Chapter – 6

*Seraph on the Suwanee: Search for Selfhood*

In 1948, Zora Neale Hurston’s last book, *Seraph on the Suwanee* was published, unfortunately it did not receive much appreciation and has often been termed as an awkward novel perhaps this is so, because Hurston chose her characters to be Southern whites rather than her usual African American characters. Hurston through *Seraph* critically examines the white culture and society and exposes its hollowness.

*Seraph on the Suwanee* is a story about poor Southern whites or “crackers” who are constantly struggling to improve their economic conditions. The protagonist is a white female Arvay Henson living in the town of Sawley. Arvay secretly fantasizes about her brother-in-law Carl Middleton who is married to her elder sister Larraine. At the age of sixteen she decides to become a missionary. Arvay is a beautiful girl but purposely keeps her suitors away by throwing hysterical fits at whoever tries to approach her.

When Arvay is twenty-one, a high-class Irishman Jim Meserve arrives in the town. Jim not only pursues Arvay, but also seduces and rapes her just before their marriage. This induces a feeling of guilt in Arvay which continues to haunt and trouble her throughout her life. In this process, she keeps her feelings confined only to herself and is unable to passionately love Jim as he wants her to do. They both are unable to communicate their feelings to each other. After twenty years and three children, Arvay realizes her mistake. She apologizes to Jim and finally finds her true happiness in domestic bliss with Jim.

*Seraph* is a complex and highly symbolic novel. It can be studied as a critique in social geography, racism as well as class. However, large numbers of critics have
found *Seraph* to be an utter failure on the part of Zora Neale Hurston. The main complaint of these critics is that Hurston had forsaken black characters and culture which was the redeeming quality of her work. Alice Walker, Hurston’s greatest champion writes:

> It is reactionary, static, shockingly misguided and timid…. especially true of *Seraph on the Suwanee*, which is not even about black people, which is no crime, but is about white people for whom it is impossible to care. (xvi)

Critics have often been puzzled by this work of Hurston. Going by Hurston’s past literary trend of imbuing her novels with black folk culture, this comes as a shock for the majority of critics and readers. To quote Carla Kaplan:

> Why, for example, would she go from depicting the black community she knew so well, portrayed so lovingly, and criticized so handily to a story about southern crackers and their difficult rise to financial success? Why would she go from using rape as a central metaphor for exploitation in *Their Eyes* to a story in which rape is merely misunderstanding--a “pain remorseless sweet” and a “memory inexpressibly sweet?” Why does she paint a positive and comic image of the very “pet negro system”-- “Every Southern white man has his pet Negro”-- which she decried elsewhere as a “residue of feudalism. (443)

If one inspects and analyze *Seraph* closely, it is worth while to note that Hurston never left her themes, folk colour, social milieu and local color in this novel. The only thing that she changed is the color of the skin of her characters. Just as her previous protagonists like John Pearson in *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*, Janie Crawford in
Their Eyes Were Watching God are in pursuit of their identity, so is Arvay Henson in Seraph. The color of skin of her characters was never important for Hurston, what was most important to her was the feelings, emotions that she endowed her characters with. Lillie P. Howard aptly writes in this regard:

As early as Jonah’s Gourd Vine (1934) Hurston had paved the way for such a novel as Seraph on the Suwanee. By insisting upon writing her story about “a man” instead of one about the “traditional lay figures” found in protest fiction about the “Negro Problem.” Hurston was practicing her philosophy that “Human beings react pretty much the same to the same stimuli. Different idioms, yes, circumstances and conditions having power to influence, yes. She was interested in casual analysis, in “What makes a man or a woman such-and-so, regardless of his color.” (134)

Though in Seraph, the main characters are white, while African American characters are minor and occurring on the periphery of the plot, but thematic issues are more or less the same. The major themes such as marriage, religion, search for self-identity, love, all are undoubtedly, present in this novel too. These unifying themes connect Seraph to Hurston’s other well-known novels and short stories. Most importantly, Hurston proves to be a versatile literary artist with her use of complex plot and intriguing characterization in a sustained narrative.

With dexterity, Hurston using local color captures the rural setting of the state of Florida. Nature is one of the themes in the novel. In the very opening lines of the novel, Hurston gives a description of the town of Sawley, situated in West Florida. Hurston writes:
Sawley, the town is in west Florida, on the famous Suwanee River. It is flanked on the South by the curving course of the river which Stephen Foster made famous without ever having looked upon its waters, running swift and deep through the primitive forests, and reddened by the chemicals leached out of drinking roots. On the north, the town is flanked by cultivated field planted to corn, cane potatoes, tobacco and small patches of cotton. (599)

Throughout the novel, nature plays an important role in the plot. It also affects the characters in varied ways. Hurston manifests malign as well as benign aspects of nature. Sharon L. Jones writes in this regard:

Characters who manage to accept their connection to the natural world ultimately emerge stronger than those whose identities are marked by estrangement from nature. Hurston captures a culture in transition from an agrarian to an industrial society, documenting the effects that economics would have, on nature and ultimately on people. (158)

The residents of the town of Sawley an important setting from where the story starts, are basically thriving on lumber and turpentine industries. Christopher Rieger writes in this context:

Hurston’s natural imagery in *Seraph* is one of the keys to recognizing strategy of ambiguity at work in the novel. The opening description of Sawley.... mirrors the degeneracy of the “Anglo - Saxon” culture that controls the town. At the same time, it might be noted that the people of Sawley are not alienated from their environment but actually immersed in the natural world and dependent on the resources of the land for both profit and survival. The mere existence of the turpentine
and timber industries does not necessarily mean that Sawley’s white male power structure is subjugating and exploiting the environment and by extension, women and African Americans. Hurston’s tale is more complex than that, and as a story of the growth and transformation of both nature and people, the novel’s ambiguity and its resistance to being read in terms of either or, black/white categories continue to grow through the course of the narrative. (109)

The protagonist Arvay Henson has an intriguing relationship with nature. Arvay’s father works in a turpentine camp. It is in this turpentine farm, that Jim Meserve, Arvay’s prospective husband comes to work. Turpentine becomes a natural remedy for Arvay’s hysterical fits.

The Mulberry tree is one of the most important symbols in the novel. The mulberry tree is an intrinsic part of Arvay’s character just as the blossoming pear tree is to Janie Crawford in Their Eyes Were Watching God. Arvay’s “image of herself centers around a tree, in this case a mulberry tree, that grows behind her home is Sawley” (Morris and Dunn 9). For Arvay, the mulberry tree in her backyard is her “sacred place” and “a cool green temple of peace” (632). It is a place where Arvay secretly fantasizes about her brother-in-law Carl Middleton. She brings Jim to the tree as a gesture of atonement and to purge herself of all the fantasies about Carl Middleton. Hurston writes:

She wanted Carl and all her thoughts about him to be gone from under that mulberry tree. She wanted to feel that the temple was cleansed, and that she herself was clean and worthy of what she was about to receive. (632)
Notably, just after a few days, Jim rapes Arvay under that very mulberry tree. Hurston writes:

Looking upwards so intently, Arvay did not see Jim when he sprang away from the trunk of the tree. She felt his arms suddenly thrust beneath her, and his hands digging into her side…. Arvay opened her mouth to scream, but no sound emerged. Her mouth was closed by Jim’s passionate kisses, and in a moment more, despite her struggles, Arvay knew a pain remorseless sweet. (644-645)

Thus, the mulberry tree becomes a witness to a change in Arvay’s life. She not only loses her virginity, but also her innocence under this tree. She is now also destined to serve a dominating man as her husband throughout her life. Hurston connects the imagery of the mulberry tree to a heinous crime such as rape which Arvay undergoes. Susan Edward Meisenhelder writes in this regards:

The wild imbalance between male and female in this novel is, in fact, imaged in the central metaphor that replaces the pear tree, that of the mulberry tree. ... Hurston’s first description of the mulberry tree, its “new green leaves, punctuated by tiny fuzzy things that looked like green stubby worms” (37) prefigures the pervasive rape imagery and the female violation at the novel’s core. (95)

Surprisingly, Arvay does not feel violated, on the contrary feels purged of her secret guilt of lusting for her brother- in- law Carl and she feels that “She had paid under that mulberry tree” (650). After being raped, Arvay leaves her drawers hanging on the branches of the mulberry tree, symbolizing her loss of virginity and her starting a new life. Hurston writes,
Anyway no one ever came to the mulberry tree nowadays. Not wishing to leave such an intimate and revealing garment lying on the ground, Arvay looked around for a better place, and spied a dead snag of a limb at the level of her head, and she hung her drawers on that. Then she went over in deep embarrassment and stood beside Jim.... Arvay glanced back at her drawers swinging ever so gently in the breeze. She took it as a kind of sign and symbol.... She was going, and leaving her old life behind her left behind, but not forgotten, to be picked up another time, perhaps. (646-647)

Arvay throughout her life, even after getting married to Jim and moving out from Sawley remains connected to her “Sacred” mulberry tree. When her mother Maria Henson dies and she returns for her funeral, Arvay gives away the land of her parents to the town to be used as a park, but requests the authorities to take care of the mulberry tree. Arvay says, “Only thing I ask and require is for them to save that mulberry tree and give it every care.” (881). Thus, mulberry tree serves as a sacred symbol for Arvay and plays an important role in her life. In the end, she wants this “sacred symbol” to be enjoyed by other people. Arvay wants this mulberry tree to be preserved. Hurston writes:

Like her Mama’s keep-sakes, this mulberry tree was her memory-thing. It bought back to her the happiest and most consecrated moments of her life time. As with other mortals, life is full of compromises and defeats with few clear victories to show. (877)

Swamp is another nature symbol used in the novel and it is intricately connected with the character of Arvay Henson. Jim, after moving to a town named Citrabelle, buys five acres close to the “Big Swamp.” It “was a growth that ran north
and south for eight or nine miles and formed the western barrier of the town” (669). For Arvay, this swamp is a deadly place of which she is afraid. She says, “I don’t want no parts of that awful place. It’s dark and haunted looking and too big and strong to overcome. It’s frightening! Like some big, old varmint or something to eat you up” (671).

“The Big Swamp” is symbolic of Arvay’s dark side. It is her dark desires like her negative feelings for her sister Lorraine, and her selfishness which is symbolized by the swamp. “A dark and murky wilderness that symbolizes the fearful tangle of Arvay’s subconscious” (Hemenway 209). The swamp also symbolizes the deformity in her son Earl. Right from the beginning, the moment Arvay sees the swamp she becomes anxious about the safety of her deformed son Earl. She says, “But my child, Jim. Earl is too little to know how to look out for himself and he’s liable to stray off in there like young’uns will, and get snake-bit or tore to pieces by some varmint or other” (671). Ironically, her worst fears prove to be true. Earl keeps venturing into the dark swamp unknown to either Arvay or Jim. Later, after Earl had tried to sexually assault Lucy Ann Corregio, he runs in to the swamp to hide. Here he is hunted down and killed.

Later, Jim decides to drain the swamp and clear the trees, Arvay surprisingly feel empathy for the swamp. Rita C. Butler writes, “Over the years, the fecund, exuberantly fertile swamp that Arvay, the mother once perceived as a threat to her son has become a comforting space where she can start to heal from her grief” (124).

For Jim, the swamp has a different connotation. For him, swamp is a profitable business opportunity. Jim, too connects memories of his son Earl with that of the swamp but “unlike Arvay who sees the swamp as a way to be closer to the memory of her son, Jim seeks to obliterate any memories of the child he would prefer
to forget‖ (Butler 125). Jim tells his son-in-law Hatton to invest in swamp land, develop it into a new suburban area of the town Citrabelle. Jim tells Hatton,

There’s a great big fortune hid in that dark old swamp. All it needs is the brains and the nerve to get out. I been wanting to tackle it for nearly twenty years. Ever since I bought this place, but I wasn’t in no position to handle it then, and anyhow the time wasn’t right. The machine necessary wasn’t on hand in those days. Now it is, you’re young and smart, and you can do the job that I been saving up for my sons to do. When you see daylight through that place from here, you’re going to be a mighty well-off young man. Are you game? (772)

Hurston uses the theme of nature to expose the inherent shortcomings of Anglo-Saxon culture. Hurston deeply resented the fact that Anglo-Saxon people or whites viewed nature as only a means of profit and prosperity and hence exploited it without taking into consideration its importance in the human context. Throughout the novel, Jim and other white characters keeps exploiting the nature for their own profitable purpose. In the beginning, we see residents of Sawley thriving on lumbering and turpentine industries. They are actually the descendants of the white settlers who have settled here after displacing native Red Indians. In an effort to raise his economic position, Jim soon moves to the town of Citrabelle to start a business of fruit plantation Jim says, “Fruit is the main thing, then truck-gardening. Ninety-day crops down in here. Three crops a year. Sell it in the commission house, put your money in your pocket and put in another crop” (665). Similarly, he insists that his son-in-law Hatton Howland cuts down swamp trees and develop it as a real estate property. Soon trees in the swamp are cut down and swamp is filled. Hurston writes:
They went to the swamp and moved about in their high boots, and swinging shining axes to shy them, felling the giant trees. Gna\wng at the feet of the forest to make way for the setting sun…. Raw, dark gashes made by the bulldozers were streets stretching across the new fill and would soon be paved. (776-777)

Jim after earning profit from the exploitation of land takes to the ocean. He starts a shrimping business. By exploiting vast natural reserves of nature, he becomes even richer. Hurston gives a vivid description of exploitation of these natural resources:

Turtles, numerous kinds of fish, a leopard shark, strange unimaginable-shaped things; four octopi, about four feet across, bent their arms like swastikas and rolled about the deck trying to find their way back to the water…. The men went in killing things. First that astonishingly limber bodied shark. It could whip its body around as if it hadn’t a bone in it. With shovels and the axe, they fell upon it…. With shovels, the men scooped up the mass of strange life on deck, and tossed it back into the water. The sea birds screamed and swooped, picking up the dead, and catching the weakened creatures before they could dive out of reach. (905)

The ocean imagery occurs at the concluding part of the novel. It is altogether a different world compared to other natural aspects occurring in the novel like the swamp and the turpentine forests. Hurston writes:

The contrast was utterly startling. No waves, just an undulating motion that made the distant horizon seem to go up and down slowly and gently. The sun was not up yet, but he had sent his messengers on
ahead. A diffused pinkness lit up the sky to the east, then suddenly the rim of the great ball rushed up from the east of the ocean, and laid a red sword westward across the swaying water. (900)

The ocean means winning and losing as well as life and death for Jim Meserve and Arvay Henson. It is only on the ocean that Arvay feels at home. Hurston writes:

Arvay looked and gasped in awe and admiration. The sea vastness, the unobstructed glory of the rising sun, the delicate and forming colors on horizon and sea made new sensations for Arvay. She felt herself stretching and extending with her surroundings. (900)

It is only here in the ocean that Jim and Arvay reconcile with each other after a brief separation. Arvay realizes that she cannot live without Jim and comes to a realization that serving and nurturing Jim is her key to happiness. Arvay and Jim’s relationship comes out of darkness and uncertainty of the “Big Swamp” to the clarity and lucidity of the ocean. Hurston writes,

A breeze of dawn sprang up, and the boat rocked gently with it. The slightly increased motion made Arvay look out upon the sea. She saw that the sun was rising. It seemed to her that the big globe of light leaped up from a bed fixed on the eastern horizon and mounted, trailing the red covers of his bed behind him. Arvay pictured that he looked and saw the Arvay Henson with her and Jim on board and laid that rosy path across the crinkling water straight to it to look and see if she was carrying her work. The sunlight rose higher, climbed the rail and came on board. (930)
Significantly, the novel ends with natural imagery, just as it had started. The gentle knocking of the ocean, dawn of a new day brings a new change in Arvay and Jim’s life. Christopher Rieger writes in this regards:

The ocean makes a fitting setting for this vision of mutual power and reciprocal need. Its vastness and fluidity permit Hurston to portray the ocean as encompassing opposing forces in its oneness. Alternately placid and menacing.... Thus, the ocean appears as a decidedly feminine force in Hurston’s depiction. As Jim rests on Arvay’s bosom like a child returning “to the comfort of his mother”, the boat carrying them is similarly cradled by the maternal and eternal sea: the Arvay Henson rode gently on the bosom of the Atlantic. It lifted and bowed in harmony with the wind and the sea. It was acting in submission to the finite and Arvay felt its peace. (122-123)

Freudian themes are perhaps one of the most important theories in Seraph. Both the main characters, that of Arvay Henson and Jim Meserve suffer from certain personality disorders and Hurston aptly uses Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalytic theories in her story. During the period of Harlem Renaissance, Sigmund Freud’s works and his various theories became immensely popular with African American literary artists and Hurston was no exception. According to Lowe, “Freud was a favorite topic during the Harlem Renaissance and in New York intellectual society in general during the twenties and thirties” (271). Hurston was aware of Freud’s works before her tenure in Barnard College in the early 1920s and the story of Seraph came as an opportunity for Hurston to blend this knowledge with literature. To quote Carl Milton Hughes:
*Seraph on the Suwanee* places Hurston at once among the many American writers who have paid homage to Sigmund Freud. One has only to recall the Freud vogue of the twenties and thirties in American literature. Freud at this time was accepted as the modus vivendi of uninhibited sex. Hurston deals with a different phase of Freudian psychology although sex appears. Her point of departure subscribes to the more recent Freudian treatments in literature which popularizes the neurotic character. In the particular case in point, Hurston gives a study of the hysterical woman. (172)

Delving deep into the protagonist Arvay Henson’s character, one sees that she is a neurotic and has a complex personality and lives a delusional, melancholic life. Hurston manifests the psychological predicament of Arvay. John Lowe writes in this context:

> Morbidly aware of her unworthy status as a Cracker, guilty of lusting after her sister’s husband, afraid of being an object of ridicule, and thus largely devoid of a sense of humor, she reads all humour as suspect, aggressive, and threatening, interpreting it in this pseudo-Freudian way causes her to be “Freudianly” troubled throughout the book. (283)

In the beginning of the story one sees that Arvay is guilt ridden for loving her brother-in-law Carl Middleton and dreams that Carl will leave Larraine to be with her. Arvay dreams:

> She would be standing in a flower yard, and she would see Carl coming a long way off, tired and worn out and sad. He would kneel down on his knees, kiss the hem of her garment, tell her how it all happened and beg her to forgive and to forget. (608)
Not only Arvay fanaticizes about Carl but also deep down wishes that Larraine is dead so that she can remarry Carl. Hurston writes:

That night Arvay had a strange dream. She saw Raine’s white neck. It was huge like the stand-pipe at the water works, and down its long length blood was running and running from a huge gash. Somehow she was impelled to look at her own hands and in her right was a long shortly knife ....Another night Arvay dreamed that she was in a beautiful forest of trees and very happy....A tiger leaped upon Larraine and tore her throat away. Great streams of blood ran down and some of it clotted between Larraine’s breasts. Somehow Arvay was not afraid of the tiger. She looked on indifferently as the beast lapped Larraine’s blood fiercely, and when he was sated, and moved away the music began again. Waking, Arvay shuddered with remorse. She knew then that she had been her own sister for years. (656)

Arvay is aware of her guilt of her death wish for her sister and seeking pleasures from sexual dreams of her brother-in-law Carl Middleton. Arvay’s failure to marry Carl Middleton and her family’s cold treatment towards her, only compounds her psychological problems. These dreams are actually repressed desires of Arvay, which comes out in the form of dreams. Commenting on Arvay’s characterization as a neurotic, Carl Milton Hughes writes:

Hurston introduces the reader to a neurotic woman known to clinical psychologist as the hysterical female. This type has certain repressions which originate in the libido. Here the emphasis is upon sex. The case study of Arvay follows the conventional pattern of the type. For instance, when Arvay appears on the scene she has a chronic case of
repressed love…. Now the psychology behind such behavior remains grounded in the individual’s private world where she indulges in romantic love without the attending reality of physical love. Even when married, such women, although they bear children, derive little sensation from the passionate love and remain essentially frigid. Arvay’s tendency towards fainting equates epileptic seizure, which belongs primarily to the Freudian hypothesis if sexual repression. Arvay, once faced with a physically appealing man is awakened sexually. She transmits to her first-born intellectual deficiency. (173-175)

Hurston most aptly uses Freud’s psychoanalytic theory of dreams in the story of Seraph.

Dreams have always been an important theme in African American literature. Leading Harlem Renaissance writers have used the theme of dream to build upon their stories. Hurston too uses dreams in the exposition of theme of the story of Seraph. Arvay dreams of Carl and her sexual escapades with him as well as her sister’s death. Lowe writes in this regard:

Dreams have traditionally played a large role in black sermons and in the “travels” of recent converts who have “come through.” Dreams play key role in conjuring and root work and in the widespread habit in black urban neighborhoods of poring over dreams for destined numbers to play in neighborhood rackets. Hurston’s mentor no doubt introduced her to Freud as early as the twenties, but other friends like Van Vachten were affectionados as well. Whatever, the source, Hurston certainly saw the immense potential of Freud’s theories for Seraph,
where they would work in tandem with backwood religions. Arvay’s dreams are for instance, both typological and Freudian. (272)

Unable to marry Carl Middleton, Arvay decides to become a nun and remain unmarried throughout her life. This decision distances Arvay even more from her family, also marking her as an object of public ridicule. She goes into a kind of self-exile or “mourning” for five years until she meets Jim Meserve. Freud in his influential essay, “Mourning and Melancholia” explains:

The melancholic displays.... an extraordinary diminution in his self-regard, and impoverishment of his ego on a grand scale. The patient represents his ego to us as worthless, incapable of any achievement and morally despicable; he reproaches himself, vilifies himself and expects to be cast out and punished. He abases himself before everyone and commiserates with his own relatives for being connected with anyone so unworthy.... This picture of a delusion (mainly moral) inferiority is completed by sleeplessness and refusal to take nourishment. (246)

Arvay also throws hysterical fits to refrain any suitor from approaching her as revealed by Jim later. While creating the character of Arvay, Hurston had Freud’s psychoanalytic theories on her mind. Hurston writes:

For the last three years, Arvay had been having hysterical seizures, classified in the local language as “having fits. Sometimes they came upon her in church right after the sermon, but more often she was took down right after she got home from the service, and usually when some extra brash young gallant had forced himself upon her to the extent of seeing her home.... Arvay’s part, the venture invariably ended in an hysterical display as soon as the young man got inside the
Henson parlor. Hardly did she get her hat off before she was sprawled out on the horse-hair sofa clenching hands and teeth and bobbling around, and up and down, and with her mother running in with a small vial of spirits of turpentine and the sugar dish with a teaspoon in it to administer the dose of three “drops” of “teppentine on sugar” forced between the teeth of Arvay to bring her to. The embarrassed would be suitor stumbled out and that was the end of his hopes. (604)

Arvay is mostly successful in keeping her suitors off. This act of hysteria once again manifests the complexity of Arvay’s character. This hysterical madness or a metaphor of resistance can be best described as a problem, not a solution (Butler 112). While explaining female hysteria, Carminero-Santangelo comments:

Madness is the impasse confronting those whom cultural conditioning has deprived of the very means of protest or self-affirmation. Far from being a form of contestation ‘mental illness’ is a request for help, a manifestation both of cultural impotence and of political castration.

(21-22)

However, a determined Jim is not put off by Arvay’s hysterical act. He “cures” Arvay of her self-induced madness by putting a drop of turpentine in her eyes. Being in relationship with Jim, does not help Arvay either. She is unable to love him completely. Despite being with Jim, Arvay remains melancholic throughout her life. While describing the characteristics of melancholia, Freud explains:

The object has not perhaps actually died but has been lost as an object of love (e.g. in the case of a betrothed girl who has been jilted )....The distinguishing mental features of melancholia a profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity
of love.... and a lowering of the self-regarding feelings to a degree that finds utterance in self-reproaches and self-revilings, and culminates in a delusional expectation of punishment. (“Mourning” 244-45).

Though Jim loves Arvay, Arvay is unable to reciprocate Jim’s love. She thinks that how Jim could choose her, a worthless “cracker” over other girls. She is apprehensive of Jim’s intentions during their courtship, Hurston writes:

But Arvay took in through a gray veil of apprehension. Folks would be coming along this road and see her in the company of Jim, and she pictured them grinning slyly and making jokes about her. Her mind imaged up the picture of the future. After Jim had made a public show of her, he would naturally get himself a regular girl, and they would all laugh at her Arvay, and say how Jim Meserve and whoever his wife might be had made her look like a fool at a funeral. If only nobody came along! Oh, but she was not born for luck. (614)

Arvay’s self-esteem is further lowered, as she is raped by Jim just before their marriage. The rape further shatters her self-esteem. She feels degraded and debased. Hurston writes:

Not until Jim lay limp and motionless upon her body, did Arvay return to herself and begin to think and with thinking, all her old feeling of defeat and inadequacy came back on her. She was terribly afraid. She had been taken for a fool, and now her condition was worse than before. It was more than she could bear, to have been so lifted up for a few weeks only to be cast down like this. What was to become of her. (645)
This inadequacy and defeating attitude plagues Arvay and Jim’s married life also, “Arvay found that Jim thought her a trifle dumb” (659). As a result Arvay’s feeling of guilt and inferiority only increases, making her distance herself from Jim more and more, “Arvay did a lot of communing with herself. Now, she thought, Jim’s real feelings were exposed. He had never taken her for his equal” (716). The neurotic Arvay becomes more and more shut to herself and isolated until she recognizes her true worth after twenty years of searching within herself.

While Hurston uses Freud’s theory of Mourning and Melancholia to create the complex character of Arvay she also endows the character of Jim with another psychoanalytic theory that of Narcissism. The character of Jim manifests certain features of a Narcissistic Personality Disorder as set forth by the American Psychiatric Association’s Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), “The essential feature of Narcissistic Personality Disorder is a pervasive pattern of grandiosity, need for admiration and lack of empathy that begins by easily adulthood and is present in a variety of contexts” (714).

From the beginning of the novel, one sees Jim’s narcissistic pattern of behavior, He says to Arvay, “You don’t understand your own self, Miss Arvay, and somebody stronger than you, and that can see further than you, and somebody that feels your care, will have to be on hand to look after you” (613). Jim’s mannerisms and behaviour further depict his arrogant narcissistic behavior. He says to Arvay, “It’s a habit of mine, Miss Arvay, when I catch a streak of lightening aiming at me, to stand in my tracks and slap it back where it come from” (623). Similarly, he flaunts himself as, “he came parading like a king down the aisle behind her” (617).

Hurston through the character of Jim and his narcissistic traits is commenting on white American patriarchal cultures that are in power. Christopher Lasch, in his
book *The Culture of Narcissism* explains, “every society reproduces its culture—its norms, its underlying assumptions, its modes of organizing experience—in the individual in the form of personality” (34) and a personality, “that is suited to the requirements of that culture” (238). Hurston brilliantly shows that the narcissistic traits of Jim is a result of conditioning by the society and culture in which he lives. Thus, Hurston through the character of Jim tries to show the narcissistic characteristics of white American society.

Though Jim is portrayed as a male chauvinist and a narcissist, he needs Arvay as a mother figure in his life. This mother/child motif runs throughout the novel. He is dependent on Arvay emotionally and wants that she should mother and nurture him. He tries to dominate Arvay throughout the novel, but feels inadequate without her. “For an answer, Jim kissed Arvay with a kind of happy arrogance, then snuggled his head down on her breast in that way he had that Arvay thought was so much like a helpless child, and went off into peaceful sleep” (797). Jim also seeks to impress Arvay just like a small child does to show his mother. In the snake handling scene, Jim catches hold of the snake like “a little boy turning cartwheel in front of the house” (829). In the final reunion scene too, when Arvay returns to Jim, he reacts “like a child trying to keep him from crying” (917) and seeks comfort in Arvay just like “a little boy who had fled in out of the dark to the comfort of his mother” (917).

Arvay too, is ready to play the role of mother to Jim, she thinks, “Her job was mothering” (919). Susan Edwards Meisenhelder comments:

> His love for Arvay is ultimately not sexual but infantile, an attempt to recreate a relationship with his mother, who is the most important woman in his life….this need for “hovering” rather than a vigorous
sexual partner requires that he harness Arvay’s sexual energy. Making
her his sexless seraph and nurturing mother. (105)

Through *Seraph*, Hurston investigates white American society and its different
aspects. She deals especially with the theme of the poor of white class extensively in
her novel, “crackers”, a term which she uses throughout the novel. Commenting on
the theme of poor whites in the works of literature, John C. Charles writes:

Poor whites as subject of fiction, social commentary, and historical
inquiry, were in fact experiencing something of a vogue during and
after the Depression, bestselling Southern authors Marjorie Kinnan
Rawlings (a Floridian and personal friend of Hurston), Erskine
Caldwell, and historian W.J. Cash all took on poor whites during these
years. These and other writers of the period frequently depicted poor
whites through stereotypes usually assigned to African Americans, i.e.
as either quaintly innocent or savagely primitive. Hurston draws on
these familiar stereotypes of the poor white as a real means to
communicate with her postwar audience in much the same way that
white writers after Reconstruction had achieved a symbolic national
reunion through proliferating and demeaning images of African-
American. (27)

The protagonist Arvay Henson and her family represent the class of poor
whites or “crackers” as Hurston describes them. Crackers are not only poor but also
“ignorant, primitive, bigoted, lazy, fearful of change” (Charles 6). Arvay’s father
Brock Henson earns bare minimum money and somehow sustains his family by his
turpentine farm. Arvay and her family live in a very modest home. Arvay is aware of
her poor class and thinks herself to be inferior to all the others, “things as wonderful
as this were never meant for nobody like her. This was first class-class, and she was born to take other people ‘s leavings” (620). “This perception of general Southern poor white squalor and benightedness is made manifest in Arvay and her family, whose ignorance is frequently shocking, on occasion amusing, and at times appalling (Charles 38). Even though she marries Jim, who himself is more or less equal as her economic status, she still consider herself to be economically inferior to Jim and often thinks that Jim is mocking her of her debilitating status. Arvay says to Jim:

I know that you had been had it in you to say all the time. I been looking for you to puke it up long time ago. What you stay with me, I don’t know because I know so well that you don’t think I got no sense, and my folks don’t amount to a hill of beans in your sight. You come from some big high muck-de mucks, and we ain’t nothing but piney-woods Crackers and poor white trash. Even niggers is better than we is, according to your kind. (713)

Throughout the novel, Arvay remains class-conscious. She judges people on their material worth. Through the character of Arvay and her notions about the economic preferences, Hurston shatters the myth of white womanhood being untainted. Laura Dubek writes in this context:

*Seraph on the Suwanee* thus issues challenges to 1940s constructions of white womanhood. First, the novel shows just how the white women benefit from the idea—advanced by popular women’s magazines—that they comprise a homogenous group defined solely by their difference from men. Through her fictional portrait of a materially successful white marriage, Hurston illustrates that. If white women learned the social/racial mores of class mobility, they could maintain economic
privilege by enacting a purblind set of cultural practices which seemed (or were consciously) dependent on white male behaviour and its privileges. Because of his class background, Jim Meserve—rather than the Henson Crackers—knows the social behaviours and manipulation that make for gender, race, and class power. Jim’s power translates into economic prosperity which Arvay, as wife, shares and ironically secures by remaining defined solely in relation to her husband. Most importantly, then, the novel shows that the pervasive emptiness of the white middle-class housewife’s life….Hurston writes a novel that exposes that same American society as racist and white women as complicit in the economic and social structure that support racist and sexist practices. (349)

She also disapproves of Hatton Howland for her daughter on the basis of his economic state and his job at gas station. Hurston through the theme of poor whites exposes the shortcomings of the whites and their culture. To quote John C. Charles:

By scapegoating crackers is a double-edged sword for Hurston, for while the poor white allows her to render a critique of Southern backwardness, her strategy of representation displacement—projecting negative African American stereotypes and experiences onto poor whites—actually stages, indirectly, what she most wanted to disavow: black abjection. Hurston depicts the world of the crackers as marked by crushing poverty, ignorance, rape, lynching, and an enduring plantation social structure; she even goes as far as to draw on eugenicist ideas about inferior, animal-like, and unsocializable “kinds” of people. In other words, Hurston indirectly voices what she refused
to say about the oppression of African Americans, however unintentionally and, arguably, unconsciously: the crackers end up as surrogates, figures that simultaneously obscure and reveal the seething racial conflicts of the postwar South. What is completely absent from the text—overtly racialized violence, Jim Crow, Sharecropping, chain gangs, the KKK—reappears in altered form and in affect, an affect that overpowers the manifest discourse of the work. Hurston’s “unspeakable” rage at the condition of African Americans become legible in the narrative through her vicious treatment of the poor white characters. (27-28)

Just as Arvay remains stuck to her roots of being a “cracker” throughout the novel Jim Meserve remains devoid of any class consciousness and his economic position remains fluid all through the novel. He comes from an upper-class family who owned plantation and bought lands during the slavery, but lost their money during the Civil War. He starts with humble beginnings as a turpentine worker in Brock Henson’s farm, but gradually succeeds in changing his fortunes. He moves to Citrabelle to start a citrus-fruit production, later venturing into real-estate business and finally shrimping business. Through the character of Jim, Hurston portrays ambitious middle class whites of America. He constantly strives to be upwardly mobile and tries to change his class consciously.

In *Seraph* African Americans represent working class poor people. Joe Kelsey is an African American working under Jim. In Jim’s shrimp boat, the majority of workers doing menial works are the African Americans. Jim employs African Americans to do manual labour for him because it was, “colored men did all of the manual work, they were the ones who actually knew how things were done” (666). In
a way, Hurston tries to show the economic exploitation of working class black who
work hard but are most disadvantaged. Christopher Rieger comments:

The bulk of profit, however, is reserved for the white, male owners of
the land, Jim and Hatton, rather than for those who work on it. In the
scenes on the muck in Their Eyes, Hurston is careful to point out the
profits being turned by the black laborers, while the white bosses are
virtually absent from the text itself. In Seraph, we see things from the
other side, and the focus is on the profit from the negotiating deeds,
timber contracts, and development deals. (114)

Gender is another prevalent theme in the novel. Like in her other novels,
Hurston takes a deep look between the relationship of men and women in Seraph.
Susan Edwards Meisenhelder writes in this regard:

A major strand in her critique involves relationship between white men
and women. Although for postwar white America, Arvay may have
seemed a Cinderella figure rescued from poverty and sexual frustration
by Prince Charming, Hurston gives us quite a critical view of life on a
pedestal, revealing the specific ways in which love is “de prong” even
well-to-do white women get hung on. (96)

At the beginning of the novel, it is told that Arvay is the talk of the town, as
she is still unmarried at the age of twenty-one. Men often fanaticize about Arvay and
joke about her. “Tremendous emphasis is placed upon women’s flesh in this novel
and what men think of doing, as well as what they do” (Campbell 140).

Similarly Jim rapes Arvay during their courtship and keeps on repeatedly
doing so for the rest of their married life. He warns Arvay, “you’re going to keep on
going raped. You couldn’t be hollering for your Pa every day for the rest of your life,
could you?” (650). Hurston depicts the physical degradation imposed by males on women through the heinous act of rape. During the time-frame of this story, thousands of African Americans were regularly lynched and killed on the pretext of raping a white woman. Interestingly, Hurston here shows, a white man like Jim Meserve raping his own white woman. In the later part of the novel, Hatton Howland tries to rape Arvay’s daughter Angie, “Angie! Do that again, and so help me, I will rape you” (760). Even Earl, the mentally challenged son of Jim and Arvay tries to rape Lucy Ann. In this way Hurston portrays violent relationships between white men and women in *Seraph on the Suwanee*.

Hurston once shows how women have to live in a marginalized position and are often dominated by men. To quote Josie P. Campbell:

As in her other novels, Hurston also deals with men’s domination of women. If to be black, female and poor is to be marginalized in a patriarchal world, what is it to be white female (with blonde hair and blue eyes), and poor? To a large extent, in this novel, there appears to be little difference when it comes to how men view women. (140)

Throughout the novel, Jim asserts his importance as a male over Arvay, “No, Miss Arvay, that I can’t do at all you need my help and my protection” (613). Similarly, like any other white male, Jim thinks women are good for nothing. Jim says “Women folks don’t have no mind to make up no how. They wasn’t made for that” (621). Ironically, Jim thinks that Arvay is only fit for doing household chores and mothering his children, yet he often expects her to understand and be with him in all his struggles, “Now, you ain’t dumb, Arvay. You got plenty of sense if you would only use it. May be you couldn’t of done one thing to help me, but you could of showed what you was made out of by trying” (836).
Though she is the protagonist of the novel, at times Arvay seems to be the weakest character. Hurston creates her character with fatal flaws like lack of confidence, humour, and vigour. Interestingly while creating the character of Arvay, Hurston has added her own personal dimensions to it. Hurston was a very confident and bold woman and often her men friends were in awe of her. Due to her free spirited nature she even could not continue marital life. She often found men timid and plagued by inferiority in front of her. In a way she endowed all these shortcomings in the character of Arvay, “The interesting thing about Arvay’s characterization is that Hurston created it from the inadequacy she found in the men in her own life” (312). While discussing the character of Arvay with Scribner’s editor, she said:

I shall bring Arvay along her road to find herself a great deal faster. I get sick of her at times myself. Have you ever been tied in close contact with a person who had a strong sense of inferiority? I have and it is hell. They carry it like a sore on the end of the index finger. You go along thinking well of them and doing what you can to make them happy and suddenly you are brought up short with an accusation of looking down on them, taking them for a fool, etc., but they mean to let you know and so on and so forth. It colors everything….for example I took this man I cared for down to Carl Van Vechten’s one night so that he could meet some of my literary friends, since he had complained that I was always off with them, and ignoring him. I hoped to make him feel at home with the group and included so that he would go where I went. What happened? He sat off in a corner and gloomed and uglied away, and we were hardly out in the streets before he was
accusing me of having dragged him down there to show off what a big shot I was and how far I was above him. He had a good mind, many excellent qualities, and I am certain that he loved me. But his feeling of inferiority would crop up and hurt me at the most unexpected moments.…It is a very common ailment. That is why I decided to write about it. The sufferers do not seem to realize that all that is needed is a change of point of view from fear into self-confidence and then there is no problem. (Hemenway 312-313)

Motherhood is an important theme dealt extensively by Hurston in the novel. Arvay is an embodiment of motherhood. Though she is not portrayed as a strong character but she shows her strongest mother instinct when it comes to her children. Children are the first priority of Arvay, and sometimes she even goes to the extent of confrontation with her dominating husband Jim for her children’s welfare. Arvay’s first child is Earl who is a physically and mentally challenged child. Arvay loves Earl very much, “So Arvay felt free to get on her knees and pray. First, she asked God for the health and welfare of her child, and please, let Earl David never be taken away from her” (663). Though Jim also likes his son, but he does not feel as attached as Arvay for Earl and sometime even comes to the point of ignoring him. Earl’s life depends directly on Arvay only. She takes care of him in every way. Even Jim acknowledges this fact. He thinks:

But Arvay is a true mother, bless her heart! I can’t, I can’t fault her too much for what she’s done, crazy as it is. Mother-meat never gives over, I reckon. They’ll die and go to hell for their young. (725)

Arvay loves Earl more than her other children. Hurston writes:
Every time that she saw heard blow-outs of laughter from the house in
the grove of nights, and knew that Jim was down there taking part, and
thought about Earl being in that room under watch-care, she boiled.
She felt that she and Earl were shut off in loneliness by themselves.

(718)

After the death of Earl, Arvay becomes more depressed and disillusioned. Her
relationship with Jim deteriorates further.

Arvay’s second child is Angeline. Arvay loves Angeline and imbues in her
good qualities to make her an ideal girl. She wants her to continue her education and
get married. When she elopes with Hatton Howland, Arvay is greatly disappointed.
Arvay tries to convince Angie to get higher education:

I ain’t never had much schooling; no college walls, and I thought that it
would be mighty nice for you to get hold of the advantage that I
missed. All I know is my a b c’s. Read some and figger little. I thought
that it would be nice, after you mentioned it, to have my girl come
home with papers to hang on the wall. (755)

Arvay also loves Kenny, as he is her youngest child. Arvay even wants Kenny
to finish his college before starting a music career. She is cautious of Kenny’s
whereabouts when he goes to another city for higher education. At one point of time
she even confronts Jim when she feels that Kenny is being instigated by Felicia and
her mother.

Religion is another theme present in the novel. In her earlier works, Hurston
had explored the theme of religion in context of African American communities, but
in *Seraph*, she looks how religion plays a part in the lives of white people. At the very
beginning of the novel, Hurston depicts that for people in Sawley, Baptist Church
plays an important part in their lives. It is not only a place of religious importance but also a social center for meeting each other. Religion and Church plays an important role in Arvay’s life, who “played the organ for the Sunday school, and she took an active part in church work” (603). She even decides to become a missionary and spend the rest of her life as a nun. It is against the backdrop of Church, that Arvay and Jim’s courtship begins. Jim meets Arvay for the first time while going to the church. Before meeting Jim Meserve, Arvay fanaticizes about her brother-in-law Carl Middleton, who is pastor at the same church.

The Bible acts as a guiding principle for Arvay in her life. “Arvay had thought of herself since the childhood as soldier in the army of the Lord. A soldier of the Cross, and a follower of the Meek and Lowly Lamb” (817). She regularly the reads the Bible and finds solace in it. At one point of time, she even fights with Jim over the Bible. Arvay scolds Jim, “You must be crazy or awful wicked one, to be looking for jokes in the Bible”(658). Yet she considers Jim to be a miracle that God has sent for her, “This was miracle right out of the Bible.” (750). When Arvay’s daughter Angie marries Hatton Howland without Arvay’s knowledge, Arvay once again finds solace in the Bible. Arvay compares herself to the biblical character of enslaved Hager. Bible once again becomes the point of reference for Arvay, when she thinks of the Corregios. According to Arvay, the Corregio family can best be described as “godless”. Arvay compares Felicia and Mrs. Corregio as Herodias and Salome, when she feels that they both, are preying on his youngest son Kenny. Arvay thinks:

They were no different from that awful Herodias and her daughters Salome who had got John the Baptist killed for nothing. They had been put in the Bible to warn folks against just such sluts as Felicia and her Mama. Babylonian females with no God in their hearts, and no weapon
against evil in their hands. Just out to bring ruin and destruction on widows and orphan-children. (818)

Though Arvay is deeply religious but she is always in conflict with her impure thoughts. In the beginning, we see that she secretly lusts after her brother-in-law Carl Middleton though she knows it is an immoral act. She often asks God for forgiveness and when Earl is born with deformity, she thinks that God has punished her for her sin of lusting for her elder sister’s husband. Arvay thinks, “This is the punishment for the way I used to be, I thought that I had done paid off, but I reckon not. I never thought it would come like this, but it must be the chastisement I been looking for” (662). At the end of the novel, Arvay finally realizes the true importance and worth of religion and God’s greatness, beyond theological books. Sharon L. Jones writes in this regards:

At the novel’s close, Arvay returns to a purer sense of religion as she nears the acceptance of a sense of self.... At this point Arvay begins to rediscover the divinity in herself and in her relationship with her husband. (158)

Arvay is finally at peace with herself. She realizes that God has assigned her a role to perform that is to be wife of Jim and mother to his children, “God had made her a mother to give peace and comfort around” (918). Arvay compares her life with “Moses before his burning bush” (918) and her marriage with Jim as compared to the relationship between Rebecca and Issac in the Bible. Arvay even sees birth of her children as God’s message to her. The birth of Earl was meant to “purge her out” (918) While birth of Angeline and Kenny came to her like the “Resurrection” (918). In the end, Arvay finds divinity in her motherhood. Hurston writes, “Holy Mary who had been blessed to mother Jesus had been no better off than she was. She had been
poor and unlearnt too” (919). Hurston wrote about Religion in her autobiography *Dust Tracks on a Road*:

But certain things have seemed to me true as I heard the tongues of those who had speech, and listened at the lips of books. It seems to me to be true that heavens are placed in the sky because it is the unreachable. The unreachable and therefore the unknowable always seems divine—hence, religion. People need religion because the great masses fear life and its consequences. Its responsibilities weigh heavy. Feeling a weakness in the face of great forces, men seek an alliance with omnipotence they rely upon is a creature of their own minds. It gives them a feeling of security. Strong and self-determining men are notorious for their lack of reverence. (225)

Jim Meserve is a total worldly person. In the beginning he goes to church only because Arvay goes there. After marrying Arvay, religion takes backseat for Jim. For Jim, providing for his family becomes his foremost priority. He even sometimes argues with Arvay on her religious inclinations. The title of the novel, *Seraph on the Suwanee* is symbolic having religious connotations just as Hurston’s other works. The seraph or angel referred to in the title of the novel is Arvay Henson Meserve. Referring to Arvay as a seraph is highly symbolic. Seraph is “One of an order of celestial beings conceived as fiery and purifying ministers of Jehovah” (Gates and Appiah 34). Just as a seraph hovers over God, Arvay cares for her husband and children, “Mothering and hovering ” (919) them. In the end, Arvay becomes Jim’s “seraph and accorded Jim the paradoxical status he has demanded, that of God to be worshipped and child to be hovered” (Meisenhelder 107).
The name of Arvay’s daughter is also symbolic. The name Angeline refers to angel. It suggests divine quality of Arvay’s daughter who “resurrects” her. In a way Angeline brings back happiness and peace into Arvay and Jim’s life which had become absent after the birth of their first child, Earl who was deformed.

Name of Jim Meserve is also symbolic. Ironically his surname “Meserve” speaks for himself. Hurston gives him a name Meserve which actually means “Me-Serve” or serve me. His name, Meserve, suggests domination and possession (Jones 160). Throughout the novel, he dominates Arvay and demands her submission. In the end, ironically, Arvay finds that her real happiness lies in “serving and meant to serve” (920). “Jim’s effect on the black characters in the novel is equally pernicious and insidious” (Meisenhelder 113). Other black workers serving under Jim have symbolic name. One of Jim’s shipmates is Stumpy--suggesting a black character who is stunted in the white culture. Another black character is Cup-cake, who cooks for Jim just as his name symbolizes. A Black character, Titty-Nipple, suggests the maternal role black men play for white men in the absence of their white women.

*Seraph on the Suwanee* is a highly symbolic novel. Hurston has used many complex symbols in the novel. One another symbol present in the novel is that of the burning of the house. Arvay goes back to Sawley, for her mother’s funeral and later puts fire to the old house of her family. This burning of house has a great symbolic meaning for Arvay. She is immensely happy at her act. Hurston writes:

Looking at the conflagration, exultation swept over her, followed by a peaceful calm. It was the first time in her life that she was conscious of feeling that way. She had always felt like an imperfect ball restlessly bumping and rolling and bumping. Now she felt that she had come to a dead and absolute rest. The dry old house dead and absolute rest. The
dry old house burned furiously, and as Arvay watched the roaring and ascending flames, she picked herself over inside and recognized why she felt as she did now. She was no longer divided in her mind. The tearing and ripping and useless rending was furnished and done. (879).

With the burning of the house, Arvay finally comes to peace with herself. She burns away all her impure thoughts, emotions and guilt, which she had been carrying as a burden throughout her life. She is purged out of all the evil thoughts about her sister Larraine and Carl. She also understands her true worth. She is now able to love Jim without any restrictions and inhibitions. To quote Rita C. Butler:

She has created a space that honors the best of what she can salvage from her past. Hurston, adept at understanding the nuances of discrimination that can begin at an early age in one’s own family, suggests that Arvay is neither weak nor inherently mean but rather that her undesirable behaviour in the past reelected a lack of insight into the deep-sighted insecurities she harbored about herself and her place in the world. In contrast to a paternal legacy that includes emotional abuse and dormant genetic flaw that causes havoc, Maria, the long-suffering mother, becomes the force that enables Arvay to experience a degree of self-esteem and social power. (135)

The burning of the house can inextricably be linked to the title of the novel. In the Bible, there is a story that when Isaiah sees God on a throne, under hovering seraphim, he cries out loud that he is last because he is man of sin. One of the seraphim flies and puts a hot coal in Isaiah’s mouth. He is instantly purged of all his sins. Similarly, when Arvay sets fire to her old house, in a way she is repeating the action of biblical seraphim. By burning her house she purifies herself of all her sins.
The scene of crossing the bar occurring in the end of the novel is once again symbolic. It symbolizes test of love for Arvay. After coming from Sawley, Arvay goes to New Smyrna on the coast of Florida to meet Jim. Jim and Arvay both sail off on shrimping venture on the boat called *Arvay Henson*. Enroute, the ship is dangerously caught in a sand bar. All the crew members are terrified and one mate even grabs Jim’s leg. At this time Arvay pulls him off, and Jim is able to maneuver the ship out of the sand bar. This incident acts like a test of love for Arvay in which she passes and reunites with Jim emotionally. However, there are many incongruities in this scene. It is laden with artificiality and staged language. For example, when the terrorized shipmate holds Jim’s leg, and cries out, “Captain, My Captain! You gone crazy? Turn back! this bar is too rough to cross right now. Captain!” (898). This at once reminds us of Walt Whitman’s poem “Oh Captain! My Captain!” Similarly, Hurston also makes many references to Alfred Tennyson’s poem “Crossing the Bar”, in which she replaces God with Jim Meserve. In all, this scene is highly symbolic and melodramatic.

Arvay’s three children, Earl, Angeline and Kenny too, are symbolic of various aspects of Arvay’s personality. Arvay’s first child Earl symbolizes the dark side of her personality. “His mental, physical and emotional deformities are linked to Arvay in subtle and complex ways” (Campbell 134). Just as mentally challenged and deformed Earl cannot think and explore and is confined to his own world of darkness, similarly Arvay also seems to be reproachable and incapable to love Jim. Just as Earl’s capability to think is considerably narrowed and lacks broad thinking so is sometimes seen in Arvay. She is unable to view things in a different perspective. For example, she unnecessarily hates the Corregio Family and thinks of Felicia and Mrs. Corregio as sluts. She even thinks that Jeff Kelsey is instigating Jim and is proving to
be a negative influence on him. Though, in reality it is far from the truth. Like Earl, she too is shut in her own dark world.

Arvay’s second child, her daughter Angeline symbolizes another facet of Arvay’s personality. Arvay’s feistiness and her courage all are present in Angeline. Angeline’s beauty and sensuality at once reminds us of Arvay’s inherent traits. Even Angeline and Hatton Howland’s courtship, has striking resemblance to that of Jim and Arvay. Eventually they too elope and get married secretly as Jim and Arvay.

Kenny is Arvay’s third child. Kenny is much like his father Jim, but Kenny is very much like Arvay in other aspects. He inherits Arvay’s love of music. Music comes to him naturally. Kenny is mature and caring like Arvay. Just as all through the years, Arvay always cared for her sick and ailing mother, so does Kenny care for his grandmother. He sends presents, photographs and even money to his grandmother, “a money-order for twenty five dollars made out to Maria Henson and signed by Kenny Meserve” (852). Though Arvay may have certain shortcomings but she imbibes in her children certain attributes such as beauty, love, caring, and even music.

In Seraph on the Suwanee, African American characters are depicted as peripheral characters. Hurston has a purpose behind introducing these characters in the novel, though they are always on the borderline. She tries to show that African Americans are important to the white people, for their work and economic prosperity. Joe Kelsey works with Jim and helps out Jim in every business venture. He is with Jim assisting him whenever he needs him. Ironically, it is Joe who teaches Jim to treat women like horses and that they should be tamed, but he never treats his wife Dessie with such derogatory notions. Dessie, wife of Joe Kelsey is more or less like a sister to Arvay. She helps her in giving birth to Earl, as well as provides emotional and physical support when Arvay needs it. Arvay too, likes Dessie very much for she is
like her sister in place of Larraine. Other minor African American characters too are important in Jim life. He takes help of African American workers in all his business ventures. They are always instrumental in economic success of Jim. Similarly, Kenny too, learns music from them and ultimately makes his career in music.

**Seraph on the Suwanee**, can be classified in the genre of romance. Like any other romance novel, *Seraph* also uses a particular formula or repeating pattern and structure usually found in these kind of novels. Commenting on the use of formulae in romance genre novels, Josie P. Campbell writes:

Romance novels generally make use of formulas, or conventional structures or patterns found in a great number of works, for example, hot tempered Irishmen, hard drinking, fighting, and loving, it a formulaic representation, just as the virginal, “nice” blonde girls is. Formulas also refer to plot types, such as the romance in which poor girl meets rich boy, they fall in love, poor girl loves rich boy, they find each other again, poor girl and rich boy marry to live happily ever after.... Formulaic literatures however, should not be considered simplistic or superficial. Shakespeare used formulas, for example, while at the same time he transcended them. (142)

Hurston uses the “Cinderella” or the formula of ideal romance in *Seraph*. John Cawelti has delineated certain traits of ideal romance formula. He enumerates:

It has large groups of individual works from certain combinations of cultural materials and archetypal story patterns..... the defining characteristic is not that it (usually) stars a female, what matters is how the love relationship she has with another develops .... overcoming.... social or psychological barriers. (41-42).
Seraph on the Suwanee makes a formulaic reading. Following the “Cinderella pattern”, Hurston constructs her novel on this conventional structure. Like any romance where hero and heroine function as the center of the story, so Jim and Arvay. The whole story revolves around them, with Arvay being the protagonist of the story like Cinderella. There are also other minor characters present but they only serve as a foil to the hero and heroine. Larraine, elder sister of Arvay acts as a foil to Arvay, while Carl Middleton, brother-in-law of Arvay, functions as a foil to Jim, for in the beginning of the novel, he too, serves as a potential lover for Arvay. Hurston portrays Arvay as a very beautiful girl who enchants Jim so much that he eventually rapes her in order to possess her. Interestingly, Hurston portrays the rape of Arvay by Jim in a romantic fashion. “Jim penetrates her violently and forcibly, and Arvay like Sleeping Beauty in the fairy tale, seems to be “awakened” by his probing of her body” (Campbell 144). Jim marries Arvay. They have ups and downs in their married life, but they both overcome their problems to reunite in the end and live happily ever after. To quote John Lowe:

In Hurston’s conceit, Arvay, like Cinderella, finds her handsome prince, who whisks her away from her unhappy home (replete with a wicked sister) and installs her in what eventually is described as a veritable central Florida “Castle.” (278)

The narration is in third person omniscient narrator, but although it is narrated in the third person, we see and know about the story through the perspective of the protagonist Arvay, Hurston exploring her psyche, uses direct and indirect discourses in the novel for narration.

Overall, the language and style by Hurston in Seraph, is controlled and serious, for she wants to give her readers an insight into a neurotic woman’s mind.
There is no comic relief in the novel. Hurston purposely discards simple yet engaging style in favor of a complex one. The story moves slowly and sometimes seems to be tedious. To quote Robert Bone, “It causes many readers to yearn for the alleviating force and carefree gaiety of the earlier works” (169).

The theme of marriage is once again very important in *Seraph on the Suwanee*, just like Hurston’s other works. Here, Hurston presents a different perspective of marriage not seen in her previous novels like *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* or *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. In her earlier works, she had shown how marriage comes to a bitter end due to adultery and betrayal, but in *Seraph*, marriage continues because individuals reunite with a better understanding. There are several prominent marriages depicted in *Seraph*, like that of Jim Meserve and Arvay Henson, Maria and Brock Henson, Carl and Lorraine Middleton, Joe and Dessie Kelsey, Mr. and Mrs. Corregio and Jeff Kelsey and his wife. Notably most of them differ in ethnicity, race and age. All are presented with different perspectives of marriage, but Hurston also shows that there are certain similarities such as love and trust present in all marital relationships which makes a marriage work.

Right from the beginning, Hurston makes it clear that marriage for white males is a means to oppress women. “Even more broadly, Hurston suggests, in the social milieu of the novel, marriage as an institution means the repressing of a woman’s sexual powers, the taming of her passion” (Meisenhelder 100-101).

The most significant marriage occurring in the novel is that of Arvay Henson and Jim Meserve. Jim holds a very conventional attitude about marriage. According to Jim, women in marriage are only for the purpose of taking care of her husband and having children. Clearly Jim does not believe in equality of women in the marital relationships. Before marrying Arvay, he makes his intentions clear:
Lady folks were just made to laugh and act loving and kind and have a good man to do for them all he’s able, and have him as many boy-children as he figgers he’d like to have, and make him so happy that he’s willing to work and fetchin every dad-blamed thing that his wife thinks she would like to have. That’s what women are made to have. That’s what women are made for. (621)

Unfortunately, this serves as the main principle on which Arvay and Jim’s marriage is based. Obviously, the marriage between the two is not a harmonious one. Arvay feels enslaved and oppressed. Throughout the marriage, she is in self-doubt that Jim does not love her because of her lower economic status. Arvay is disappointed and says to Jim:

I can’t never feel satisfied that I got you tied to me, and I can’t leave you, and I can’t kill you nor hurt you in no way at all. I’m tied and bound down in a burning Hell and no way out that I can see. I can’t see never no peace of mind. (797)

Arvay is at home with her confined roles of mother and daughter. Jim often accuses Arvay of not understanding him or reciprocating his life. He thinks that Arvay is not making serious efforts to love Jim. Jim says:

You love like a coward. Don’t take no steps at all. Just stand around and hope for things to happen out right. Unthankful and unknowing like a hog under an acorn tree. Eating and grunting with your ears hanging over your eyes, and never even looking up to see where the acorns are coming from. (837)

As years pass by, and Arvay’s children grow up, Arvay and Jim’s marriage deteriorate considerably. At one point, Jim even threatens Arvay of beating her up, “I
made my big mistake was in not starting you off with a good, beating just as soon as I married you” (794). With the growing years, Arvay feels more and more alienated and powerless and even thinks of leaving Jim. Arvay faces her greatest humiliation in her marriage when Jim dehumanizes her in what critics call the “bedroom scene.” He treats Arvay like a slave, “Dont you move!” Jim bellowed harshly. “You are my damn property, and I want you right where you are, and I want you naked until I tell you that you can move” (795). Arvay decides to leave Jim. When she goes back to Sawley, she comes to a final conclusion that life with Jim is more bearable than living in Sawley, alone and wretched. “Arvay’s home coming shatters this idealized image of poverty and backwardness teaching her to appreciate the distance from it that marriage to Jim Meserve has enabled her to obtain” (Dubek 346). Both Jim and Arvay resolve to keep their marriage intact and reunite.

Hurston also explores other aspects of marriage through the other couples as well. Though we are not told in much detail about Joe and Dessie Kelsey, but evidently their marriage is much better than that of Arvay and Jim. Against stereotypes of African Americans having unhappy and broken families, Joe and Dessie have a happy marriage with each other. Mr. and Mrs. Corregio’s marriage represents another growing trend of marriage occurring at that time in America. Mr. Corregio is a poor Portuguese, but Mrs. Corregio hails from an economically sound American family. Despite being from different backgrounds, they are happy in their marriage. The marriage of Angeline and Hatton Howland reminds us of that of Arvay and Jim. They too, elope and marry each other with Jim helping them. The marriage of Larraine and Carl Middleton, reflect the marital relationship existing in rural southern America in places like Sawley. Both of them struggle to make their family’s ends meet, causing a distraught in their marital relationship. In a way, Hurston,
shatters the myth of happy married lives of whites, on the contrary shows that people from different race and ethnicity have a more prosperous married life.

Race and racism is another theme occurring in the novel, though it is not dealt with directly. *Seraph on the Suwanee* is mainly based on white characters. Hurston manifests how racist ideologies exist in dominant white America. Rita C. Butler writes in this context:

> While Freud explored the hidden under layers of the human psyche, Hurston looks below the surface of white culture and finds there a locus of social pathology. Like the meteorological phenomenon of “white out” that occurs strives to blanket the social landscape under white “cover” of uniformity that is assumed to be the desired norm.

(106)

Through the character of Arvay Henson, she depicts how their ideologies construe the thinking of white people. Throughout the novel, Arvay is judging people according to their race instead of their qualities. She blames Joe Kelsey to bring a rift between her and Jim’s marriage. Similarly, she thinks the Corregio family is inferior and not equal to whites. Hurston writes:

> Jim had said that they were white folks but the man turned out to be a Portuguese and his name was Corregio. That made them foreigners, and no foreigners were ever quite white to Arvay. Real white people talked English and without funny sounds to it. The fact that his wife was a Georgia born girl that he had married up around Savannah did not help the case one bit, so far as Arvay could see. The woman had gone back on her kind and fallen from the grace. (707-708)
Even when Kenny leaves college for a music opportunity, Arvay thinks it is the Corregio family who has instigated Kenny to leave his education. She thinks every other person of different racial identity as subhuman indicating her deeply embedded racist thinking. Arvay thinks, “Felicia and her mother were nothing but heathen idolaters, and not to be treated white. Arvay proceeded to set up images of them among the African savages and heathen Chinee. They were not fellow human, nothing of the kind” (817).

Hurston, through Arvay, makes it clear that the ambit of racist view of a white extends not only to African Americans, but to the Chinese, as well as other Europeans such as Portuguese people who are considered as inferior to whites, and ultimately dubbed as sub-humans. “Hurston explains Arvay’s thinking as the practically inevitable outcome of racist socialization” (Dubek 345). In the beginning we see that Arvay is also fearful of African Americans and is concerned for her safety, but later Hurston shows that it is not the African American but it is Arvay’s own son Earl who attempts to rape another white girl. Earl is later chased and killed, reminding us of the ill-fate of thousands of African Americans who were killed on false and hoax allegations of rape by white women. Ironically, in *Seraph*, it is the white characters like Jim, Earl and Hatton Howland who are engaged in the heinous crime of rape. Josie P. Campbell writes in this context:

In the time frame of Hurston’s novel, in the first half of the twentieth century, black men in untold numbers were lynched and mutilated for their supposed rape of white women Hurston was surely aware of this, as she most likely was aware of the popular black blues singer, Billie Holiday, and her famous signature song, “Strange Fruit.” This song, written and first performed by Holiday in 1939, depicts the horror of
lynching: “Southern trees bear a strange fruit” that of black bodies “swinging in the Southern breeze”…. The vigilante posse that seeks out and destroys Earl in the swamp reminds us of all of those white supposedly tracking black men to their deaths because supposedly they had raped white women. (141)

Search for identity is another important theme in the novel. Throughout the novel, Arvay is in search of her identity. In the beginning of the novel, we see Arvay decides to become a nun for the rest of her life and to serve the needy becomes the quest of her life until she meets Jim, “She solemnly said that she had given her heart and her life to the work of God. She planned to be a missionary” (602). After meeting Jim she finds her life’s quest in domestic bliss, but at times is wavered by her decision. At one point of time she wants to return to Sawley and spend the rest of her life there, “she would march away from Jim and go back with her own Kind” (718). When Arvay goes to attend her mother’s funeral she finally comes to the conclusion that she needs to live with Jim and be with him rather than spending her life alone. Ultimately, Arvay is able to find her identity as a wife and mother. “Her problem is closer to Janie Crawford’s: she lacks any definition of her identity. Unlike Janie, Arvay lacks a voice, without which she lacks worth, and the ability to imagine freedom” (Schwer 28-29).

Jim too, is in search of his identity throughout the novel, but his search is more in terms of economic sense rather than a spiritual quest. His quest of life seems to be in making money and to be rich and he is successful in doing so.

Hurston was often criticized for not writing protest novels but her greatest criticism came in the form of Seraph on the Suwanee. This criticism still continues even after her death for disregarding African American characters in favour of whites.
Hurston in her brilliant fashion disguises her protest against racism by exposing the follies of white people rather than exposing blatant racial oppression of African Americans. *Seraph on the Suwanee* can also be read as a social critique on white people.

Hurston has also used the Blues theme in the novel. To quote Steven C. Tracy:

The blues musical as a musical genre, though it has its roots in African modalities that are centuries old, first emerged in America during the period following Reconstruction in the late nineteenth century. The term was applied to the songs of itinerant and frequently illiterate singers whose work was noted and transcribed by the folklorists and commentators from outside the tradition in which they were generated until the first blues were recorded in 1920. The blues are traditionally pithy, oral lyric works using a variety of loosely fixed structures into which are poured the subject matter of an individual experience that reflects communal interests. (122)

In *Seraph*, Hurston uses the blues theme to show the vital difference between whites and African Americans. While whites’ life is surrounded by material comforts, they lack intrinsic happiness. African Americans though they are poor and illiterate, but they have a rich colorful life. African American workers in Jim’s turpentine farm play blues in the night after a hard day’s work, “Instrumental pieces, sung by men and some by women; spirituals, not sad and forlorn, but sung with a drummy rhythm to them; work songs and ballads” (651-652). Later when Kenny grows up, he is deeply influenced by the Blues songs and takes up to learning from Joe and Jeff Kelsey. In this way, Hurston also shows how whites are influenced by the cultures of African Americans though they cannot accept the fact. In Hurston’s time
when Harlem Renaissance was in full vogue, it became a fashion among the whites too often to go to all black night clubs and make friends with literary artists.

Hurston also uses the theme of “Pet Negro” in her novel. Hurston writes:

Every Southern white man has his pet Negro. His Negro is always fine, honest, faithful to him unto death, and most remarkable, indeed, no other Negro on earth is fitten to hold him alight, and few white people. He never lies, and in fact can do no wrong. If he happens to do what other people might consider wrong, it is never his Negro’s fault. He was pushed and shoved into it by some unworthy varmint. If he kills somebody else, the dead varmint took and run into the pet’s knife or bullet and practically committed suicide just to put the pet in wrong, the low-life-ted scoundrel-beast! If the white patron has his way, the pet will never serve a day in the jail for it. The utmost of his influence will be invoked to balk the law. Turn go his Negro from the jail! (653-654)

In *Seraph*, like any white Southerner Jim too, has his pet Negro as Joe Kelsey. Joe remains a faithful and honest worker to Jim. He more or less acts a compatriot to Jim advising him from personal to business matters. With the help of Joe, Jim is able to make a rapid progress in his business ventures and make money. However, critics have often criticized Hurston for glorifying the concept of “Pet Negro,” as it still reminds one of an oppressive plantation system.

Settings play a very important role in the plot. In all, the novel is based in Florida. There are three major settings in *Seraph*: the town of Sawley, the town of Citrabelle, and the ocean. “Hurston uses setting in Seraph to comment generally on
socioeconomic conditions in Florida in the early twentieth century and to delineate the psychological state of Arvay Henson in particular” (Campbell 126-127).

The first setting of the novel depicts the town of Sawley. Sawley is a town situated in West Florida on the river Suwanee. People of Suwanee are mostly engaged in turpentine and lumbering industry. Interestingly, Hurston tells us that not only the landscape is stunted but so are the opinion and views of people. She writes, “The forms and the scanty flowers in front yards and in tin cans and buckets looked like the people. Trees and plants always look like the people they live with, somehow” (599). It seems that Hurston was well versed with the geography of Sawley and had a first hand knowledge of not only the area but also about its people. People seem to suffer from various diseases like that of hookworm, malaria and other diseases. People seem to be fundamentalist, conservative and racist in their views and opinions. They also suffer from poverty and often are termed as “crackers.” Outside Sawley is the turpentine camp, which is characterized by African American workers and laborers living there. The environment of the camp is lively due to their presence. They work hard in the day and sing blues and play other instruments in the night. While describing the setting of Sawley and the turpentine camp, Hurston offers a stark contrast between the two, emphasizing the fact that African Americans have a more vibrant and happy life than that of poor whites or crackers.

The town of Citrabelle is exactly the opposite of Sawley. Citrabelle is a beautiful town adorned with flowers and fruit bearing trees. The houses are airy, well-lit, painted bright yellow, trim with white, and “folks down in these part did seem to be powerful fond of painting houses and planting flowers things had a picnicky, pleasury look that, while it was pretty” (664). This city is in total contrast to what Arvay had seen all her life, cardboard houses and forms of cotton and tobacco here
and there. Such is the beauty and vibrancy of Citrabelle that Arvay is in fact, daunted by its pleasantness. However, outside the settlement of Citrabelle are the forests and the swamp which are dark, scary and full of snakes making it a dangerous place. Unfortunately, in Citrabelle, the relationship of Jim and Arvay deteriorates more.

The third setting in the novel is that of the ocean on which the shrimping ship of Jim Arvay Henson sails. This setting is totally different from that of the town of Sawley and Citrabelle. There is kind of fluidity and ease in it. The ocean embodies both the aspects of an individual: life and death. Jim says “Biggest thing that God ever made. It’s pretty like you say, and then it can be ugly. It’s good and it’s bad. It’s something of everything on earth” (900). This third and last setting brings a conclusion to the story, where Arvay and Jim reconcile and both forget their differences to live happily ever after. Hurston writes “The sea vastness, the unobstructed glory of the rising sun, the delicate and forming colors on the horizon and sea made new sensations for Arvay. She felt herself stretching and extending with her surroundings. Her eyesight seemed better, and her hearing more keen” (950). Freud calls this feeling of Arvay as “oceanic feeling, a sensation of eternity, a feeling as of something, limitless unbounded-- as it were “oceanic” (Civilization 11). Freud terms this joy as the “survival of something that was originally there alongside of what was later derived from it” (15).

The imagery of the ocean and its gentle rocking reminds us of the conclusion of Their Eyes Were Watching God, but remarkably, in Their Eyes Were Watching God, we see Janie vowing to live her life for herself. In Seraph, we see Arvay vowing to live and serve her husband and her children. To quote Josie P. Campbell:

However, in Hurston’s earlier novel, plot, character, and settings all work together to prepare us for the magnificent mythic apotheosis of
its ending. *Seraph* does not prepare us for such an ending, and although the language soars, we are not at all sure the lives of Arvay and Jim Meserve do the same. (131)

The narration of the characters is in Standard English, but the white characters speak in a language which is rich in idioms and metaphors like African American dialect. Joey Lee Dillard in his influential book *Black English: Its History and Usage* mentions that black dialect had a very significant effect on the southern white speech as it was there for more than three centuries. Surprisingly, even the racist white southerners have a habit of parodying black dialect which shows their familiarity with it (215).

White characters speak in a language which is replete with Southern dialect expressions, folk sayings and idioms. Hurston has used idioms such as “grass-gut mule” (618), “throwing the rabbit in the briar patch without knowing it” (705), Hurston’s favorite “to hit a straight lick with a crooked stick” (715) and one of the most famous oft repeated quotations of Hurston, “She had been in Hell’s kitchen and licked out all the pots” (758). Even though *Seraph* is predominantly about white people and their culture but “the rhythm and syntax of Hurston’s black folk haunt the reader throughout the novel” (Carby ix). Hurston tries to show that whites and African Americans both have common discourse and in turn affect each other. Before writing *Seraph*, Hurston had conducted a research on the dialect and speech of southern white people. She found out that they too, have unique dialect and expressions. John Lowe writes in this context:

> Many of the expressions that the White characters use here actually were common parlance for both poor whites and blacks of the period. Which group generated them first or not is quite another question.
Indeed if one grants areas of linguistic congruence to the two groups, it quickly becomes obvious that the paucity of linguistic evidence from these largely illiterate communities of discourse makes it impossible to decide which group originated which work or phrase or to claim that any one version of “pure” speech indeed exists. Nothing in the United States is “pure” and the idea that there has been some magic wall of separation between the linguistic systems of black and white southerners simply cannot be supported…. The idioms and expressions of *Seraph*, however, by and large are not of that type. I would argue, in fact, that although readers of Hurston’s other books (particularly non southerners, black or white) who have not studied the language of the American South of the period the way Hurston did might very feel that she has simply replicated black speech in white mouths. Hurston in fact had done quite a bit of her research into the materials that became *Seraph*. (281)

In *Seraph*, Huston uses complex animal symbols. One such animal symbol is that of dog. Dog symbolizes “aggressive and destructive male sexuality” (Meisenhelder 103). Hurston depicts Jim as “a well-trained hound dog tackling a bob-cat” (606). In the conclusion scene, Jim moves towards Arvay “like he was stalking a prey” (916). The symbol of dog is also associated with Earl who symbolizes dark, perverted male sexuality. Earl does not speak anything but only “yelps and growls” (727). Earl attacks Lucy Ann and tries to devour her just like she was a prey. Earl bites and chews Lucy Ann’s hands and thighs like a ferocious hound.
Just as the symbol of dog is associated with males so is the horse imagery associated with females. When Jim tells his friend Joe about his feelings about Arvay, Joe advises Jim to dominate Arvay just as humans do with horse. Joe advises Jim:

Most women folks will love you plenty if you take and see to it that they do. Make ’em knuckle under. From the very first jump, get the bridle in they mouth and ride ’em hard and stop ’em short. They’s all alike, Boss. Take ’em and break ’ems. (640)

Similarly in the early part of the novel, it is seen that during the courtship days Arvay feels like “her eyes stretched wide in fear like a colt that has been saddled for the first time (611). Susan Edwards Meisenhelder mentions, “Part of the “saddling” that white women experience in Seraph on the Suwanee, as the frequent horse and rider metaphors in the novel suggest, is a sexual one.” (100)

Hurston also uses snake symbolism. The snake handling scene has high implications in the novel. When Jim sees the snake in the grove, he picks up the snake, “bragging, triumphant face on Arvay. She could tell that he was expecting her to admire” (829). Jim is unable to handle the snake as it starts coiling around him. He cries to Arvay for help but petrified Arvay cannot move from her place. Ultimately, Joe Kelsey saves Jim from the snake. Jim takes this incident as a test of love of Arvay and finds that Arvay fails in it. He says to Arvay, “You had the biggest chance in the world to make a great woman out of yourself. A Past Grand Noble chance. But you crapped out on it and lost the dice” (835). It is from here that the Arvay and Jim relationship deteriorates to an extent. Once again Hurston uses the snake symbol in phallic terms reminding us of Jonah’s Gourd Vine. Jim tries to use the snake as a way to prove his manhood, and “to gain psychological control over her” (Meisenhelder 106) but fails miserably.
*Seraph on the Suwanee* has been dismissed by the critics as the most unsatisfactory work by Zora Neale Hurston. Feminist critics find it implausible as the protagonist Arvay Henson Meserve, leaves her new found freedom and goes back to her oppressive husband to “serve” him. Karla F.C. Holloway states that “Arvay returns to a wasteland of dead values, lost ambitions and thwarted goals” (244). *Seraph* is often dismissed as a work which portrays women in servile terms. “Writing from the triply marginalized position of woman, black, and champion of an aesthetically disdained folk tradition, Hurston ostensibly denies all three of these identities in her story of an upwardly mobile white family under inflexible male control” (Clair 198). While critics of African American literature implacably suggest that Hurston did a grave error in writing about whites and discarding her social cultural heritage, few African American critics even find this work as an evidence of Hurston’s contempt for her own race. To quote Robert Hemenway:

> The peril in deliberately choosing a white subject is considerable. There is nothing which prohibits a black writer from creating successful white characters, and black literature is full of brilliant white portraits. But if the novelist consciously seeks to portray whites in order to validate his talent, to prove to the world there are no limits to his genius, the very assumptions of the decision become self-defeating. (307)

In reality as one takes a close look at the story of *Seraph*, both allegations do not seem to be plausible. Hurston’s works often speak about liberation and freedom and *Seraph* is also no exception. Arvay finds her freedom and happiness with her husband not staying away from him. In each novel, Hurston creates different characters with different facets. As an individual, Arvay finds her happiness and
fulfillment in nurturing her husband Jim and her children and that is paramount to her.

“Although she is still a troubled character at the end of *Seraph on the Suwanee*, Arvay Henson attains a level of liberation at which she can at least make a free choice, and she finds a place in which she truly feels free (Schwer 39).

Notably Hurston wants to emphasize this aspect of woman that is their feminine authority and maternal power. Commenting on Arvay’s decision to return to her husband, Lille P. Howard writes:

> By contrast, *Zora Hurston was never able to put love, mothering or serving before her own career. Though she was married at least twice and involved in a number of love affairs she always returned sometimes even escaped, to her career.* (146)

As the story unravels, it is seen that Hurston still writes about these oppressions only changing the colour of the skin of her characters. Hurston wants to show that oppression exists not only in African American race but also among whites. Hurston aptly shows that “oppression and its subversion has neither gender nor color. And *Seraph on the Suwanee* is finally the thinly veiled story of a woman who resists victimization, throws off oppression, chooses the burden that she will carry, and takes it up with courage, dignity and delight” (Clair 199). Hurston in her true trickster manners, mocks at white people and shows their hollowness. To quote Rita C. Butler:

> In *Seraph*, Hurston becomes the consummate “people watcher,” as she seeks to understand that false foundation. Her novel describes a society where the exploitation of maternal energies I service to patriarchal economic and social goal results in the corruption not only of the personal agency and meaning of women as mothers, but of Mother Nature as well. Her female protagonist Arvay Henson, is the focal
point for her diagnosis of Anglo-Saxon culture dominated by a psychologist mindset based on domination and exclusion where the conditions that confer privilege and power are very narrowly defined. With *Seraph*, Hurston not only continues the tradition of black women writers who used their writing talents to challenge the social status quo, she also emerges as a prescient foremother in terms of feminist sociopolitical analyst. Her subversive novel makes a potent statement about racial inequality by focusing on the psychological dynamics of a white couple—a clear departure from African American male writers in the 1940s who tended not to make gender distinctions when writing about race. (41-42)

*Seraph on the Suwanee* is a highly complex novel by Hurston. In *Seraph* she uses complex symbols and rich imagery to accentuate her plot. And most importantly, she brilliantly achieved what she wanted, to shatter the white establishment, and once again affirm a woman’s independence even though in a covert way.
Work Cited


Freud Sigmund. “Mourning and Melancholia.” *The Standard Edition of the*


