oppression to freedom:

They passed the old tree where Minnie Ramson daily placed the pots of food and jugs of water for the Loa that resided there. Old Tree the free coloreds of Claybourne planted, as a gift to the generations to come... The branches, reaching away from the winter of destruction toward the spring of renewal... The leaves unfolding slowly after much coaxing season... the flowers... promising the perfect fruit of communal action.⁶

But many of the black women writers give the tree the power to offer solace, peace, hope or shelter to suffering or wandering lonely women of all ages. Sometimes the union with Nature is so perfect that sadness as well as happiness are completely shared. In Ntozake Shange's novel, *Sassafrass, Cypress and Indigo*, Indigo has to give up her conversations with her dolls, her best friends, because she

has become an adult. While in the forest saying goodbye to her fantasies, "weeping willows curled up from the earth, reaching over Indigo and Miranda on their last walk in a long friendship. Miranda thought the weeping willows were trying to hug them, to pull them up to the skies where whether you were real or not didn't matter".⁷

Sethe, the protagonist of Morrison's *Beloved*, was fiercely whipped by her white masters when she was young leaving an ugly scar on her back. For Amy, a poor white girl who helps her give birth to Denver while she is running away from slavery, Sethe's back is a beautiful tree:

It's a tree, Lu. A chokecherry tree. See, here's the trunk-it's red and split wide open, full of sap, and this here's the parting for the branches. You got a mighty lot of branches. Leaves, too, look like and dern if these ain't blossoms. Tiny little cherry blossoms just as white. Your back got a whole tree on it. In bloom. What God have in mind, I wonder. I had me some whippings, but I don't remember nothing like this.⁸

For Sethe, the scar is a constant reminder of all the burden she has to carry. It is not a tree in bloom but an image of despair born of the desperate murder of her own child: "I got a tree on my back and a haint in my house, and nothing in between but the daughter I'm holding in my arms. No more running-from nothing" (p. 15). Once her two sons have run away from their sister's "haint" she still associates the tree with images linked to slavery and lynchings, imagining her boys "hanging from the most beautiful sycamores in the world" (p. 6). Sethe's scar is quite different for Paul D, her friend from Sweet Home (their master's farm). He kisses every "leaf" of it but, having made love, and perhaps due to his association of the scar with their past, he considers it repulsive and not at all inviting. His mind goes back to Brother, a tree he had chosen at Sweet Home among all the beautiful trees in the farm where he and his friends could have time for themselves.

In Ntozake Shange's *Betsey Brown*, the tree can also represent a physical refuge. Betsey is at the stage when reality and dreams are easily confused. She is a leader in the house among her brother and sisters and usually adopts a womanish attitude. She becomes perplexed with adults' ideas and behaviour and the main reason for her perplexity is that she thinks everybody wants her to be somebody else. There is an oak in her backyard where she climbs when she needs peace and silence for her thoughts: "so Betsey knew this was her tree, where she could think all kinds of thoughts and feel all kinds of feelings".⁹ The tree offers "light" ("she looked all over the tree for some advice, some indication of what to do next", p. 73) and it is also a nest that gives protection. Here, all the important events in her life as a fifteen year old take place: she meets Eugene for the first time, she seeks revenge against Berenice for revealing her secret, she thinks about white children and racism and, there, she achieves the final acceptance of herself. We discover that her tree represents happiness and freedom on the last page of the book: "The extra stretch to the thickest limb of her tree by the terrace gave Betsey the breath she

needed to settle on other thoughts... anyone who could hear merengues and basketballs, feel loose and free in a comforting oak, was surely going to have her way” (p. 207).

The same idea is reflected in Alice Walker’s *Meridian*. The largest magnolia tree in the country is planted in Saxon School’s yard. It is called The Sojourner or The Music Tree and it is cut down because it offered the students the refuge and independence they needed to make love: “the steps... were trimmed away. And why? Because students —believing the slaves of a hundred and fifty years ago— used the platform and who knows, even the podium, as places to make love”.¹⁰

As a last example of the trees as a way to freedom, physical as well as psychological, *Beloved* shows Paul D’s escape to the North (described as Free, Magical, Welcoming and Benevolent North) counselled by a Cherokee: “Follow the tree flowers. As they go, you go. You will be where you want to be when they are gone”. (p. 112).

Due to the need for independence and privacy, women find relief in those places in Nature that can replace a house¹¹. Denver’s secret place in *Beloved* is a clearing in the wood “with murmuring leaves” and “green live walls” (p. 28) that she uses as a playroom and that protects her from the outer world, the disquieting menace when she feels displaced in her mother’s heart by a man or by her sister’s ghost.

A different interpretation of the tree is apparent in *Maud Martha*, here associated with a man. While at a Ball, she feels inferior and displaced by a much “lighter” girl in her husband’s heart. She wishes he was the tree she could lean on; she feels she could fight for her husband’s attention but the realization that colour is too high a wall between them makes her wonder, “but if the root was sour what business did she have up there hacking at a leaf?”¹²

In Ntozake Shange’s *Choreopoem*, the lady in red, a woman who has been telling a heart-rending story of despair and is on the verge of suicide, finds solace and an escape from her anguish when she is “rescued” by a tree:

it waz too much
i fell into a numbness
til the only tree i cd see
took me up in her branches
hel me in the breeze
made me dawn dew¹³

Finally, the tree as a representation of life, with its seasonal changes, is described in Zora Neal Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*: Janie, the female character, saw her life as “a great tree in leaf with the things suffered, things enjoyed, things done and undone. Dawn and doom was in the branches”.¹⁴

One important element in the green world archetype is the image of the green world lover, that is, a man who is not at all threatening, who is understanding and rejects a relationship based on male dominance, but whose appearances, in some cases, can be misleading. A prime example is found in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Janie, who represents the female quest for self-expression and true love, has a vision which as a very young and immature girl of fifteen she identifies as marriage: a pear tree being pollinated by bees. From that moment on, she longs for a relationship based on such fulfillment. In her grandmother's attempt not to let her become "the mule of the world", she is married to a man who is much older than herself and after a few weeks, she realizes that "his image was desecrating the pear tree" (p. 28). After running away with Joe Starks, responding to the starting point of her quest¹⁵, she realizes that "he did not represent sun-up and pollen and blooming trees". Marriage loses its beauty, her female self reacts and rejects Joe's sexual advances: "the bed was no longer a daisy field for her and Joe to play in", "she wasn't petal-open anymore with him" (p. 111). Once her two first dreams are dead, her original expectations are finally fulfilled in Tea Cake. There is no room in their relationship for dominance, subordination and male control. Because of the trials she must undergo, Janie is seen as travelling "to the horizon and back". Her last trial and doubtless the most appalling is killing her green world lover in self-defense. The return to the community to be "judged" is the end of her journey into self-expression and true love. Her last vision is seen in terms of Tea Cake as the green world lover (whose name is, not incidently, Woods).

These examples clearly demonstrate that the green world is a constant in Black American women's literature and, as such, includes this tradition within a much wider literary context. Nevertheless, the interpretations of this archetype are expanded to include, not only a turning away from men towards a natural reality, but also seeking solace and protection from a society hostile to black women as well as a space in which to develop their own sense of self-worth and identity.

Just as Paul D uses the natural world as a guide to escape from slavery to freedom, so the other characters transcend the limitations of their physical and psychological realities to achieve fulfillment through contact with the green world.

Notas

¹ Annis Pratt, *Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction* (Great Britain: The Harvester Press, 1982), p. 4.

² Pratt, p. 21.

³ (London: The Women's Press, 1983), p. 22.

⁴ (London: The Women's Press, 1982), p. 57.

⁵ Gaston Bachelard, *La Poética del Espacio* (Méjico: Fondo Cultura Económica, 1965), pp. 278-279. For Bachelard, the tree represents "la figura del ser que se concentra sobre sí mismo", "el árbol está vivo, pensante, tendido hacia Dios".

⁶ Bambara, pp. 145-146.

⁷ (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982), p. 23.

⁸ Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1987), p. 79. All subsequent notes will refer to this edition.

⁹ (London: Methuen, 1985), p. 42. All subsequent notes will refer to this edition.

¹⁰ Alice Walker, *Meridian* (London: The Women's Press, 1982), p. 34.

¹¹ Gaston Bachelard, *La Poética del Espacio* (Méjico: Fondo Cultura Económica, 1965), pp. 35-36. For Bachelard, "todo espacio realmente habitado lleva como esencia la noción de casa", "la casa protege al soñador, la casa nos permite soñar en paz".

¹² Gwendolyn Brooks, *Maud Martha* "If You're Light and Have Long Hair" in Mary Helen Washington, *Black-Eyes Susans* (New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1975), p. 42.

¹³ Ntozake Shange, *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When The Rainbow Is ENUF* (London: Methuen, 1984), p. 63.

¹⁴ Zora Neal Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1978), p. 20. All subsequent notes will refer to this edition.

¹⁵ See Missy Dehn Kubitschek, "'Tuh de horizon and back': The Female Quest in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, in *Black American Literary Forum*, Vol. 17, No. 3 (Fall, 1983), pp. 109-115.

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