The Black Madonna: 
*Notions of True Womanhood from Jacobs to Hurston* 

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In trying to overcome a heritage of concubinage and to assimilate values of Victorian society, black female writers of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, like Harriet Jacobs, Frances Harper, and to a lesser extent Nella Larsen, seemed compelled to bind their female characters in a corset of chastity. The women in their works are depicted as either sexual martyrs or as saints. In their attempts to shed the stereotype of the sinful sexual woman, these writers sometimes robbed their characters of their sexual identity, making them pure, passionless, almost holy—Virgin Mary figures, as feminist Bell Hooks notes (31). The writings of Jacobs, Harper, Larsen, and Zora Neale Hurston show a progression from apologetic acknowledgment of the shame of sexual slavery to defiant celebration of the joy of sexual freedom.

Being of the minority race in a society presents one set of problems. Combined with gender, the situation becomes "double jeopardy," as Faith Pullin says. Black women, she writes, face the "painful condition of double jeopardy, the double strain of being a woman in a sexist society and black in a racist one" (178). The early novels of African American women illustrate the situation of double jeopardy for black females. Not only are black females marginalized by race, but also by gender. Jacobs and Harper wrote during the Victorian era, a period obsessed with morality. The period spawned a code of ethics for women, "the cult of true womanhood." The "true woman," according to prevailing notions of the period, was a paragon of virtue, a madonna, as it were: pious, pure, submissive, domestic. Of
course, this view of the ideal woman, promoted by whites, did not extend to black women, who were too often seen as temptresses with insatiable sexual appetites. Many blacks felt they had to combat this notion. The task fell to black middle class club women who set about encouraging a strict moral code and extolling the virtues of women of their class. Some, like Frances Harper, accomplished this through writing. What I call a “black madonna” character developed in African American literature to compete with the ideal of the white madonna upheld by the cult of true womanhood. Often, the ideal black woman depicted in post-bellum literature is a mulatto, as Frances Smith Foster points out:

Although the social and economic realities of black life did not allow strict adherence to the Cult of True Womanhood, black women, at least publicly, aspired to this standard. The earliest and most pervasive image of the female protagonist in Afro-American literature is that of the tragic mulatto, the epitome of True Womanhood. Not only is she pious and pure, but she is also beautiful and more refined than most white women. (34)

Harper’s title character in her book *Iola Leroy: Or, Shadows Uplifted* illustrates this point. Iola is the black answer to the calling of true womanhood. Daughter of a black woman and a white man, light-skinned Iola grows up believing she is white and identifying with the slave-holding class—until she learns she is of mixed race. When her father dies, her status follows that of her mother, and she is remanded to slavery. In post-Civil War freedom, she marries a light-skinned mulatto doctor—a physical and psychic counterpart—and the pair hie to the South to work for elevation of the race.

To understand better the efforts of Frances Harper and others working to promote uplift of the race we need only examine history. A female slave narrative would be a logical place to begin. Harriet Jacobs deals with sexual slavery in her narrative, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. The story’s main character, Linda Brent (a thinly veiled Jacobs), recounts episodes surrounding her enslavement and eventual escape from bondage. Born in 1813 in Edenton, North Carolina, Jacobs was a slave in the household of Dr. James Norcrom, who threatened her repeatedly with sexual advances. She retaliated by having a long-term sexual relationship with Samuel Tredwell Sawyer, a young white lawyer, with whom she
had a son and a daughter. Norcrom continued to pursue her. In 1842, Jacobs escaped to the North, eluding Norcrom, who attempted to capture her. Abolitionist and Quaker Amy Post persuaded Jacobs to write her story in 1853, and the book was published eight years later. In describing female slavery, Jacobs demonstrates how the values of the cult of true womanhood become inverted for the black woman: If God has bestowed beauty upon her, it will prove her greatest curse. That which commands admiration in the white woman only hastens degradation of the female slave (28).

Gender is essential to Jacobs’s story. It separates Jacobs’s slave narrative from those of Frederick Douglass and Booker T. Washington, for example, by calling particular attention to the plight of female slaves. Jacobs deals with the double-jeopardy theme. Brent loses her chastity while trying to maintain her dignity—by taking a white lover instead of succumbing to her master’s persistent sexual advances. She defends her decision by saying, “It seems less degrading to give one’s self than to submit to compulsion” (55). In begging the reader’s pardon for Brent’s indiscretion, Jacobs also points out that the reader (presumably white) “never knew what it was to be a slave” and goes on to say she believes “the slave woman ought not to be judged by the same standard as others” (56). In accordance with the cult of true womanhood, Jacobs’s character should have behaved more like Iola Leroy and said, “Over my dead body,” preferring death to loss of virtue. Jacobs’s confession, however, admits reality for black women. As Beverly Guy-Sheftall notes, black women were “painfully aware that they were devalued, no matter what their strengths might be, and the cult of True Womanhood was not intended to apply to them no matter how intensely they embraced its values” (90).

Jacobs notes in the introduction to her narrative that she tells her story in order to save other women in bondage. Her story, like Harper’s after hers, is aimed at a white audience. For black female writers of this period, the problem of maintaining identity while trying to appear pleasing to the dominant culture is significant, as Frances Smith Foster notes: If their life stories were to be appreciated by nineteenth-century white audiences, who were generally unsure of the basic humanity of blacks, or by black readers, jealous of their precarious social status, the protagonists must be exemplary in all ways (33). Catering to the ideology of the dominant culture gave rise to the development of the black madonna as a way to overcome the negative sexual stereotypes engendered by slavery.
Negative stereotypes of black women persisted well after the Civil War. As Beverly Guy-Sheftall points out, black women continued to be devalued in the writings of white men and women at the turn of the century. She cites the writings of Southern Methodist minister A. H. Shannon, northerner William Pickett, Tulane University professor William Smith, Virginia historian Phillip Bruce, southerner Eleanor Tayleur, writer Gertrude Stein, and University of North Carolina professor Howard Odum as examples of discussions of the moral laxity of black women. Guy-Sheftall indicates, for example, that Bruce believed black women did not have to live up to the standard of morality or adhere to the cult of true womanhood because no such values existed, in his view, within the black community (43).

Counter to most of his contemporaries, B. F. Riley, a southern white minister, wrote in 1910 that the "deification of motherhood," as well as other prevailing notions about womanhood, must also extend to black women. He asserted that black women must be placed on the same pedestal as white women for the uplift of the race (Guy-Sheftall 71). While respected as thoughtful, his work seemed to have little effect in altering the prejudices of his contemporaries.

According to the cult of true womanhood, the ideal woman was a moral wife, mother, and daughter. Her place was in the home. She was religious, submissive, and pure. A great issue was made of purity. Women were expected to maintain virtue at all costs. As Barbara Welter writes in her seminal essay "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860," "A 'fallen woman' was a 'fallen angel,' unworthy of the celestial company of her sex. To contemplate the loss of purity brought tears; to be guilty of such a crime, in the women's magazines at least, brought madness or death. Even the language of flowers had bitter words for it: a dried white rose symbolized 'Death Preferable to Loss of Innocence'" (154). The cult of true womanhood made clear that it is the lot of women to fend off the (in theory) unwanted advances of males, who were thought to be more sensual by nature. In Victorian fiction, men are portrayed as predators, women as prey.

It is clear that, owing to the perceived animal sexuality of black women, the standards of true womanhood could not be seen as applying to them. By psychologically projecting this image of animal sexuality onto black females, the white male absolves himself of the sexual exploitation of black females, as Hazel Carby points out:
A basic assumption of the principles underlying the cult of true womanhood was the necessity for the white female to "civilize" the baser instincts of man. But in the face of what was constructed as the overt sexuality of the black female, excluded as she was from the parameters of virtuous possibilities, these baser male instincts were entirely uncontrolled. Thus, the white slave master was not regarded as being responsible for his actions toward his black female slaves. On the contrary, it was the female slave who was held responsible for being a potential, and direct, threat to the conjugal sanctity of the white mistress. (27)

After the Civil War and through the turn of the century, the black women's club movement saw the need to bring to light the virtuous black woman. These middle class women did so by holding educational meetings and by writing magazine articles extolling the virtues of the women of their class. Their meetings dealt with such practical matters as dressmaking, the laws of sanitation, cooking, child care, proper dress and such moral matters as teaching a boy to protect a woman, assessing the moral needs of childhood, and instilling high moral standards in girls and boys (Guy-Sheftall 74). A major objective of the club movement, according to Beverly Guy-Sheftall, was to persuade poor rural black women in the South to embrace the sexual mores of the Victorian middle class. It should come as no surprise, then, that Frances Harper was a club woman, dedicated to this notion of elevation of the race.² Her character Iola Leroy is the embodiment of the club movement's ideals. Iola is the construct of a black woman designed to refute the negative images generated by history and circumstance. "By creating a respectable ideal heroine, according to the norms of the time," writes Barbara Christian in her essay, "Harper was addressing not herself, black women, or black people, but her (white) countrymen" (234).

In regard to true womanhood, Iola's appearance, occupation, and marital status are worth noting. She is described as "refined and ladylike," pretty, with long hair, blue eyes, and white skin. This portrait, whether a concession to white readers or a bridge between the races, conforms to the dominant culture's view of the ideal woman. In giving her heroine white skin, Harper perpetuates negative stereotypes of dark-skinned women, or at least does little to overcome
negative stereotypes of dark-skinned women. Instead, she reinforces the dominant culture's view that skin color reflects the virtues of true womanhood. Perhaps she realized that her white readers might not be easily sold on the idea of a dark-skinned woman in the role of Iola and so chose to accommodate the readership.

Besides her appearance, Iola's occupation is also noteworthy. She serves as a nurse during the Civil War (that is, she does work considered noble). Her marriage is an important sociopolitical statement. Iola rejects a white suitor, thereby rejecting "passing" into the dominant culture, and she is rewarded for her virtue. She subsequently makes the perfect match to Dr. Latimer and conducts her life in the manner of true womanhood: "Soon after Iola had settled in C—she quietly took her place in the Sunday-school as a teacher, and in the church as helper. She was welcomed by the young pastor, who found in her a strong and faithful ally. Together they planned meetings for the especial benefit of mothers and children. . . . Her life is full of blessedness" (459).

The novel neatly glides over the subject of concubinage, a subject key to the condition of black women of the period, though the author's editorial comments can be found couched in the thoughts of the Union general overseeing the field hospital where Iola works: "Could it be possible that this young and beautiful girl had been a chattel, with no power to protect herself from the highest insults that lawless brutality could inflict upon innocent and defenseless womanhood?" (256-57) By Harper's time, black women had effectively repressed—in literature, at least—this sexual portion of their identity. In Iola Leroy, slave character Tom Anderson gives us the only hint of Iola's condition during slavery when he tells of the master's advances toward her: "'One day when he com'd down to breakfas,' he chucked her under de chin, an' tried to put his arm roun' her waist. But she jis' frew it off like a chunk ob fire. She looked like a snake had bit her. Her eyes fairly spit fire. Her face got red ez blood, an' den she turned so pale I thought she war gwine to faint, but she didn't an I yered her say, 'T'll die fust'" (258). This is the true woman's appropriate response toward the unwanted advance. She would rather die than lose her virtue.

With the notions of true womanhood in mind, we more clearly see the profound statement Nella Larsen later makes about black female sexuality in Quicksand. In assimilating to white culture, the middle class black woman falls into the sexuality trap set by the white
patriarchy. In assimilating, the black woman tries to distance herself as much as possible from her heritage, but in the end finds she is still bound—by gender, class, and race. Larsen uses the theme of the mulatto woman fleeing to black people to show that the woman of Negro ancestry cannot escape her heritage. The mulatto finds happiness in neither black nor white worlds in this novel.

One of the most troubling aspects of *Quicksand* is the heroine's unsatisfactory marriage. The union of the intelligent, refined Helga Crane and the fat preacher with the dirty fingernails leaves the reader with a sense of cognitive dissonance. A member of the black middle class, Helga marries not up, as others of her class might, but down, and ends up in the quagmire of life in the rural South, satisfying her husband and begetting babies. She shuns the trappings of the middle class in favor of life among "her people," but this proves to be her downfall rather than uplift. She fails in even her smallest attempts to elevate the condition of her rural black neighbors. In inverting the plot heretofore espoused by African American female novelists seeking uplift of the race, Larsen in the 1920s sat at the forefront of a movement that would change the way blacks—particularly female—view themselves vis-à-vis the dominant culture. She is the first black female novelist to question—at least in published writings—the conventions of the Victorian cult of true womanhood. As Hazel Carby notes, Larsen created in Helga "the first truly sexual black female protagonist in Afro-American fiction" (174). While she does not resolve in her novel the conflict between sexuality and Victorian mores, Larsen indicates that happiness lies not in embracing these values and assimilating to the dominant culture, but rather in establishing a separate identity in terms of race and gender.

We cannot help leaving *Quicksand* with an empty feeling, wishing the heroine could have done better than to marry the unsavory Reverend Pleasant Green. We wish she could have married Dr. Robert Anderson, the black principal of Naxos, or someone like him, that the ending of the story could be as much like a fairy tale as the ending of *Iola Leroy*, for example, in which the heroine makes a perfect match. Instead of a fairy-tale heroine, Helga is a tragic heroine. Race and sex are at issue here. As regards the race issue, Larsen's novel presents what has become a classic theme: the plight of the mulatto. Helga is caught between black and white worlds, feeling comfortable in neither. Her shuttling between Harlem and Copenhagen and her rejection of black and white suitors alike demonstrate her feeling
of “in-between-ness.” As regards the issue of sex, Larsen’s novel can be seen as an attack on the black women’s club movement with its embracing of the ideals of the dominant culture’s cult of true womanhood. Larsen appears to have been the first black female novelist to realize that adherence to the cult of true womanhood can bring a black woman down, even if she is free from institutionalized slavery.

Helga Crane’s dilemma is not unlike that of her creator. The daughter of a Danish mother and a West Indian father, Nella Larsen frequently alluded to herself as a “mulatto.” Her biographer Thadious Davis writes, “Implicit in her reticence about her background is some discomfort in being the only black member of her immediate family. . . . Throughout most of her public life, Larsen was apparently alienated from her white family members” (182–83). Her time in the South, studying at Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, and acting as an assistant superintendent of nurses at Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, “propelled her into an all-black world with which she was never fully comfortable” (183). She seemed most at home in New York City, where she lived most of her adult life. There she counted among her acquaintances some of the most prominent supporters of the Harlem Renaissance: James Weldon Johnson, W. E. B. Du Bois, Carl Van Vechten, and banker Edward Wasserman. Helga Crane’s search for definition reflects Larsen’s own.

As the story opens, we see Helga in her comfortable room in Naxos, outfitted with the trappings of the black bourgeoisie. Though she is squarely in it, she repeatedly rejects aspects of the black middle class, particularly its imitation of white ways. She leaves Naxos rather abruptly because she cannot stand its aping of the white world. Though Naxos (an anagram of Saxon)3 professes to be about the business of racial uplift, the school community actually represses the race, in Helga’s view:

These people yapped loudly of race, of race consciousness, of race pride, and yet suppressed its most delightful manifestations, love of color, joy of rhythmic motion, naive, spontaneous laughter. Harmony, radiance, and simplicity, all the essentials of spiritual beauty in the race they had marked for destruction. (18)

She senses how she, “the despised mulatto,” does not fit in. Helga herself exhibits ambivalence toward assimilation and racial uplift.
She is often angered by the incongruities she observes. For example, her friends in Harlem declare themselves proponents of the race and opponents of white oppression while they imitate the whites' style of dress and living and appreciate aspects of white culture—to the exclusion of the culture of their own race. Helga's friend Anne Grey embodies the middle class club woman Helga disdains.

Helga, an emblem of the sensual woman, is victimized by the cult of true womanhood. Its conventions require her to repress her sexuality. Her flamboyant taste in clothing, for example, sets her apart from others of the black middle class, who prefer conservative, even drab, garb. Clothing is symbolic in the novel. In Naxos, Helga's clothing makes her "different." In Chicago, men mistake her for a prostitute. In Copenhagen, wild clothing is a symbol of her exotic beauty. The way she festoons herself makes Helga an object for consumption. Danish artist Axel Olsen forces her to confront sexual stereotypes. Before proposing marriage, he seeks an informal sexual liaison with her—a form of concubinage. His painting of her shows her sexual side: "The picture—she had never quite, in spite of her deep interest in him, and her desire for admiration and approval, forgiven Olsen for that portrait. It wasn't, she contended, herself at all but some disgusting sensual creature with her features" (89). Helga's sexual awakening occurs during her brief encounters with Dr. Anderson, but eventually her sexual desire finds its outlet in a bad marriage—for a Victorian middle class woman, marriage provided the only appropriate outlet for sexual passion.

Helga's victimization is illustrated in her half-hearted coming out at the steamy jazz club. For the occasion, she bravely wears her risqué black net dress, declaring that she is "about to fly." But instead, she scurries back into her cocoon. The "jungle" of the jazz club proves too frightening:

She was drugged, lifted, sustained, by the extraordinary music, blown out, ripped out, beaten out, by the joyous, wild, murky orchestra. The essence of life seemed bodily motion. And when suddenly the music died, she dragged herself back to the present with a conscious effort; and a shameful certainty that not only had she been in the jungle, but that she had enjoyed it, began to taunt her. She hardened her determination to get away. She wasn't, she told herself, a jungle creature. (59)
Helga seems ashamed of her sexuality, probably because she equates sexuality with the negative stereotypes foisted upon women by the white patriarchy. She emerges from the jazz club “a small crumpled thing in a fragile, flying black and gold dress” (62).

Helga’s predicament is that of a woman who feels deeply and cannot find the appropriate outlet for those feelings. She is passionate, and according to Victorian convention passion is wicked. “Passion in women baffled Victorian society,” writes Jenni Calder. “It suggested at best irregularity and nonconformity, at worst, sin” (144). Considering Helga’s passion as well as her racial identity, we see that, according to prevailing views of the period, her predicament can only worsen, as Larsen suggests by the novel’s unhappy ending. Dr. Anderson’s illicit embrace at a Harlem dinner party compels Helga to confront her passionate side: “And then it happened. He stooped and kissed her, a long kiss, holding her close. She fought against him with all her might. Then, strangely, all power seemed to ebb away, and a long-hidden, half-understood desire welled up in her with the suddenness of a dream” (104). This passage resonates with Victorian melodrama, with the passionate kiss and the fending off of the “unwanted” advance. But the point is that Helga’s long-simmering repressed sexuality has reached the boiling point. Armed with the memory of this kiss and the feeling it has elicited, Helga plots to relinquish her chastity by initiating an affair with Anderson, but his gentlemanly apology for his bad behavior at the party thwarts her.

Where is the tempted and frustrated virgin to go? To church, of course. And in the midst of a revival meeting, Helga has a conversion experience in which she is saved—“or lost”—as Larsen slyly suggests (114). She ends up marrying “the fattish yellow man” who sits beside her during the service, the Reverend Pleasant Green, returning to the rural South with him, and having babies. After the difficult delivery of her fourth child, who dies shortly after birth, Helga admits to herself that she has made a mistake and resolves to leave. But she knows she cannot abandon her children, and, no doubt recalling her own unhappy childhood, decides to stay. As the novel closes, she is having her fifth child. She is stuck in the quagmire. Unlike Iola Leroy, whose return to the South is heralded in the name of uplift, Helga’s return to the South is abysmal. Any small attempts she makes to bring middle class values to her rural southern neighbors fail. Iola’s adherence to the tenets of the cult of true womanhood elevates her; Helga’s adherence to it victimizes her. As Hortense
Thornton points out, Helga is a “sensitive woman, an individual, who throughout her life because of society’s taboos has repressed a significant part of her being. Helga’s inability to allow herself authentic sexual expression assumes a significant role in her tragic dilemma at the novel’s end” (290).

While earlier women novelists might have upheld the notions of the cult of true womanhood, Larsen presents an indictment of these values. Her heroine stands by the conventions of the cult, and this leaves her in a loveless marriage sure to engulf her and snuff out her vibrant self. She initiates a theme that Zora Neale Hurston later adopts and develops in her novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Hurston, it seems, has little use for the notions of true womanhood. She refuses to deny her protagonist’s sexuality.

Janie is a victim of the cult of true womanhood early in her life, when her grandmother forces her to marry as soon as she exhibits awareness of sexuality. Janie awakens sexually one spring afternoon as she sits under the pear tree. She watches the bees visit the blossoms and observes the “ecstatic shiver of the tree from root to the tiniest branch creaming in every blossom and frothing with delight. So this was marriage! She had been summoned to behold a revelation” (11). A neighborhood boy, Johnny Taylor, appears on the scene soon after Janie’s awakening and, when Nanny looks out the window, she sees Johnny “lacerating” Janie with a kiss. She resolves to get Janie “protection” through marriage to Logan Killicks, an older man with property and therefore standing within the black community. In accordance with the cult of true womanhood, marriage is the ultimate transaction for women.

Nanny, a former slave and her master’s concubine, sees marriage as protection from sexual predators. “Ah was born back due in slavery so it wasn’t for me to fulfill my dreams of whut a woman oughta be and to do,” Nanny tells Janie. “Dat’s one of de hold-backs of slavery” (15). Nanny is determined that Janie will share neither her fate nor that of her mother who, at seventeen, was raped by a white school teacher. The rape yielded Janie, whom the mother left in Nanny’s care.

Not at all attracted to Logan Killicks, Janie wonders if she will grow to love her husband in marriage. But she does not fall in love with Killicks; in fact, she grows to loathe him. Her marriage is akin to Helga Crane’s marriage to the Reverend Pleasant Green. But, unlike Helga who remains in the quagmire of her marriage, Janie walks away from Killicks—without bothering to divorce him—and follows the dandy Joe Starks. While initially appealing, life with Starks
is not much better than life with Killicks. Janie becomes a slave to the store her husband operates in the town where he is mayor. Starks treats Janie as an object. On the one hand, she bears the title of Mrs. Mayor Starks, while on the other hand, in accordance with her husband's orders, she minds the store with a rag wrapped around her head. (Starks jealously guards the conjugal sanctity of his wife, who is good looking and ten years younger than he.)

Janie resents her grandmother for having forced marriage upon her: "Here Nanny 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 into 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" (85). Herein we find Hurston's indictment of the cult of true womanhood. Nanny's outdated attitudes, resonances of the Victorian period, are seen as a noose.

When Starks dies, Janie soon finds freedom, love, and identity with a younger man, the carefree Tea Cake. He recalls the pear tree for her. "He could be a bee to a blossom—a pear tree blossom in the spring. He seemed to be crushing the scent out of the world with his footsteps. Crushing aromatic herbs with every step he took. Spices hung about him. He was a glance from God" (102). Even after Tea Cake's death, Janie remains comforted by his love. She finds peace in the memory.

The actions of Hurston's protagonist represent a significant departure from the actions of previous heroines in African American literature. However, credit must go to Larsen for firing the first salvo against the cult of true womanhood with her creation of the sexual protagonist, Helga Crane. Larsen's protagonist, while adhering to the tenets of the cult of true womanhood, appears to want to loosen the corset of chastity that Harper's Iola Leroy so comfortably wears and that Jacobs's Linda Brent realizes cannot fit a concubine. Hurston advances a theme Larsen initiates. Not only does she allow her character sexual identity, but she also grants her passion and the freedom to follow it. Hurston echoes Larsen's call for a new womanhood. Together, they put the black madonna on the shelf, a dusty icon of a cult whose worn-out notions of womanhood no longer apply.
NOTES

1 The phrase “true womanhood” was used frequently by authors of the Victorian period when referring to the subject of women. See Welter 151.

2 Frances Harper was one of the most visible black female public figures in the latter half of the nineteenth century. She lectured widely, advocating Negro suffrage and women’s rights. See Gates 12-13.

3 In addition to being an anagram for “Saxon,” Naxos is the Greek island famous for its wine, the center of worship of Dionysus. In mythology, the god found King Minos’s daughter, Ariadne, asleep on the shore, where she had been deserted by Theseus. The theme of the abandoned woman is taken up in Quicksand.

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