

**“WHO’S GOT HIS OWN?”: SOCIAL PROTEST IN KRISTEN HUNTER’S
*GOD BLESS THE CHILD***

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God Bless the Child, published in 1964, takes its title from a song by Billie Holiday and it is no coincidence that the main character’s life portrayed in the novel is as tragic and sad as that of the singer’s.

The book is better understood when placed within its two immediate contexts: first, the literary. This book belongs to the literary movement known as the Second Black Renaissance, a throwback to the Harlem Renaissance of the twenties. Again there is a flowering of black culture in the sixties, although with a stronger emphasis on literature, while in the twenties the emphasis fell mostly on fields such as music, dance, etc. Numerous books by blacks (male and female) are published in this period and black literature reaches its greatest intensity regarding the expression of topics and ideas typical of blacks. It is significant that black writers now begin to receive literary awards from the “establishment”. Kristin Hunter herself received the Philadelphia Athanaeum Literary Award for *God Bless the Child*.

Second, the political: written during the Civil Rights Era, sometimes called the Second Reconstruction ¹, in which important sociopolitical gains were made by black Americans regarding social equality and integration, achieved through the turmoil of sit-ins, demonstrations, marches, (the march of Washington in 1963, the Montgomery Bus Boycott, etc.). Despite all this, in *God Bless the Child* there is no direct treatment of any particular political situation. What we do find, however, are certain and implicit allusions to the social condition of black people. Even though the outstanding characteristic of the literature by blacks in the 60s is the protest element, Hunter’s development of protest is carried out through her dealing with some of the same ideas and concepts existent in the Black Women’s Literary Tradition since times of slavery. In fact, in *God Bless the Child* several elements are present that appear also in other novels by Zora Neale Hurston, Toni Morrison, Nella Larsen, etc.

First, there are certain associations that the characters in the novel relate to the colour “black”. On the one hand, it is conceived as something connected with feeling, with a state of mind; in this case, “to feel black” is equated with “to feel bad”. For instance, Queenie says on one occasion to her mother,

‘Sometimes I get sick of hearin’ how white folks live ’cause it makes me remember how I gotta live. Sometimes, just sometimes I wish you’d stop. The more you talk about your white folks the blacker I feel’. (p. 20)

On the other, as a result of their complex of inferiority, black people themselves regard “black” as something ordinary, low, and think the lighter the tone of skin the better. This is evident in what Granny says to Rosie referring to Tom Tucker:

‘Glad to see you takin’ up with somebody like him, refined and ambitious and all. ’Course he is a bit too dark, but you can’t have everything. ’Specially bein’ the color you are’. (p. 117)

Or when she talks proudly about her own light tone:

‘Down Home, we were always the lightest. That’s how come we were house servants, not field servants’. (p. 20)

Also present in this novel is the notion of the white conception of black as being lustful, lascivious. Queenie’s remark is significant of this:

‘White folks like her always think colored folks are up to something immoral’. (p. 131)

Although it is just an anecdote, the idea that blacks had to cheat whites in order to get some advantage is worth mentioning, too. The following is an example. One day, Lourinda, who was cleaning Miss Emile’s room, picked up a pearl and said to her mistress, “‘Pearls like this might get broken here, Miss Emile. It’s cracked already. I’ll just put it away’. And Miss Emile said, ‘It’s not worth anything, Lourinda, it’s just in the way. Why don’t you take it on home?’”. So Lourinda took it and gave it to Rosie as a present, who said, “I don’t see no crack, Granny” and she replied, “There ain’t no crack, child” (pp. 21-22).

The characters in the novel used as vehicles for protest of the black social condition can be divided into three groups; the main one composed of the three women protagonists: Lourinda Huggs (Granny), Queenie and Rosie Fleming.

Of secondary importance are the three people whose lives revolve around Rosie’s and help to shape more accurately the picture Hunter wanted to portray. First, Larnie Bell, Rosie’s boyfriend, who goes to college in order to become a classical musician, but owing to his passion for jazz and his involvement with a white girl, finally ends up as an ordinary piano player at Benny’s cabaret. Then we

have Dolly Diaz, Rosie’s friend since childhood, whose innocent and naive personality leads her to worship Rosie’s way of life and despise her own middle-class position, as we see from the following quote:

Dolly groped; sighed; finally settled for the approximate words. ‘The way you live is so exciting. So glamorous’.

Rosie stared at her a moment longer, then threw back her head and laughed raucously. ‘You simple ass. Hell, this ain’t glamour. This is just poverty’. (p. 195)

The last figure in this group is Tom Tucker, an orphan boy who will become Rosie’s colleague in the numbers racket. He is a self-made man and his ambition is as strong as Rosie’s. Nothing in life is more important to him than money. This he will prove by betraying Rosie later on.

Like the protagonist’s, these characters’ dreams are finally destroyed: Larnie fails in his musical career; Tucker leaves the town with his reputation stained and Dolly loses her innocence and stops idealizing Rosie and her milieu. As Hunter tells us towards the end of the novel:

Dolly saw Rosie clearly for the first time, without the distortion of her own needs, and she was not a marvelous, glamorous creature after all; she was just a child. (p. 300)

The third group is made up of minor characters who contribute to create the peculiar atmosphere in the book. They belong to the underworld into which Rosie enters in order to earn enough money to secure all the things she wants in life. One is Pockets Robinson, who pretends to be a powerful man but is, in fact, working under the orders of the white man who controls the district. This man is the owner of the cabaret at which Rosie and Larnie work. Benny, although he seems to dominate the numbers racket, is only “another cog in the Machine” of the Mafia. He is controlled in the same way he controls other people. The following text is significant:

‘What’s The Machine?’ she asked, picturing a crane like a great blind dinosaur, dipping its giant scoop-shovel snout to pick up her tiny figure and deposit it on the rubbish heap. It was an accurate picture.

‘I don’t really know’, Benny admitted. ‘I’m just a cog in the Machine. It never bothers me as long as I keep it oiled’.

Benny was just another small, stocky, perspiring man in rumpled clothes as he explained, ‘The Machine is big money, Rosie. White money. Not Italian, pure Anglo-Saxon lily white. Banks and investment houses. They invest in policy just like they invest in corn and cotton. When they decide that little independent people are draining off too much of the profits, they fix you’.

‘You mean they can fix the race-track numbers in the papers?’

'The Machine can do anything it wants, Rosie. Start wars if it wants.
Elect Presidents.'
'But who are they?' she insisted on knowing.
'They're the ones with Power'. (pp. 285-286)

Another of these characters is Miltie Newton, an incompetent and pitiful alcoholic who helps Rosie in the numbers racket. He is perhaps the only good-natured person of all. Last in this group is Shadow, a symbolic name, for he is a pimp who has followed Rosie since she is seven and finally helps her have an abortion. The connotations of death are clear in Rosie's perception of him in the moment before the abortion:

The worst was the clear moment when he approached her with a wad of cotton soaked in chloroform and she looked up at last into his blank colorless eyes and knew who he was and was glad to see him coming. (p. 254)

It is around the three main female characters, however, that Hunter elaborates her main protest of the American Dream, revolving essentially around Rosie's quest for that ideal.

Following the classical-linear structure in which novels are divided into three parts, the first serving as the introduction of characters and plot, the second functioning as the part of greatest complexity and the last as the conclusion, the novel describes the life of Rosie Fleming from the time she is seven until her death at an early age (which is not specified in the text). She is a black, poor and uneducated girl who only dreams of getting out of the ghetto. There are two main influences in her life. One is that of her granny, an old lady who is proud of having worked for a rich white family for forty years. The other is that of her mother, who works as a simple hairdresser. These two characters embody two different attitudes towards life: the first instils in Rosie an urge for the luxury and high life that she sees in the house of her "white folks". The second conceives things from a more realistic perspective, values other aspects of existence such as love, friendship, happiness, and has a bitter philosophy of life. From childhood, Granny used to give Rosie small and valueless gifts that the white people she worked for didn't want anymore; while her mother had neither enough milk nor food to eat. All they had was a filthy house full of roaches. All this leads Rosie to feel admiration and extreme affection for Granny and indifference towards Queenie. Each woman leaves Rosie an important legacy: from her mother she takes the sense of independence; a headstrong ambition from her grandmother. The plot centers on the conflict Rosie encounters between the dream-world embodied by Granny and the real-world personified by Queenie.

The profit motive Rosie develops following her Granny's ideas drives her to hold two simultaneous jobs: as a sales-girl at Mr. Schwartz's shop during the day and as a night-waitress at Benny's cabaret, while working illegally in the numbers racket, eventually ruining her health to death owing to the hard work she does and the little care she takes of herself.

Too late does she realize that the frivolous and superficial life of luxury she so thoroughly sought was not in the end as bright and wonderful as it seemed. Finally, the protagonist dies questioning herself:

(...): Did rich white people have roaches too?

As her mind admitted the possibility for the first time, Rosie really did laugh, from the top of her voice to the bottom, a full free laugh that echoed through all the rooms. Yes, maybe they did have roaches, and termites, too, and dandruff, and tooth decay, and falling hair. Granny had never mentioned such things, of course, but they still might be. (p. 305)

Basically, the tragic sense of this novel arises from the lack of understanding between Lourinda and Queenie. The first spoils Rosie by instilling in her ideas of luxury and wealth that obviate her understanding of the real, important virtues of people and life. Queenie feels jealous of Rosie’s feelings towards her granny: .

‘Yeah, it was always her’, Mom went on, ‘her you ran to, not me. You’d cut yourself and keep it hid from me all week, lettin’ it get all festered and angry, so’s she could bandage it when she came home. Then she’d say, “Queenie, why don’t you look after your child?” Hah!’ Mom laughed shortly. ‘You always would spite yourself to spite me’. (p. 247)

and at the same time blames her mother for her husband’s leaving her:

Queenie shook her head stubbornly. ‘She was out to break us up from the beginning. He didn’t suit her high-and-mighty ideas’. She chuckled. ‘She named me “Queen Victoria Regina” out of some magazine. With a name like that, I had to marry a king. Grover Cleveland Fleming wasn’t good enough. He was just named for a President’. (p. 248)

As a matter of fact, Granny will try to do the same thing about Larnie, interfering in Rosie’s affair with him. So, instead of love and affection, what the protagonist faces at home from childhood is a continuous tension between her Granny and her mother. That way she will grow up without her own ideas and projects. Everything she does is governed by desire to please Granny and the materialistic side of life she taught her, forgetting about other aspects such as love, happiness, friendship, etc.

According to Darwin T. Turner, Kristin Hunter

(...) added her voice to the voices of others in the 1960s who observed the need to replace the greed and materialism of the American Dream. (p. xxii)

but I would add that she also points out that the American Dream was in fact a device created by and for the progress of white Anglo-Saxon Americans, therefore

excluding all other people such as Blacks, Latinos or Indians. Economic success and social prestige, as proclaimed by the American Dream, are not open to black people in a racist society like the U.S. Tom Tucker refers to that when he says to Rosie:

‘Look’, he said. ‘I’m black. Only way I can make it in this country is be an outlaw’. (p. 100)

or even the naive Dolly:

‘Why don’t you stop kidding yourself, Rosie? There aren’t any colored millionaires. There never will be’. (p. 208)

Whereas in the literature written by blacks during the sixties the direct description and treatment of black issues was the most outstanding feature, Hunter expresses through this novel a certain amount of veiled protest in a personal way, since she doesn’t make allusions to any political situation nor does she give us any clear hint that would suggest any political commitment. However, the ideas underlying the novel are inéquivocal in showing a high degree of socio-political protest of the inequal and biassed conditions black people have to live under in the American society.

Notes

¹ Turner, Darwin T., in page vii of his Introduction to *God Bless the Child*, by Kristin Hunter, (Howard University Press, Washington D.C.), 1986. All subsequent pages will refer to this edition.

Kristin Hunter (Philadelphia, 1931) began writing in a newspaper at the age of 14; in 1972 accepted a teaching position at the University of Pennsylvania and at the moment she combines that activity with her writing work. *The Landlord* (1966), *The Survivors* (1975) and *The Lakestown Rebellion* (1978) are other adult novels written by her. She writes also for young people.