

From Detachment To Attachment In Gayle Jones'S *The Healing*

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ABSTRACT

African-American women writers have always been keenly aware of the impact of race, class, gender and oppression upon their lives. Because of African Black slavery, African women have struggled individually and in groups. They have fought through formal organizations to eradicate the multiple injustices that their communities have faced. It is only the memories of the painful and agonizing activates experienced by their people in American which makes them to accept the violence and bitterness that has characterized African-American writing of recent past. The African-American writer's are now speaking about the independence for the Black people as never before. The first Renaissance 'of African-American writing came in the late twenties and early thirties of the twentieth century. It was called the Harlem Renaissance'or New Negro Movement'or Black Renaissance'; the writers of the Renaissance were apprehensive with numerous social and economic problems but they had basically turned to the problems of race, gender and class discrimination African-American people.

Gale Jones's one of the best novels *The Healing* which earned a good name and fame for her. Robert Bone called it a classic of Black folk culture and literature, one of the best novels of the period. (33) And indeed it is a glaring comparison with another literary classic, Henry James's *Portrait of a Lady*. In both novels, the protagonist is a woman who must make a major decision about the course of her life. Isabel Archer, much to the chagrin of her readers, dutifully

returns to her despicable husband, Osmond, determined to lie in the cold and uncomfortable bed she has made for herself. She feels it a shirking of duty to do otherwise. Harlan Jane Eagleton, on the other hand, after dutifully marrying the man her grandmother has chosen for her-an old farmer who owns sixty acres and house and finding no real satisfaction there, strikes out, like Huck Finn, for the territory in search of her dreams and the possibility of a better life beyond the horizon. Her second husband is a little better than her first, but Harlan Jane endures, hiding her dreams away until she is free to search again. She begins her search when she is sixteen years old. By the time she finds what she wants, she is forty. The important thing is that she never gives up the search; she simply bides her time until things get better.

In *The Healing* has universal implications for women in that it protests against the restrictions and limitations imposed upon women by a masculine society. Hemingway asserts that, in this novel, Gale Jones discovered one of the flaws in her early memories of the village (Eatonville): there had usually been only men telling lies on the front porch and where men saw one thing and understood, while women saw ten things and understood. Like the women of most societies, the females in Harlan Jane's town were expected and encouraged to marry for security and economic advancement. The story is rather awkwardly told by both the heroine, Harlan Jane Eagleton, and an omniscient narrator, and is revealed, for the most part, in a flashback to Harlan Jane's best friend, Joan Watson.

The narrative is awkward in some places because much of what Harlan Jane tells Joan, Joan must already know, partly because she is Harlan Jane's best friend, and partly because Joan was a part of Eatonville just as Harlan Jane was. Both must have many common experiences which there would be no need to repeat in the narrative. In order to make the novel

succeed, then, one must take Coleridge's advice and willingly suspend one's disbelief. Once that is accomplished, the novel succeeds handsomely. As Gale Jones reveals: The plot was far from the circumstances, but I tried to embalm all the tenderness of my passion for him in *The Healing* (24). Gale Jones claimed that the story had been dammed up inside her, and she had released it, in seven weeks, in Haiti. What she wrote was the story of a woman in search of self and genuine happiness, of people rather than things, the story of a young, black woman with her eyes on the horizon. Although Harlan Jane Eagleton's search is the main thrust of the novel, other themes—freedom from materialism, interracial prejudice, and sex stereotyping also demand our attention. The key to the novel is Harlan Jane's idea of marriage, which is pitted against other, less romantic and other ideas of marriage in the novel.

Harlan Jane gets her definition of marriage from nature. When she is sixteen, her sexuality awakens as she watches the mystery of a blossoming pear tree in her back yard: From barren brown stems to glistening leaf-buds to snowy virginity of bloom. It stirred her tremendously. How? Why? It was like a flute song forgotten in another existence and remembered again. What? How? Why? (12). The answers to her questions come when she sees a dust-bearing bee sink into the sanctum of a bloom; the thousand sister-calyxes arch to meet the love embrace and the ecstatic shiver of the tree from root to tiniest branch creaming in every blossom and frothing with delight. So this was a marriage! She had been summoned to behold a revelation. Then Harlan Jane felt a pain remorseless sweet that left her limp and languid (52). The sexual imagery in these passages is blatant. The scene is orgasmic and impresses Harlan Jane so strongly that she experiences a pain remorseless sweet after which she is limp and languid. This is the idea of marriage that she carries with her and for which she searches for

nearly thirty years. It is a romantic notion, certainly, but one certainly worth harboring. 100 After she witnesses the marriage between the pear tree and the bee, Harlan Jane looks for similar marriages elsewhere. She finds what she seeks inside the kitchen of the house where she lives with her grandmother. In the air of the room were flies tumbling and singing, marrying and giving in marriage. (145) this, too, is nature at work that Harlan Jane identifies with the pear tree; all she needs is the right dust-bearing bee to pollinate her buds. Then she will be happy: oh to be a pear tree- any tree in bloom! With kissing bees singing of the beginning of the world! She was sixteen. She had glossy leaves and bursting buds and she wanted to struggle with life but it seemed to elude her. Where were the singing bees for her? (26). That the intensity of her desire would blind her to reality is made ironically and immediately apparent in the very next paragraph where Harlan Jane, looking through pollinated air saw a glorious being coming up the road. In her former blindness she had known him as shiftless Johnny Taylor,

The desecrators come in the form of the people whose notions of marriage differ drastically from Harlan Jane 's but not from each other's. Harlan Jane 's grandmother and Harlan Jane 's first and second husbands all see marriage as a materialistic security venture. They limit Harlan Jane and spit on her pear tree image. Gertrude Stein, Harlan Jane 's grandmother, sees marriage as a way out for Harlan Jane , as escape from poverty and abuse, a chance to sit on a high place. Nancy's greatest wish is that Harlan Jane finds a respectable husband with property so that she can avoid the traditional fate of black women.

By choosing Williams as a husband for her granddaughter, Nancy makes two errors. Darwin Turner describes the first as a feeling that life cheated her by enslaving her, Nancy Vows that her granddaughter will enjoy the happiness she herself has never known. But seeking to

realize herself through her granddaughter, she fails to allow for Harlan Jane 's personality and aspirations (14).

Gertrude 's first error naturally leads to her second. Because she wants to live through Harlan Jane , to obtain through her the things, the protection and security she herself never had, she is blinded to Williams' short comings. Actually Williams is too set in his ways and obsessed with his property to treat Harlan Jane like a real woman; instead, he treats her like a livestock on his farm; he soon measures her value, then, in terms of how much work she can do and how much time she spends doing it. Ironically, Harlan Jane has become something of a spit cup after all; her role is hardly more than servile.

Harlan Jane 's grandmother (and Jessica Starks) thinks that freedom is symbolized achieving the position on high (57). Harlan Jane finds another bad catch in her next husband, Jessica Starks, an ambitious young man on his way to make his fortune in the small, all-black community of Eatonville, Florida. To the romantic Harlan Jane , he is a knight in shining armor for he not only rescues her from her miserable marriage with Logan, but he also offers to fulfill her dreams if she will run away and marry him. Harlan Jane is reluctant to accept Jessica's offer because he did not represent sun up and pollen and blooming trees (4). Because he spoke for far Horizon, however, she capitulates. When Starks comes to fetch her in his hired rig, Harlan Jane unties them upon, a symbol of her servile life with Williams, from around her Waist, and takes a seat beside Starks: With him on it, it sat like some high, ruling chair. From now on until death she was going to have flower dust and spring time sprinkled over everything. A bee for her bloom, her old thoughts were going to come in handy now, but new words would have to be made and said to fit them.

Unfortunately, Harlan Jane does not have the presence of mind that she needs to read Starks correctly. That Starks, who reminds Harlan Jane of Mr. Watson, transforms the rig into some high, ruling chair and has already told her that a pretty doll-baby like you is made to sit on the front porch and rock and fan. You self should have given Harlan Jane pause. She, after all, does not wish to sit on high and be ruled. Starks does represent for horizon, however, so Harlan Jane becomes Mrs. Jessica Starks, later Mrs. Mayor Starks, Naïve and trusting, she is petal open for him. Some critics, who are perhaps too steeped in cold reality, have pointed out that Gale Jones has her heroine acquire a second husband here without benefit of a divorce from her first. According to Harlan Jane, however-and by extension, according to Gale Jones-her marriage with Williams has never consummated: She was petal open but he was no pollen-bearing bee; the only dust he brought was field dirt and most of that was on his feet.

Harlan Jane did not, could not, love Williams and thus could not froth with delight, no orgasm was forthcoming, so obviously no marriage had taken place- nor by Harlan Jane's pear tree standards at any rate.

As Gale Jones says in the novel, for women the dream is the truth (the sole reality). Then they act and do things accordingly. The familiar people and things had failed her so she hung over the gate and looked up the road towards way off. She knew now that marriage did not make love. Harlan Jane's first dream was dead, so she became a woman. Harlan Jane's new husband becomes mayor of Eatonville and, as proprietor of the general store, its wealthiest citizen. Jessica Starks, consumed by ambition and a desire for property and possessions, soon begins to treat Harlan Jane like a showpiece: Jessica told her to dress up and stand in the store all that evening

Everybody was coming sort of fixed up, and he didn't mean for nobody else's wife to rank with her. She must look on herself as the bell-cow, the other women were the gang. And he forbids her to participate in the main entertainment of the town, the telling of lies around the porch of the community store. Jessica's ambition is powerful enough, but his love (is) short-sighted. He is too busy building a big, white mansion a high place which he thinks will represent security and power-which makes the rest of the town look like servants' quarters.

It is no mistake that he often prefaces his remarks with I, god. His attitude makes a feeling of coldness and fear take hold of Harlan Jane. She felt far away from things and lovely. When she is twenty-four and has been married seven years to Jessica, Harlan Jane closes her petals; her relationship with her husband becomes purely perfunctory: The spirit of the marriage left the bedroom and took to living in the parlor. It was there to shake hands whenever company came to visit, but it never went back inside the bedroom again... The bed was no longer a daisy-field for her and Joe to play in. It was a place where she went and laid down when she was sleepy and tired... (15) When Jessica slaps her one day when dinner turns out badly, Harlan Jane stood where he left her for unmeasured time and thought. She stood there until something fell off the shelf inside her.

Then she went inside there to see what it was. It was her image of Jessica tumbled down and shattered. But looking at it she saw that it never was the flesh and blood figure of her dreams. Just something she had grabbed up to drape her dreams over. In a way she turned her back upon the image where it lay and looked further. She had no more blossomy openings dusting pollen over her man, neither any glistening young fruit where the petals used to be. She

found that she had a host of thoughts she had never expressed to him, and numerous emotions she had never let Jessica know about. Things packed and put away in parts of her heart where he could never find them. She was saving up feelings for some man she had never seen. (39) Not only does Jessica prohibit Harlan Jane from talking with the common folks, but he demands that she wear a head rag to hide her beautiful hair when she works in the store. Parts of the real Harlan Jane, then, are all wrapped up, literally and figuratively.

Jessica Starks is too much like Logan Williams to make Harlan Jane happy. Starks, like Williams, feels that Harlan Jane ought to be proud and grateful for what he has done for her. After all, he has lifted her out of the valley and placed her on his mountaintop: Here he was just pouring honor all over her; building a high chair for her to sit in and overlook the world and she here pouting over it! Not that he wanted anybody else, but just too many women would be glad to be in her place (21). Harlan Jane, though humble, is not grateful. She doesn't want to be above anybody. She just wants to be equal. The years took all the fight out of Harlan Jane's face. For a while she thought it was gone from her soul.

No matter what Jessica did, she said nothing. She had learned how to take some and leave some. She was 108 a rut in the road. Plenty of life beneath the surface but it was kept beaten down the wheels. Sometimes she struck out into the future, imagining her life different from what it was. But mostly she lived between her hat and her heels, with her emotional disturbances like shade patterns in the woods-come and gone with the sun. She got nothing from Jessica except what money could buy, and she was giving away what she didn't value (75).

Harlan Jane 's position, however, is only temporary until the opportunity she awaits presents itself. In the meantime, having considered flight and rejected it to where? To what?, she becomes a stoic; She got so she received all things with the solidness of the earth which soaks up urine and perfume with the same indifference. Things reach the climax about sixteen years later when Harlan Jane , who has been constantly and publicly reminded of her aging by Jessica, decides to strike back. The scene is the store and the results are a short version of the dozens with the fatal blow being levied by Harlan Jane ; Humph! Talkin' bout me lookin' old! When you pull down yo britches, you look lak de change uh life. Jessica is shattered: Harlan Jane had robbed him of his illusion of irresistible maleness that all men cherish, which was terrible.

There was nothing to do in life anymore. Ambition was useless (70). Harlan Jane has shown Jessica that the security and power of the high place is largely an illusion. Shortly afterwards, Jessica, has now broken, takes to his bed. Within a few weeks he is dead. He dies pretending to believe that he has been fixed by save one was not an uncommon belief among blacks during the early twentieth century Gale Jones had introduced voodoo and its powers in *The Healing*. The implication is that the supernatural-voodoo, in this case-exercises its powers, whenever summoned by voodoo practitioners, over natural man. Although Joe Starks does not really believe that he has been fixed by his wife, then, its possibility is seriously considered by the other town people. Although Harlan Jane hasn't used voodoo against her husband, she is finally free. She had run off from her first husband to keep house with Jessica's in uh wonderful way.

Jessica's death gives her another chance. Just as she had thrown the apron away when she left Williams so she could now throw the head rag away which had been a symbol of her

imprisonment with Jessica. She could once again let down her hair and try to live. Having discovered that She had an inside and on outside now and... how not to mix them, she sends her starched and ironed face to Joe's funeral, but she herself went rollicking with the springtime across the world. The horizon is before her once again, and this time Harlan Jane does not plan to let it out of her sight. All of her life, Harlan Jane has been searching, but thus far she hasn't found. She is interested in people and love while all the people who have controlled her life thus far-her grandmother, Logan Williams, and Jessica Starks have been interested in property and wealth, and the respectability each seemingly brings. They have insisted upon prose (materialism), while Harlan Jane herself prefers and seeks poetry. Having tried her grandmother's way of life, Harlan Jane now determines to live her own. She explains to Joan Nancy was burned in slavery when folks,

She hates her grandmother for limiting her to speak when the whole horizon beckoned: She had been getting ready for her great journey to the horizons in search of people; it was important to the entire world that she should find them and they find her. But she had been shipped like a cur dog and run off down a back road after things..., Here Nancy had taken the biggest thing God ever made, the horizon for no matter how far a person can go the horizon is still way beyond you-and pinched it in to such a little bit of a thing that she could tie it about her granddaughter's neck tight enough to choke her. She hated the old woman who had twisted her so in the name of love (26-27).

As for her husbands, since Harlan Jane insisted upon being petal open with them, it was essential that they be open and communicative with her. That was not the case, however, both Williams and Jessica refusing to share them; they did not know how. When Harlan Jane

suggested to, Williams that she might run off and leave him somebody, Williams refused to reveal his real feelings: There! Harlan Jane had put words to his held in fears. She might run off sure enough. The thought put a terrible ache in Logan's body, but he thought it best to put on scom. Harlan Jane how jealous he was. He never told her how often he had seen the other men figuratively wallowing in is as she went about things in the store.. She was there in the store for him to look at, not those others (70).

But he never said things like that. It just wasn't in him When Jessica overheard Harlan Jane expressing sympathy for an abused mule which often served as the butt of many jokes, he bought the mule, turned him to pasture, and to become everyone's favorite. He never told Harlan Jane, however, that he had bought the mule to please her. By contrast, Harlan Jane had been forced to tuck herself a way with her first two husbands, with Taicy, her soul crawled out from its hiding place(90). The second part of Harlan Jane 's life deals with its poetry, with trying to know the common news, so she'd be ready for the entry when it came. When Taicy, a happy-go-lucky black man at least eighteen years younger than Harlan Jane, arrives in town, Harlan Jane 's springtime begins a new growth. Thus, the novel ends with a positive note.

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