Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

TCLC 126

TOPICS VOLUME

Volume 126

Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

Topics Volume

Criticism of Various Topics in Twentieth-Century Literature, including Literary and Critical Movements, Prominent Themes and Genres, Anniversary Celebrations, and Surveys of National Literatures

Janet Witalec
Project Editor

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Preface

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Special Commissioned Essay on African-American Folklore and Literature

Barbara J. Wilcots

This special topic entry, written by Barbara J. Wilcots of the University of Denver, presents an overview and analysis of African-American Folklore and Literature.

INTRODUCTION

Folklore is not as easy to collect as it sounds. The best source is where there are the least outside influences and these people, being usually under-privileged, are the shyest. They are most reluctant at times to reveal that which the soul lives by.

—Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men* (1935)

Coined by William J. Thoms in 1846, the term *folklore* has multiple and varied definitions. Folklorist, anthropologist, and novelist Zora Neale Hurston defines folklore not only as "that which the soul lives by" but moreover as the essence of existence—"the boiled-down juice of human living." (Zora Neale Hurston, *Writings by Zora Neale Hurston from the Federal Writer's Project: Go Gator and Muddy the Water,* edited by Pamela Bordelon [New York: Norton, 1999]). Further, she argues, "folklore is the first thing that man makes out of the natural laws that he finds around him" (70). Hurston, who undertook a comprehensive, systematic study of African-American folk culture of the South, explains that the "group mind uses up a great part of its life span trying to ask infinity some questions about what is going on around its doorstep. And the more that group knows about its own doorstep, the more it can bend and control what it sees there" (70).

Rich in its variety, folk culture embodies a people's beliefs about the nature of the universe and their place in it. It encompasses the practices and rituals used to exert control over the forces of that universe, as well as the oral and artistic expressions through which the group preserves and passes on its history, communal values, and life strategies. The elements of folk culture that most clearly imbue the literature of African Americans include West African-derived spiritual beliefs, communal-based social customs, and oral and musical traditions. Hurston asserts that while beliefs and customs are the accumulated evidence of self-discovery, oral expression—and the music and literature that arise out of it—is "discovery in itself" (70). Through oral and artistic expression, the individual explores his or her interior life and discovers the connections among all aspects of the universe. Through these mediums of discovery, the folk preserve their knowledge and history, share their wisdom, and offer hope and direction to succeeding generations.

Barbara J. Wilcots (essay date 2002)

SOURCE: "An Analysis of African-American Folklore and Literature." In *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism,* vol. 126, edited by Linda Pavlovski. Farmington Hills, Mich.: The Gale Group, 2002.

[*In the following original essay, Wilcots provides an overview of African-American folklore and literature, focusing on its history, representative writers, significant works, and critical response.*]

AFRICAN-AMERICAN FOLK TRADITION

The African Origins of Negro Folk Culture

Modern African peoples comprise more than eight hundred distinct ethnic and linguistic groups, many dating back thousands of years, and each with its own religious system and cultural heritage.[1] Historians estimate that 11.7 million Africans,[2] representing more than two hundred ethnic groups from Central and West Africa, were enslaved in the New World.[3] Enslaved Africans brought with them a variety of languages, social structures, religions, and rituals. Consequently, no monolithic African or African-American culture exists. Some anthropologists and sociologists have used this diversity, as well as the argument that slavers forcibly divested slaves of all vestiges of their heritage, to insist that Africans in the New World were totally de-cultured. However, scholars of African religions and culture have argued the validity of a West African-derived worldview and the existence of African "retentions" which formed the foundation of the folk culture of Africans in the New World.

The extent to which African cultural inheritances were retained varied widely among slave communities. Where

slave masters intentionally dispersed clans to squelch the possibility of uprisings, cultural values naturally were submerged and blended with non-African customs. In areas with large concentrations of slaves, particularly in those places where slaves outnumbered the white population, African cultural inheritances survived more frequently and fully than in communities sparsely populated with Africans.

Care is necessary in choosing the terms used to describe the cultural values and practices that survived the Middle Passage.[4] "Survival" and "retention" commonly are used; however, the terms can be misleading as they imply that beliefs and customs were conveyed to America unchanged and practiced exactly as they had been in Africa. While substantial evidence of direct and particular "retentions" exists, recent scholarship has preferred the terms "adaptations" and "Africanisms" to more accurately describe the transatlantic transfer. The meaning of "adaptation" is evident. During the years of their enslavement, Africans held on to the beliefs and customs of their homeland but adapted them for effective use in the New World. John F. Szwed, a specialist in urban ethnography and folklore, and Roger D. Abrahams, an authority on Caribbean and African-American folklore, see African culture as a "baseline or starting point" from which Africans in the New World developed a viable culture, "selectively" adopting and adapting European values.[5] Whether beliefs and customs "survived," were "retained," or were "adapted," most scholars agree that the worldview of the slaves was rooted in Africa.

Despite the religious and cultural diversity of enslaved Africans, they nevertheless shared a corpus of beliefs about the natural order of the universe that fortified them to withstand the impact of slavery. Explaining the shared worldview of disparate African cultures, theologian John S. Mbiti writes that "fundamental concepts like the belief in god, existence of the spirits, continuation of human life after death, magic and witchcraft, seem to have been retained when one people may have split or branched off in course of the centuries, the new group forming 'tribes' of their own."[6] Similarly, E. Thomas Lawson, a specialist in African religions and rituals, writes that "even granting religious diversity, there is an underlying unity of thought that provides a set of profound answers to fundamental questions about what is real, important, personal, dangerous, and desirable."[7] Recognizing the diversity of cultures and accepting that cultural values change over time, it is still possible to consider shared traditional beliefs among West African peoples.

Spiritual Beliefs and Communal Customs

Central to a traditional West African worldview is the belief in a natural and eternal universal order that inexorably unites the sacred and secular worlds. Traditional African spiritual belief holds that the nature of the universe encompasses natural, mystical, moral, and religious orders—all of which exist for the spiritual development of humankind. African peoples take an anthropocentric view that humankind is the center of the universe; thus they interpret god and all of nature in relationship to themselves. They regard themselves as made in the image of god and see god reflected in every aspect of nature.

As many African peoples interpret the nature of the universe as hierarchical, with god at the top of the ontological order connected to human beings through a pantheon of divinities, they also see god's reflection in nature hierarchically. While god is present everywhere, some places in nature are considered more spiritual than others. Traditionally, the people of Namibia, for example, view groves and forests as especially spiritual places, regarding the *omumborombonga* tree as the "tree of life" from which human beings originated. The wild fig tree is associated with this religious idea in Kenya, as the silk-cotton tree is in Zaire, and the *baobab* tree in other African nations. Similarly, rivers and lakes are sacred sites because they symbolize purification or are considered the meeting place of spirits. Mountains and hills also are spiritual places because they draw one's eyes heavenward; thus many of Africa's mountains are designated as national religious monuments. Groups often select sacred locations as places of worship and build altars, temples, and shrines there. The sacredness of the wilderness is a value retained by New World Africans. As such, when slaves spoke of going into the wilderness, it did not hold the negative connotations associated with spiritual barrenness or being lost, as reflected in Puritan theology.

While natural places can be spiritual unto themselves, spirits and spiritual beings also can inhabit them. Closely associated with the natural order of the universe is a mystical order from which spirits and certain human beings derive "magical" power. The ontological order places god at the top, followed by spiritual beings (divinities), spirits, and the living dead. Divinities are those beings, sometimes called "nature spirits," responsible for all natural phenomena, from rainbows to outbreaks of smallpox. In some societies, cultural heroes and mythological figures are a part of this category as well, acting as servants or ministers of god.

Common spirits, "beings beneath the status of divinities, and above the status of men," can belong to one of several categories.[8] Some African peoples believe only in human spirits—which all persons become after death. Other groups believe in the existence of animal spirits as well as in a "race" of spirits that god created separate from humans and animals. Common spirits may serve individual family members or the clan as a whole, acting as protectors or intermediaries between humans and divinities. Clan members may pour libations or leave food offerings in sacred places to solicit the intercession of common spirits.

Finally, the living dead are those human spirits who are five or more generations removed from the living. Their names have been forgotten, and they have lost their links with the clan. Essentially, they have become ghosts who may not act kindly toward family members, but rather may make mischief, causing suffering and misfortune. To protect against this misfortune, some groups name their children for deceased relatives in order to keep the memory alive for another generation. For traditional West African peoples, spirits are an accepted natural phenomenon. Mbiti emphasizes that "the spiritual universe is a unit with the physical, and that these two intermingle and dovetail into each other so much that it is not easy, or even necessary, at times to draw the distinction or separate them" (97).

Correspondingly, historian Lawrence W. Levine notes that New World Africans maintained the belief that human beings could interpret and influence the natural and spiritual world because they are not separate from but inexorably united with "all matter" in the universe.[9] While Africans in the New World maintained their beliefs in the presence of spirits, they were not fearful of departed friends or family members as some stereotypes have suggested. Rather, they viewed spirits as a natural resource. They also valued specialists with the knowledge to control the spiritual world.

Just as there is a hierarchical order of spiritual beings, there also is a power structure among sacred specialists, with medicine men and diviners considered the most gifted, followed by rainmakers, rulers, and religious leaders. While differences exist across cultures, the primary variance in the mystical order among diverse peoples is in the names they assign spiritual beings. For example, in the Yoruba religious system, sacred specialists are called "ritual mediators" and placed below the divinities and above worshipers in the hierarchy. Witches and sorcerers fall at the bottom of the hierarchy for most African religions.

While mystical power can be used for evil purposes, primarily it is employed for healing and protection. Because illness and misfortune are regarded as religious experiences, healers and medicine men and women often are religious leaders. They serve as a link between the troubled human being and god and the spirits, diagnosing and healing both physical and spiritual ailments. Mbiti describes sacred specialists as "the symbolic points of contact between the historical and spiritual worlds. In them are the continuity and essence of African religious thought and life" (Mbiti, 252).

The unity of existence unbroken by birth or death is reflected in the spiritual beliefs as well as the folklore of New World Africans. Some slaves carried on the naming practices of their African ancestors. Most believed that spirits existed and contacted the living. Many read signs in nature that forewarned them of impending events. They also believed that persons born under specific circumstances—the seventh son of a seventh son, for example—acquired special powers. Often these people with special powers became preachers or conjure men and women, the sacred specialists who serve as the point of contact between the physical and sacred worlds.

The principles of hierarchy and unity also are central to the moral and religious orders of the universe in traditional West African belief. God established the moral order to ensure that humanity would work in harmony, and a religious order out of which customs and rituals arise. Through the moral order, African peoples discern good from evil and establish the values by which the community lives. The religious order governs individuals' relationships with one another as well as with god and other spiritual beings. Together, the moral and religious orders give rise to the society's customs and institutions that establish the rights and duties of the individual in obedience to god and in service to the community. Human beings will live in harmony as long as they do not breach moral or religious law.

According to some societies, moral offense or evil is not individually experienced but rather is corporate in nature. Because moral offense is interpreted hierarchically, it is not possible for a person to offend or commit an act of evil against someone of a lower status. All are responsible for the protection of those who are vulnerable, thus any such offense is considered to be committed not against the individual but against the clan. For example, if parents commit an evil act against their children, "it is not the children who experience it as offense; rather it is the community, the clan, the nation, or the departed relatives who are the real object of the offense, since they are the ones in a higher status than the parents."[10] It then becomes the responsibility of the community or clan to punish the parents for the offense. Further, if the chief offends god or a divinity, because he represents the clan, the community can be punished for the offense. As everyone and all things are connected, what happens to the individual affects the whole group and what happens to the group affects the individual. "In traditional life," Mbiti explains, "the individual does not and cannot exist alone except corporately. He owes his existence to other people, including those of past generations and his contemporaries. He is simply part of the whole" (141).

This sense of a collective identity is reflected in the African concept of "kinship" which governs the life of the individual and his/her relationship with the community. Unlike Western notions of "kin," the concept in the traditional African worldview extends both horizontally and vertically, reaching beyond the extended family to embrace all members of the group as well as beyond life to include the deceased and the unborn. The spiritual belief in the unity of all matter is reflected in the individual's and the clan's relationship to the land as well. Clans of Africans originated on and ruled parcels of land that became their tribal

homes. They sometimes fought other clans to maintain control over their territories. Even though entire clans sometimes were removed from their homeland, they continued to identify with the land on which their ancestors traditionally subsisted and in which they were buried.

Despite strong ethnic identification with clan territories, Africans considered themselves not owners, but stewards of their parcels. The land was communally held, and the king held ritual title over it. He was charged with apportioning plots to families and performing the rituals necessary to ensure prosperity for the clan. Families claimed usufructuary[11] privileges but took no more than they needed, working together for the good of the community.

While retentions of communal land values and spiritual beliefs were evident in slave communities, these practices did not transfer to the New World for the benefit of the slaves but rather for the advantage of the slave master. Masters accepted or encouraged the retention only of those African spiritual beliefs that reinforced stereotypes that characterized slaves as intellectually or morally inferior, thus justifying their enslavement. Slave masters accepted spiritual beliefs associated with ghosts, for example, as evidence of the African's superstitious nature and inferior intellect. At the same time, masters suppressed communal social practices that strengthened family or clan ties while encouraging communal work and land values that supported the institution of slavery. For example, some plantation owners allowed their slaves to claim usufructuary rights to garden plots in which to cultivate vegetables during their times of rest—at night and on Sunday mornings. The gardens allowed the slaves to improve their diets and thus their health and productivity with little cost to the slaveholder. Many masters who engaged in this practice did so with the hope that it would instill in the slaves a sense of identification with the plantation and keep them from running away.

While some slaves formed attachments to their small plots, most did not. Unmoored on American soil, unable to claim aboriginal or divine right to the land, slaves retained their ethnic identification with their African homeland but forged a new culture in America. Levine hypothesizes that "the preliterate, premodern Africans, with their sacred worldview, were so imperfectly acculturated into the secular American society into which they were thrust, were so completely denied access to the ideology and dreams which formed the core of the consciousness of other Americans, that they were forced to fall back upon the only cultural frames of reference that made any sense to them and gave them any feeling of security."[12]

Some scholars argue that slaves retained their African worldview in order to resist European acculturation. In either case, African "survivals" influenced the developing folk culture that sustained New World Africans through slavery and yet are reflected in the values by which many African Americans live. They created work songs, spirituals, and folktales to lift their spirits, express their hopes, vent their anger, critique their oppressors, and to perpetuate the principle of freedom. Thus African-derived spiritual beliefs and cultural practices are reflected in the "orature"[13] and social customs of the slave community and preserved in the African-American literature that springs from the oral tradition.

African-American Orature

Parallels in the structural patterns of African and African-American orature, as well as similarities in the moral and social functions the folklore serves, evidence the survival of West African oral tradition in the New World. While debate continues regarding the origin of Negro spirituals and folktales, it generally is accepted among scholars that simple folk speech—the Negro field hollers, folk cries, work songs, and shouts—were direct African retentions. No antecedents for these folk forms have been documented in the European cultures that informed the worldview of the slave. Taking the antiphonal, or call and response, pattern of the African oral tradition, slaves punctuated aspects of their daily lives with the rhythms of their homeland. Folk cries would pierce the air as slaves, picking cotton or cutting sugar cane, called out for water, food, or help. Field hollers such as "Master's in the Field" warned workers to pick up the work pace as the overseer or master approached. "Sister, carry de news on / Master's in de field" is but one example. Sometimes a slave might issue a cry or holler simply to solicit a human response as he or she worked in isolation on a large plantation. Evidence suggests that out of the plaintive cries of the slaves, spirituals and the blues were born.

Field Cries and Folk Songs

Anthropologist and ethnomusicologist Harold Courlander divides field hollers into two categories, "calls" and "cries," the former being communication to another and the latter a form of self-expression. Willis Laurence James, also a musicologist, delineates several types of cries, among them the "call," the "corn field whoop," the "night cry," and the "religious cry." He defines the "call" as any cry that "asks for something for or from someone else, or pronounces judgment."[14] The work song fits into this category, as it offered the slaves a sense of camaraderie as they worked together, synchronized their movements for maximum efficiency, and set the pace of the labor. The role of the lead singer was important in managing the work and giving directions. The following spading song illustrates the call-and-response pattern in which the lead singer calls out a phrase and the other workers not only reply verbally, but also respond physically, swinging their spades in unison:

> I need some water,
> LORDY NOW, WO,

I NEED SOME WATER, WO LORD.
I need a doctor, LORDY NOW WO,
I NEED A DOCTOR, WO LORD.
My heart is aching, LORDY NOW, WO,
MY HEART IS ACHING, WO LORD.

Boss say I'm faking, LORDY NOW, WO
BOSS SAY I'M FAKING, WO LORD.
What I'm gonna do, man, LORDY NOW, WO,

WHAT I'M GONNA DO, MAN, WO LORD.[15]

As the lyrics of the spading song subtly indicate, work songs sometimes critiqued the conditions of slavery and served as an outlet for the slave's frustration regarding his or her exploitation. Although they were not widely documented, records of work songs of complaint date to the mid-nineteenth century. For example, the following slave song, recorded by William Wells Brown in 1853, observes that slaves do not benefit fairly from their efforts, despite their shared humanity with the master:

The big bee flies high,
The little bee makes the honey;
The black folks makes the cotton
And the white folks gets the money.

The song implies that size, and as such, power, is the only difference between the bees, yet only the "big" one prospers. Similarly, only the color of the "folks" differ in the following lines, yet only the white folks prosper. "We Raise De Wheat" makes the same charge:

We raise de wheat,
Dey gib us de corn:
We bake de bread,
Dey gib us de crust;
We sif de meal,
Dey gib us de huss;
We peel de meat,
Dey gib us de skin;
And dat's de way
Dey takes us in;
We skim de pot,
Dey gib us de liquor,
And say dat's good enough for nigger.

The work songs demonstrate that the system contradicts the communal values that Africans brought with them from their homeland. Work songs offered a context within which slaves could speak with candor about their working conditions without suffering the repercussions they might face were they to approach their masters directly with a complaint. Typical protests included not only the inequitable distribution of goods but also the harsh working conditions, long work hours, cruelty of the slave master or overseer, as well as the hope for justice. "No More Auction Block," alternately titled "Many T'ousand Go,"[16] speaks of being sold on the "auction block" and the horrors of the "driver's lash" as well as the small rations which the slave suffered, but the song declares that these troubles will soon be over:

No more peck of corn for me, no more, no more;
No more peck of corn for me, many t'ousand go.

No more driver's lash for me, no more, no more;
[lines repeated as in first stanza]

No more pint of salt for me . . .

No more hundred lash for me . . .

No more mistress' call for me . . .

While one focuses on the list of hardships from which the slave wishes to escape, it is easy to overlook the implications of the repeated line, "Many t'ousand go." The phrase suggests the volume of humans sold on the auction block to suffer in bondage.

Although Joel Chandler Harris collected "the big bee" song in the 1880 volume of his Uncle Remus tales, there is little evidence that white scholars took particular notice of this category of work song. Some experts, such as R. Wilson Howe, even denied that protest or retaliation was a feature of Negro folk songs. In "The Negro and His Songs," Howe writes, "Nowhere in these songs can we trace any suggestion of hatred or revenge, two qualities usually developed under slavery."[17]

In considering the lack of overt animus in the work songs, one must take into account the dangers of expressing clearly any desire for revenge. Fear of slave uprisings prompted harsh punishment for outspoken slaves. Consequently, slaves embedded potentially threatening messages as allegories in their songs. It is easy to overlook the hope for retribution illustrated in the lines of spirituals such as "Go Down, Moses," in which Moses threatens Pharaoh that the Lord will "smite" the first-born of Egypt. Such songs can be interpreted purely as biblical references. Levine notes that the practice of singing what could not be said is deeply rooted in the African oral tradition. He writes, "The African tradition of being able to verbalize publicly in song what could not be said to a person's face, not only lived on among Afro-Americans throughout slavery but continued to be a central feature of black expressive culture in freedom."[18]

Messages of retribution are more clearly represented in the work songs that were carried over into the periods of reconstruction and the Great Migration. Post-slavery work songs more directly express protest against sharecropping practices as well as against overbearing field and factory bosses. The language of the following work song collected by Howard Odum in 1911 demonstrates a connection to the experience of slavery, as slave masters and overseers often were called "cap'n." Further, the song evidences not only complaint but also a clear threat:

Well, captain, captain, how can it be?
Whistles keep a-blowin', you keep a-workin' me.

Well, if I had my weight in lime,
I'd whip my captain till I went stone-blind.

Well, cap'n, cap'n, didn't you say
You wouldn't work me in rain all day?

Well, you can't do me like you do po' Shine,
You can take Shine's money, but you can't take mine.[19]

The work songs demonstrated the slave's recognition of their collective plight. They worked together in bondage and shared their struggles in song.

In contrast to the public and collective nature of work songs, the field cry, according to James and Courlander, is a song of solitude or a cry for connection. The "corn field whoops" or field cries, James writes, "signify either a loneliness of spirit, due to the isolation of the worker, or serve as a signal to someone nearby, or merely as a bit of self-indulgence—about the same as singing to one's self."[20] Romantic depictions of southern life suggest that every plantation held hundreds of slaves. Actually, few plantations had hundreds of slaves; consequently, many worked in fields alone. The field cry was a source of solace for the lonely slave. The "night cry" also served primarily to connect the caller with other human beings. When sneaking off to visit nearby plantations, a slave might use the "night cry" to signal to a friend or to announce his or her departure and return home from the night journey.

Finally, James associates the verbal "shout" or the "religious cry" with the dance "shout" in a call-and-response dynamic. He notes that folk preachers use what he terms "zooning" to elicit shouts from the congregation. James describes "zooning" as a "sort of buzzing, roaring sound" the preacher blends with the words of his sermon, inciting spiritual fervor wherein members of the congregation may sing and engage in a "holy dance" called a "shout."[21] Shout songs and dances vary in intensity, with one type being a rhythmic shuffling circle dance accompanied by a simple song with a single stanza. In his study, "Negro 'Shouts' from Georgia," Robert Winslow Gordon records a popular shout, "'Ligion So Sweet," to demonstrate "the basic simplicity of structure found in most shouting songs."[22] He explains that the shout incorporates two rhythms, a slow walk, done to the beat of the stanza, and a double-time step, done to the beat of the chorus:

(Walk)

Keep a rollin' down de fountain,
Keep a rollin' down de fountain,
Keep a rollin' down de fountain,
Oh, de 'ligion so sweet!

(Shout)

Oh de 'ligion—oh de 'ligion
Oh de 'ligion—so sweet!
Oh de 'ligion—oh de 'ligion
Oh de 'ligion—so sweet![23]

The shouts, field hollers, and work songs recorded the experiences of the slaves and carried in the stories their hopes and lamentations. The more structured forms of folk music, spirituals and the blues, grew out of these simple sounds and songs.

Spirituals

The most well known form of the Negro folk song is the spiritual. Like its precursors, the folk cries and work songs, the spiritual served several purposes in the lives of the slaves. Some critics argue that spirituals were strictly religious songs; however, they were not. Sung not only in church on Sunday, but throughout the workday, spirituals helped slaves transcend the daily trials of bondage. The songs recorded the slaves' experiences, expressed the sorrows associated with slavery and the hopes for liberation, affirmed their religious beliefs, and demonstrated as well as facilitated their resistance. Richard Allen, founder and first bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, is credited with first collecting spirituals in 1801, paving the way for scholarly consideration of the form. In 1867 William Francis Allen, Charles Pickard Ware, and Lucy McKim Garrison published the first book of spirituals, *Slave Songs of the United States*, and in 1903 W. E. B. Du Bois wrote about the songs.

Du Bois raised the question, "What are these songs, and what do they mean?" in his consideration of the music, "Of Our Spiritual Strivings" in *The Souls of Black Folk.*[24] He concludes that spirituals, which he called "sorrow songs," "tell in a word and music of trouble and exile, of strife and hiding; they grope toward some unseen power and sigh for rest in the End."[25] They are the "music of an unhappy people, of the children of disappointment, they tell of death and suffering and unvoiced longing toward a truer world, of misty wanderings and hidden ways," Du Bois writes.[26] The view of spirituals as "sorrow songs" or primarily as lamentations supported the argument that they were essentially religious expressions of hope for freedom in the hereafter. Yet Du Bois acknowledged that the songs were much more: "Through all the sorrow of the Sorrow Songs there breathes a hope—a faith in the ultimate justice of things."[27]

Generally accepted as religious songs, early discussion of spirituals focused on the practical purposes and meaning of the music, with scholars often citing the songs as evidence of the slaves' happiness in bondage. Frederick Douglass rebuts this view in his noted autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave* (1845):

> I have often been utterly astonished, since I came to the north, to find persons who could speak of the singing, among slaves, as evidence of their contentment and happiness. It is impossible to conceive of a greater mistake. Slaves sing most when they are most unhappy. The songs of the slave represent the sorrows of his heart; and he is relieved by them, only as an aching

> heart is relieved by its tears. At least, such is my experience. I have often sung to drown my sorrow, but seldom to express my happiness. Crying for joy, and singing for joy, were alike uncommon to me while in the jaws of slavery. The singing of a man cast away upon a desolate island might be as appropriately considered as evidence of contentment and happiness, as the singing of a slave; the songs of the one and the other are prompted by the same emotion.[28]

By the turn of the century, the debate shifted away from the purpose of the spirituals and focused on their origins. Often cited in the debate was German musicologist Richard Wallascheck who argued in his 1893 study *Primitive Music* that Negro spirituals were "mere imitations of European compositions which negroes [sic] have picked up and served up again with slight variations."[29] James Weldon Johnson, Alain Locke,[30] and Sterling Brown, among the intellectual leaders of the New Negro Renaissance, rebutted such Eurocentric claims, writing persuasive defenses of the music's African origins. Despite their eloquent arguments, George Pullen Jackson resurrected the Eurocentric claim in 1932, insisting that parallels he noted between spirituals and Methodist and Baptist hymns proved the Negro folk songs emerged from European roots. In addition to his white derivation argument, Jackson claimed, as did scholar Newman White, that spirituals carried no significant references to Negro bondage or freedom in any practical sense. Rather, White and Jackson argued, the spirituals necessarily referred to the stories of the Bible because white evangelical music used the same imagery and did not address the institution of American slavery.

Even though Frederick Douglass had noted the double-voiced nature of spirituals such as "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" in his narrative, referring to freedom in both the spiritual and physical sense, it was not until the late 1930s that scholars began to seriously consider the theological, social, and historical implications of the music. John Lovell Jr.'s 1939 study, "The Social Implications of the Negro Spiritual," was the first to examine spirituals as songs of liberation. Although Lovell acknowledges the Bible idiom of spirituals, he argues that their message reflects a desire for freedom on earth rather than in heaven. Slaves "were not the kind of people to think unconcretely;" Lovell explains, "and the idea that they put all their eggs into the basket of a heaven after death, as the result of abstract thinking, is absurd to any reader of firsthand materials in the social history of the slave."[31]

The assumption that the slaves sought relief solely in a distant heaven rests upon the belief that they fully embraced Christianity, eschewing the spiritual values of their African heritage. Because traditional African belief holds that god and divinities are present and active in the daily lives of the people, Africans did not separate the sacred and secular worlds. Lovell draws upon Alain Locke's and James Weldon Johnson's arguments on the African origin of spirituals to assert a traditional religious/social consciousness that was reflected in the songs of the slaves. In an argument echoed by Mbiti, Lovell writes, "the African Negro mixed his social life and his religion so thoroughly that neither can be said to dominate perpetually. . . . Religion enhances the power and desire of the folk to reveal their deepest social selves."[32]

Hurston's study of folk culture also supports the view that slaves did not separate the secular and spiritual worlds. She found extensive continuities between African and African-American beliefs regarding the natural order of the universe and the unity of all existence. "In fact, the Negro has not been Christianized as extensively as is generally believed," Hurston observes. "The great masses are still standing before their pagan altars and calling old gods by a new name" (95). Similarly, Charles Johnson writes:

> All slaves did not subscribe to the docile, whitewashed version of Christianity preached by their masters. Instead they reached deep into themselves, reestablished a dim and distant link with a long-ago homeland many of them had never seen.
>
> (91)

Selectively adopting Christian values and filtering them through their African-derived worldview, the slaves created a functional folk song not only to uplift the people, but also to aid in their pursuit of freedom.

Consistent with an African worldview, the slaves saw the physical geography and the spiritual landscape as linked, and employed geographic symbolism and biblical typology to illustrate this belief. Life was a "rough and rolling sea"; the wilderness was the home of God; the lonesome valley "led to the way of life" and expressed the depths of the slaves' hardships; the mountaintop was freedom; and "winter will soon be over" meant that slavery would not last.[33] The oppressive slave master or mistress and the overseer became "Satan" or "Pharaoh" who ensnared and enslaved the Negro. "King Jesus" and "Moses" were the allies of the slaves who helped them find freedom. "Hell" referred to enslavement or the South generally and to the Deep South, particularly, as the place where "bad" slaves could be banished. "Jordon" and "home" meant freedom in the North, Canada, or Africa.

The spirituals used recognizable religious stories to reflect three central themes: physical freedom, justice, and mental resistance to slavery. Songs such as "Go Down Moses," "Steal Away," and "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" secretly communicated plans for escape from physical bondage as well as speaking of the slave's spiritual homecoming. Denmark Vesey is said to have used "Go Down Moses" as the call to arms in his 1822 insurrection in Charleston, South Carolina.[34] Harriet Tubman, called "Moses" because of her work on the Underground Railroad, also is credited with using "Go Down Moses" and "Steal Away" to call