

The Sociocultural Perception of the African American  
Woman's Bodily Aesthetics: Investigated in the Works *Venus, God Don't Like  
Ugly*, and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

by

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## ABSTRACT

Despite contemporary movements towards tolerance and appreciation of differing cultural entities within the United States, the normative standard of beauty serves as a pinnacle of division amongst women. The normative standard of beauty—implemented by the dominant race within the States—encourages discrimination in regards to the perception of African American female beauty. Although information exists identifying the original influence pertaining to the negative perception of African American female beauty, the reason for its continued perpetuation within the African American community remains ill defined. Effects of this standard amongst African Americans are psychological and physiological. The destruction of self-image and appreciation for natural features by African American Women occur as a result. The influence of this standard extends to individuals outside of the African American community also and in turn impact their perception of African American aesthetics. Scholarly and Literary writers have chosen to comment on this topic. Some dissect the features that constitute to the considered level of attractiveness attributed of African American women. As these writers explore the realm aesthetic perception, discriminatory tendencies amongst those from the dominant race as well as the marginalized group—in this case African Americans—are revealed. Theories offering explanations in regards to the perpetuation of negative perceptions of African American female beauty arise.

## **DEDICATIONS**

For my youngest sister, whose personal struggle with self-perception and beauty inspired this thesis.

For my mother, thank you for being my number one supporter.

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## INTRODUCTION

In 2011 an article, written by Satoshi Kanazawa, surfaced onto the Internet. The article, “Why Are Black Women Less Attractive than Other Women,” sought to dissect the bodily image of black women in order to assess why these women were not as attractive than women of other races and ethnicities. During his analysis, Kanazawa compared the aesthetic perception of black women to black men thereby diminishing the beauty of these women simultaneously while acknowledging it in black men. Though his criteria for black women were slightly different than that for black men, the method he used to measure the attractiveness of such women evoked the implemented standard of beauty within the United States. His blatant disregard for the cultural differences that exist amongst racial borders, and the need for appreciation of differential features pertaining to each race, brought about the conclusion that black women were indeed the least attractive race of women to exist. Though extremely questionable, Kanazawa’s article exposes the ways in which the standard of beauty imposed within the United States, and arguably globally, influences the perception of African American female beauty.

It is argued that beauty is subjective, which is true. However, that subjectivity can be, and is often, impacted by those who hold power. As Patton reminds in “Hey Girl, Am I More Than My Hair?: African American Women and Their Struggles with Beauty, Body Image, and Hair,” the perception of beauty is “subject to the hegemonic standards of the ruling class” and therefore affects the views of those on the outskirts of the ruling class who are unable to acquire the physique epitomized by that class (27). When this hegemonic standard is implemented as the normative representation of beauty, those who are do not have such features—in this case African American Women—tend fall short of being deemed acceptably attractive.

Although the aesthetic perception of African American women occasionally serves a topic for discourse amongst literary writers and scholars—this particular scholarship has not been explored to the fullest extent. The study of African American female beauty and representation within American Literature remains marginalized in the same way the women themselves do when it comes to topics pertaining to educational, sociopolitical and sociocultural issues. While colonialism and cultural imperialism has been established as original (and overall) sources of this view towards African American's, the perpetuation of this view is not limited only to those of the ruling class—African Americans fall susceptible to the continuation of such views as well. All things considered, the logic behind the continued perpetuation of this negative perception of African American beauty within the African American community remains ill defined. Does the continuation of the view stem from self-hatred or is it simply a preference developed over time as a result of the ruling classes' own preferences? What other intricate complexities come together to encourage the perpetuation of this negative view pertaining to African American women?

The purpose of this thesis is to assess the issue at hand, attempt to provide plausible explanations for the issue, and investigate any forms of female rebellion manifested—through both literary exemplifications as well as real world phenomena—in response to this issue. In order to do so, this thesis is dissected into concise sections that discuss: the aesthetic beauty of African American women, the effects of the normative standard implemented within the States, the environmental factors that aid in the perpetuation of such views, and female responses to such views. During this process three works, *God Don't Like Ugly*, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and *Venus*, serve as literary manifestations of this perception. In the process of analyzing

these texts, certain themes and theories that provide a platform for the discourse of cultural prejudiced are discovered. Such themes and theories are discussed in the subsequent sections.



## **Bodily Aesthetics**

In order to appropriately assess the source(s) of the negatively perpetuated perspective in regards to African American female beauty, investigate the problems that arise from such perpetuations, and identify any forms of female rebellion towards this perception, a deconstructive view of the African American female body must take place. An analysis of the African American woman's physical make-up allows one to gain a better understanding of what constitutes to their beauty or lack thereof.

The hair, skin complexion, and the figure of the African American woman—arguably considered to be defining factors in their aesthetic perception—are scrutinized in the context of each literary work. It is done so for the purpose of exposing the foundation upon which the negative perception of African American female beauty is established. Once the foundation is established, the logical reasons behind such perceptions can be further analyzed in a precise manner. Themes that pertain to these aspects found within each work are then taken out of their textual forms and applied to real world situations discussed by scholarly writers in reference to the discourse of African American female beauty. Each subsequent portion of this section seeks to discuss the features of the African American woman's physique highlighted within each respective work. When it comes to the topic of hair, skin, and body within the context of *God Don't Like Ugly*, *Venus*, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* certain themes that surface are manifested to a higher degree in some of the works more so than others. Keeping this in mind, I will consider some themes with respect to one particular literary work more so than the others.

### **Hair**

The versatility of hair renders it to not only be an influential factor in one's beauty but also of one's identity. As Rose Weitz explicates, "[Hair] becomes a reflection of who [a] person is, and a sign of [their] identity" (Serico). As a result, the style, the length, and the color of one's hair tend to be some of the defining aspects of one's beauty within today's society—especially when it comes to the standard of beauty implemented within the States. Popularized consent typically attributes blonde-straight-long hair to the desperately aspired standard of beauty. In this circumstance, pertaining particularly to hair, it must be noted that this standard affects individuals within the States disproportionately according to race and ethnicity. For those who already have long, straight hair, if it were their desire to comply with the standard of beauty implemented upon hair, they could simply change the color. However, the pressure placed upon the need to meet this standard comes at a higher price for the specifically short, kinky-, dark-haired women. In an effort to meet such perceptions of beautiful hair these women would have to undergo a substantial amount of physiological changes. Elis Hervey takes note of this dilemma when she states "For women with naturally curly kinky hair, particularly African American women, fitting into the European standard of beauty (long, flowing, straight hair) can be difficult, expensive, and even unattainable" (873). Scholarly writer Patton also argues in the same direction as Elis Hervey by acknowledging that the bodily features of the A.A woman such as hair impact their physical and psychological existence "especially since one common U.S. societal stereotype is the belief that black women fail to measure up to the normative standard" (24). The idea that only one type of hair serves as the pedestal of epitomized beauty while every other type fall underneath, poses as a detrimental threat to the women who would have to climb several steps just to come close to enough to acquiring acceptably beautiful hair. It is fair to argue that these women could simply ignore such standards and embrace their own perceptions

of beautiful hair, which some do, but this too comes with a price sometimes more expensive than the act of compliance.

The choice to conform isn't always there. Oftentimes the decision has already been made, and the act of compliance isn't an option—but rather a requirement. The case *Rogers v. American Airlines* embodies an example of control often asserted over African American women in regard to their hair and its styling. In 1981, Rogers filed “an action challenging a rule prohibiting employees in certain employment categories from wearing an all-braided hairstyle” (*Rogers v. American Airlines*). Rogers believed that this act was not only discriminatory but also revoked her choice to indulge in a style that symbolized a part of her culture. She claimed that “the completely braided style, sometimes referred to as cornrows, has been and continues to be part of the cultural and historical essence of Black American women” (*Rogers v. American Airlines*). American Airlines did not see it this way. Instead, the airline suggested that she “pull her hair into a bun and wrap a hairpiece around the bun during working hours” (*Rogers v. American Airlines*). Since the rule had been implemented evenly across genders borders to men and women, the rule was not deemed racially discriminatory. Consequently, it was concluded that American Airlines could prohibit all-braided styling from the workplace.

Although the rule may not have been deemed racial discrimination the court and American Airlines neglected to take into consideration the complexity of Rogers' hair—and also the fact that her texture may have differed significantly from her peers. The African American hair texture requires special styling that promotes its length and longevity—braided styling aids in this process. Not only do braids serve as a form of aesthetic expression, they are often the only option for African-American women seeking to maintain a presentable appearance in circumstances where their natural hair would be considered unruly. For African American

women with hair that has not been chemically straightened, simply “putting her hair into a bun” is not practicable, especially if it is short. In order to comply with their standards Rogers would have had to alter the biological makeup of her hair. In doing so she may successfully assimilate into the culture established by her employers and achieve an acceptable level of attractiveness, but she would be trading in a bodily feature that attributed to her own aesthetic.

As previously stipulated, the standard of beauty is not only subjective, but it is also subject to Eurocentric ideologies. Those individuals who are on the outskirts of that race are still influenced by their dominating views of beauty. This influence is spread through media outlets that ultimately manipulate the perceptions of beauty pertaining to subjective matter such as the aesthetics of hair type, texture, and color. An example of this is seen in the popularized phrase “blondes do it better.” Even though it appears to harmless fun, this phrase reinforces the idealization of blonde hair and the aesthetic of women who possess it. It also places blonde hair as the pinnacle of all hair types and therefore implements a beauty standard that is not easily accessible to most women.

The implementation of this beauty standard by dominant ideologies universally across every racial and ethnic background within the United States brings about differing reactions. Predictably, some choose to rebel against and/or ignore this standard while others chose (and at times are forced) to conform. Continuously, negative reactions to those who are “unfortunate” enough to lack the qualities of aesthetically pleasing hair arise. As a result, women who are not born with these features are often left with the desire to alternate themselves in order to imitate Eurocentric styling standards (i.e. wearing silk wigs or chemically straightening hair). They offer up their individuality to the beauty industry in order to comply with what that society deems

beautiful. While several women are subject to such desires this thesis will focus specifically on kinky and curly-headed African American females.

Elis-Hervey argues, “For young African American Women, hair is laden with messages and has the power to dictate self-esteem and even the type of treatment received from others” (873). For these women “it becomes more complicated as hair is also their entry point into racial differences and America’s standard of beauty” (873). The hair of the African-American woman is a sacred feature seldom appreciated for its unique qualities. As Elis-Hervey points out, the hair of African American women becomes the main self-identifying factor in every social setting they find themselves in. An African American woman is typically identified by her hair—which makes a statement even before she can open her mouth. Although it is said that those within and outside of the black community often admire the African-American woman’s hair, any form of this admiration appears to be outweighed by a societal attempt to “tame” it.

As slavery progressed within the United States the significance of black hair did not go unnoticed. After “realizing the prominence hair played in the lives of western Africans, the first thing enslavers did was shave their heads; this was an unspeakable crime for Africans, because the people were shorn of their identity” (Patton). Though this attempt at domination over black bodies pertained mostly to black men, black women were not exempted from such acts. This execution of control over African American hair is an underlying force used to perpetuate the negative perspective placed upon African American female beauty. There is “great amount of literature [that] is dedicated to racial identity and self-perception, but very little addresses how hair may play a critical role in how African American women view themselves” (Elis Hervey et. al 869).

Zora Neale Hurston chooses to provide a platform for the discourse of African-American hair as it pertains to the ideology of control and beauty within *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. The first overt sign of confinement of the African-American woman's hair occurs when Joe Stark—Janie's second husband—forces Janie to wear a scarf over her head in order to domesticate her and confine the beauty she possesses as a result of her hair. Though this is such an open act of control portrayed by the patriarchy, there is another—arguably more powerful—form of confinement that is illustrated within the novel.

Janie is described as a beautiful multi-raced woman with long hair and a curvy physique. Her level of attractiveness does not go unnoticed—or unpunished—by the individuals she comes into contact with. Her hair, however, is an aspect of her beauty most envied and admired by the characters within the novel—specifically those living in Eatonville. Janie possesses a hair texture that differs significantly from most African-American women, which causes other African-Americans and bi-racial characters—such as Mrs. Turner—to attribute a higher-level attractiveness to this particular feature. Nevertheless, Janie's hair is not considered purely European, so it is still susceptible to scrutiny when compared to the standard of beauty. It has a mixture of the kinky-curly<sup>1</sup> hair type that the ruling class typically find mystifying,

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<sup>1</sup> In the A.A community hair is categorized into different types of curl patterns. Ultimately there is Wavy, Kinky-curly, and kinky-coily. Both of the Kinky-curly and Kinky-coily are typified further creating smaller subcategories of these air types. Kinky-curly typically represents looser curls while Kinky-coily represent a tighter curl. An Example of Kinky-coily could be Erykah Badu or Janelle Monae while Kinky-curly could be Halle Berry. It must be noted that perspectives on what curl types constitute to each hair type is still debatable within the African American community.

unmanageable, and even unruly. Janie's perspective of her hair is heavily influenced by this same view. Unlike her peers, she does not praise her hair the way the other African-American characters do. Instead of allowing her hair to flow, and her curls to run wild, she often confines it to a single braid down her back. We are reminded of this when she comes back to Eatonville with her "great rope of black hair swinging to her waist" (Hurst 2).

At first glance it appears that the act of confining her hair to this particular style appears to be nothing more than a choice to indulge in part of the hair-braiding culture. However, an ulterior alternate? theory arises the moment Tea Cake is introduced into the plot. The theory assumed is that Janie, on a subconscious level, feels her hair to be mystifying, unmanageable, and unruly. Though living in a *free* environment Janie's behavior towards her hair is still influenced by the ruling class.

The scene in which Janie awakes to Tea Cake "combing her hair and scratching dandruff from her scalp" (121-122), she appears to be astonished that he would do such a thing. She isn't upset, but rather surprised that anyone would want to deal with her hair let alone receive any satisfaction from combing it. When Tea Cake pays her hair a compliment comparing it to "underneath uh dove's wings," she responds "Ah been had dis same hair next tuh mah face ever since Ah cried the fust time, and 'tain't never gimme no thrill" (123). Though Janie does not display utter disgust with the hair she has, her decision to confine her curls to a presumably tame styling along with her reaction to Tea Cake letting her curls loose suggests there is more to Janie's perception of her hair than originally assumed. After Tea Cake's compliment, Janie looks in the mirror to confirm what he chose to admire about her. In this brief moment Janie's insecurities are exposed as she relishes in the reassurance of her beauty ascertained by Tea Cake.

It could be argued that Janie held a negative perception of herself—in particular her hair—prior to Tea Cake’s compliments, but that would be a drastic overstatement. A more plausible explanation to her the decision to confine her hair to such a tame style would be her subconscious desire to conform to the idea of a presentable hairstyle. According to Elis Hervey, “hair alteration is not necessarily a result of [self-hatred], nor a desire to be White, but about working within internalized beauty paradigms to attain one small piece of what society defines as beautiful” (874). If this is taken to be true and applied to Janie’s perception of self, her choice to confine her hair comes across as a survival technique engrained into her subconscious. As a child, her grandmother would comb her hair in styles that were presentable (Hurston 11-12). Rather than allowing her to indulging in the black beauty liberation that comes with embracing one’s self-defining beauty aesthetics, her grandmother conformed her curls to what society deemed as acceptable. In this moment, Janie’s grandmother utilizes hairstyling often meant to confine African American hair on a biracial girl thereby simultaneously denying her granddaughter’s Whiteness while attempting to tame her black features. For Nanny, allowing Janie to embrace too much of her European genes means also embracing the physical, emotional and sexual abuse instances Nanny had endured at the hands of Europeans. She limits opportunities Janie has with her Eurocentric side because of what it represents for her. Nevertheless, she still attempts to tame Janie’s African American side, in order to protect her from the abuse she suffered. The way she styles Janie’s hair and her emphasis on finding suitable Janie a husband exemplifies such desires. For Nanny, the perception of Janie by those in and outside of the African American community is extremely important to her survival; therefore, she forces Janie to conform her Afrocentric side. In this instance, the choice to conform is necessary in order to survive in the social control of Janie’s time.



Perhaps Janie chooses to treat her hair the way she does because “historically, African American women adopted certain White cultural ideals such as the ‘groomed image of docility’ as a survival tactic in order to convey a non-threatening image to White society” (Elis Herevy et al. 874). Such perceptions of presentable hairstyles can be traced back the 17<sup>th</sup> century amidst times of slavery prominent within the States. Even though braided styles existed prior to slavery, the meanings attributed to such styles differed for certain African cultures from the perceptions prominent within the States. Rather than being used as a bonding technique in which women socialized with one another while braiding each other’s hair, it acquired an additional meaning. As Patton informs, during times of slavery within the States it was important for the women to keep their hair “neat” (28). Since their hair type differed significantly from their masters’ the slaves often turned to braids to fulfill the need to be presentable (28). In the same way, Janie’s action could stem from a subconscious need to maintain the presentable look required of those not able to meet the hegemonic standard of beauty established by Eurocentric ideologies.

By briefly returning to the prior mentioned act committed by Janie’s second husband we are able to assess another form of control asserted by a force outside of the individual itself. Stark’s decision to require Janie to conceal her hair illustrates an exterior form of control that does not stem from the individual who is subject to such control. The covering of African American female hair is not a concept unknown to within the community. In fact, “throughout the centuries of slavery scarves became a practicable alternative to covering kinky, unstyled, hair” (Patton 28). Stark’s reason to cover Janie’s hair, however, was not because he believed it to be “unstyled” or “unattractive.” In reality he believed her hair to be too beautiful to be shown to anyone but himself. At face value, it appears to be merely jealousy that caused him to act so rashly towards Janie. Nevertheless, the idealization of control stemming from patriarchal

domination is still hidden in Stark's decision. Joe Stark strives to establish himself as a wealthy African-American man in Eatonville during a time that African-Americans were still seen as "less than." In order to do so he splurges his earnings lavishly on clothing and jewelry for Janie and himself to wear in order to set them apart from the "common black folk."

It is here that the theory of Stark's desire to place himself on a pedestal in comparison to the people of Eatonville is evident. The oppression imposed upon Stark as an African-American male living in a post-colonial and post-slavery society causes him to crave something more than the simple opportunity of "freedom" provided to his peers. Although he can never achieve the societal status of the White man, distinguishing himself from his African American peers would give him a higher status than the one provided to blacks overall. It isn't until Stark's death the power he dominated over Janie's perception of self and the control asserted over her hair is revealed. Ashe points out that "a telling moment occurs shortly after Joe dies, when Janie walks to the dresser and looks in the mirror: She tore off the kerchief from her head and let down her plentiful hair. The weight, the length, the glory was there" (135). In this moment, the control forced upon Janie to confine her hair is temporarily relinquished. She is able to obtain a taste of true black beauty liberation the instant she releases her hair from confinement. It is important to note that black beauty liberation does not only exist in the moments one chooses to allow their hair to roam freely. Black beauty liberation is the decision to embrace the aspects that constitute to one's beauty even if it does not meet the normative standard. For Janie, the normative standard of acceptable beauty was a presentable hairstyle, whether it was confined to a single braid or concealed by a kerchief. "Because Joe [Stark] was aware that Janie's hair symbolized her 'self,' [he] began to communicate to the people of Eatonville he 'owned' Janie's hair as a means of demonstrating that he in effect 'owned' Janie" (Ashe 135). In the same way, the ruling class

asserts control over others by the implementation of a normative standard of beauty. Though it is not as direct as Joe's actions, it produces the same effect. African American women are often forced to comply with this standard or exiled for their decision to rebel against it. The attribution of beauty provided with respect to African American women is largely influenced by the perception of their hair. When their hair does meet the normative standard, or is not confined to presentable styling, their level of attractiveness appears to diminish in the eyes of those who epitomize the standard of beauty implemented within the States. When confinement is not present, the aesthetic beauty of texturized hair dissimilar to that approved by the normative standard, such beauty is often dismissed altogether.

## **Skin**

African Americans, due to the color of their skin, have endured “ostracism, neglect, assault, and slander perpetuated by European Americans as well as other African Americans” (Flowers 79). For these individuals, skin complexion is more than just the level of melanin present. One's color often plays a significant role in their social, economical, and educational progression. It also extends to and influences the perception of their beauty by those within and outside of the African American community. Flowers acknowledges the hue of one's skin tone to be a possible defining factor in the lives of African Americans (Flowers 79); Matelski attributes it to the determination of beauty possessed by such individuals. The stratification of skin complexion stemming from Eurocentric ideals and the epitomized normative standard is prominent within the African American community. In addition to receiving racial discrimination why the ruling class, African American women are subject to racial phenotypicality bias—which is described by Wilder and Cain as beauty perception bias based on skin color, hair texture, or facial features (578). This bias is often associated closely with

Eurocentric ideals pertaining to beauty and the implemented normative standard. Those who appear to have features closer to European standards are deemed more beautiful within the African American community when this racial phenotypicity bias is taken into consideration. Keeping this in mind, there is “a tendency for African Americans to evaluate themselves and other intragroup members against a culturally shared hierarchal perception of light skin and Eurocentric facial features [...] as more positive and desirable than dark skin and Afrocentric facial features” (Maxwell et al. 439). Maxwell defines this hierarchal system, which promotes light skin as opposed to dark skin, as colorism (439). Wilder and Cain delineate colorism to be “an interracial system of inequality based on skin color, hair texture, and facial features that bestows privilege and value on physical attributes that are closer to white” (578). Subsequently, darker skinned individuals tend to encounter “more racial discrimination, legal punishment, and [are] seen as less attractive” (439-440). The perception of skin color can also result in differing experiences for African Americans as well as have “potentially far reaching social and psychological implications” (441). Such perceptions correlate closely with the perception of beauty attributed to African American women from individuals inside and outside of the community.

Those of a lighter complexion are typically provided with access to higher socioeconomic statuses, more political dominance, and greater educational opportunities (Flowers 81-82).

One “of the more general assumptions is that darker skin African Americans are less satisfied with their perceived skin color than lighter skinned African Americans based on the practice of skin bleaching and expressed desire to achieve a lighter complexion” (Maxwell et al. 442). While Maxwell argues that such practices do not offer a substantial amount of evidence for this presumption, it still serves as support for the claim nonetheless.

The preference of lighter skin and privileges associated with it were originally exemplified in the favoritism shown to lighter skinned slaves. As a result, a positive perception began to be attached to the ideal “light” skinned African American. The cultural standard of beauty—pertaining to each respective ethnic and racial entity—appears to attach a higher level of attractiveness to the individual that possess features less Afrocentric. However, this assumption must be contextualized according to the ideals and beliefs of the individuals implementing the standard. While there are those who appreciate Afrocentric features, the cultural standard of beauty amongst African Americans attributes lighter skin, looser hair textures, and slimmer nose as the desired aesthetic for African American women.

Wilder and Cain attest, “the association between skin tone and physical attractiveness is significantly stronger for women than men” (581). Therefore, it is believed that skin tone serves as an additional factor of oppression asserted on African American women (581). It holds a larger impact on women in comparison to men (581). A study conducted in 2009 through examination concluded that “children were more likely to identify light skinned blacks as having positive traits and more likely to identify dark-skinned Blacks as having negative traits” (Adams et. al 98). In a similar qualitative study, based on the investigation of Black female college students, it was concluded that light skin was often aligned with “beauty, privilege, and intelligence” while dark skin was associated with being “loud, suspicious, unattractive, and less intelligent” (Adams et al. 99). Adams, Kurtz-Costes, and Hoffman presume that research in regard to skin tone bias “suggests that it is a gendered phenomenon” (100). The reason is that color discrimination appears disproportionately amongst genders with women being affected to a higher degree than men. The significance of skin tone in regard to female attractiveness can be

considered “detrimental to their psychological well-being” seeing that women are more susceptible than men to “base their self-esteem “on the appraisal of others” (100).

The view of preferred lighter skin, once again, traces back to the caste system formalized during slavery (102). This system also referred to as colorism, divided the African American community based on skin tone, and furthermore influenced the cultural standard of beauty that demonstrates favoritism to lighter skinned African American women. After slavery, these lighter skinned African Americans were considered to be “Black elite” and attempted to gain higher social status by disassociating themselves from lower status African Americans who had darker skin tones” (102). This ideal discussed in literature pertaining to “skin tone preferences and stereotypes shows the pervasiveness of negative bias against dark skin tones” ( 99). Particularly in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* the desire to disassociating oneself from the darker skinned African American is manifested in the character Mrs. Turner. After Janie and Tea Cake leave Eatonville they encounter Mrs. Turner who is also mixed race. Unlike Janie however, Mrs. Turner garners a sense of internalized racism. It’s apparent in the way she perceives her features as opposed to the “Negroes” in her community.

Mrs. Turner’s shape and features were entirely approved by Mrs. Turner. Her nose was slightly pointed and she was proud. Her thin lips were ever a delight to her eyes, Even her buttocks in bas-relief were a source of pride. To her way of thinking this set her apart from the Negroes. That is why she sought out Janie to friend with. Janie’s coffee-and-cream complexion and her luxurious hair made Mrs. Turner forgive her for wearing overalls like the other women who worked in the fields. (163-164)

Hurston exposes an importance perception in regard to the racial phenotypicality bias often presence within the African American community through her description of Mrs. Turner.

The features most praised by Mrs. Turner are the features that she deems sets her approve the common black folks. It isn't only Mrs. Turner's approval of her Eurocentric features that constitutes to the negative perception of beauty pertaining to those who look more Afrocentric, because that in itself not necessarily negative. It is the superiority she asserts as a result of those features. Simply admiring one's feature does not necessarily perpetuate the negative perception associated with to African American beauty. However, appreciating it in such a way that shows bias, while simultaneously dismissing the features that are not considered Eurocentric as unattractive, does. Mrs. Turner's perception of African Americans stems from self-hatred and internalized racism that warrants a biased view pertaining to the standard of beauty. Her perception is equality applied across genders; exemplified in the way she refuses to forgive Janie for "marrying a man as dark as Tea Cake" (164). During her many discussions with Janie she is heard complaining about black folks, and how she isn't used to associating with them (Hurstun 164). She further cements this idea in that statement made to Janie, "When somebody talked mah husband intuh comin' down heah tuh upoen up uh eatin' place Ah never dreamt so many different kins uh black folks could colleck in one place. Did Ah never woulda come" (164). This is attitude is reminiscent of establishment of Black Elites, compromised of lighter skinned former slaves—and descendants of former slaves—with the mentality established through superiority complexes. The normative standard implemented favors the feature that were similar to the ones they possessed as well as the opportunities that were privileged to them in comparison to darker skinned individuals aided in the continuation of this form of internalized color discrimination.

## **Body**

As time progresses and preferences change so does the perspectives on the aspects that constitutes to one's beauty. Nevertheless, despite the changes in the standard of beauty within the

United States, one thing has remained relatively the same. The majority's perspective of what determines one's level of attractiveness still remains a dominant factor for consideration in regard to the standard of beauty. This perspective then trickles down into other cultural entities existing in the United States. In the African American community, the cultural standard of beauty differs from the one established by the dominant race when it comes to body aesthetics. Though this cultural standard praises certain features natural to the African-American female, the normative standard of beauty still impacts how African American women view themselves and also how those outside of the community view them.

In her research, Matelski contemplates Maxine Craig's discoveries on the physique of the African American woman. In her article, she acknowledges Craig's argument that in addition to having "unequal access to education, housing, and job opportunities, [African American Women] also 'bore the shame of being women in unacceptable bodies'" (Matelski). Although African American women come in different bodily proportions ranging from skinny to curvy, the average African American woman weighs more what is considered "slim" according to White beauty standards. While slenderness is envied by popular culture, the desire for extreme slenderness was not something often desired in the African American community (Matelski). Instead, African Americans encouraged larger body sizes as opposed to the normative standard. The act of embracing larger physiques within the African American community ostracized their beauty from popularized societal consent. In turn African Americans began to formulate their own standard of beauty. In the 40's and 50's instead of "yielding to narrow ideals of fashion, body, and cosmetic culture, African American women and men broadened the definition of female beauty, which included skin color, hair texture, fatness and athleticism" (Matelski). Black periodicals during this time period also "showed an open celebration of plus-size models,



celebrities, and female athletes who did not conform to or fit white ideals of acceptable femininity” (Matelski).

Despite this celebration of larger physiques within the African American community, these women are still susceptible to scrutiny at the hands of those within and outside of their culture. In fact when paired within dark skin and kinky-coily hair, the body type of the African American woman is met with a different attitude from other African Americans than those with lighter skin and looser curls. Various literary works—such as *God Help The Child* (Morrison 2015) or *The Blacker the Berry* (Thurman 1929)—have presented this dilemma through the illustration of characters subject to different attitudes based on whether they obtained light skin and loosely curled hair or darker skin and coily hair. The literary characters discussed in this thesis are subject to praise as well as abuse based on their physical features. Their body size in particular is perceived differently depending on the other aesthetic features associated with it. The perception of each character’s body type must be analyzed based on the individuals from whom the perspective stems. While *Venus* exposes its readers to the Eurocentric perception of the African American woman’s body, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *God Don’t Like Ugly* offer up the perspectives of African Americans’ perception of the women within their community. This section seeks to analyze the aesthetics of the African American Woman’s body with respect to perspectives from within and outside of the African American community provided within the three novels.

*Venus* expresses the negative perception towards the black woman’s physique as a result of Eurocentric ideals. It is important to note that though African American women are black, not all black women are African American. In this case Saartjie is not African American, and although this thesis primarily focuses on African American women, her situation is relevant to

the study of African American beauty. The abuse endured by Saartjie Baartman<sup>2</sup> exposes a familiar theme as it pertains to the perception of black women and their bodies. Saartjie's dehumanization at the hand of European forces can be applied to the similar over-sexed image distortion of African-American women.

At the age of sixteen Baartman was sold to Peter William Cezar—her slave master—shortly after Dutch colonists took her fiancé's life. It was during this time that researchers allege Baartman, despite being illiterate, signed a contract with her master Cezar and his brother agreeing to travel from Eastern Cape<sup>3</sup> “to England and Ireland to work as a domestic servant and be exhibited for entertainment purposes” (South African History 2016). In 1814, after serving four years in London Cezar sold Baartman to an animal trainer named Reaux in Paris where she was showcased and studied as a “scientific specimen.” According to Tillet, — a researcher and writer on the scholarship of black women's bodies and their treatment as a result of European colonialism—even when Baartman was no longer a carnival performer she was still “the subject of satirical cartoons” as well as “a scientific oddity for a panel of French scientists and zoologists” (944). Tillet theorizes that treatment of Baartman was considered acceptable by European colonist in order to provide substantial evidence in support of White supremacy. She argues, “by establishing Baartman as the primitive, bestial, and grotesque corporeal representative of the entire African continent for Napoleon's colonial endeavors” the need for racial supremacy could be proven “while simultaneously justifying French colonization,

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<sup>2</sup> Baartman's actual name is still unknown. “Saartjie” was given to her at the time she was sold into slavery. The name is Dutch for “Sara.”

<sup>3</sup> Eastern Cape was formally known as Gamtoos River—where Baartman was born.

enslavement, and disenfranchisement of blacks” (945). In order to rationalize the concept of racial supremacy and colonialism the idea that Africans were indeed inferior needed to be established. A level of inferiority for blacks was then fermented by the contortion of image and the marginalization of such cultural entities. In theory, this justification would enable the distortion of the black female image through the perpetuation of sexual exploitation and exoticism. Saartje Baartman symbolized such forms of oppression as well as “the most popular and widely circulated stereotype of black female sexuality” (Tillet 944). She exposed the perception maintained of black women as sexually promiscuous Jezebels.

For some time, little was known about Saartjie or the abuse she endured as a human debacle. It was not until Saartje’s remains were removed from Cabinet Number 33<sup>4</sup> and finally “laid to rest in Hankey, South Africa on National Women’s Day, August 9, 2002 that her story gained international recognition (Henderson 946). Parks’ rendition gives life to a phenomenon in the form of a peculiar play, which uses atypical characters. Metaphorically she was resurrected from the depth of the “historical obscurity by academic inquiry and a public swell to correct social and cultural injustice” (946). In the creative adaptation of Baartman’s story she is portrayed as a debacle who falls short of being human. Diminished by public perceptions of her exposed body she is deemed a slut whose soul is “mounted on [Satan’s] warm wall” (Parks). The extent to which Saartje Baartman, renamed as the Hottentot Venus by her captors, is belittled is emphasized in the repetitive lines “I regret to inform you that thuh hotenttot venus iz dead. There won’t b inny show tuhnight” (Parks). Even after her death Saartje is depreciated to a mere source of entertainment. In this moment, the Hottentot Venus is merely a spectacle for the entertainment

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<sup>4</sup> The section of the Museum in Europe that contained Baartman’s bones

of British carnival goers (Tillet 944). Dressed in “tightly-clad and flesh-colored body leotards, displaying her ostensibly unusual buttocks [...] Baartman performed in a cage and was ordered by a ‘keeper’ to walk, sit, dance or stand” (Tillet 944). The bestial characteristics applied to Baartman in exchange for her humanity is reiterated in the little regard held for her death. Through addition of the phrase “there won’t be inny show tuhnight” to the seemingly disheartened revelation of her death, Parks exposes the blatant dismissal of Baartman’s value. The announcer might as well have said “Yes the ‘Hottentot Venus’ is dead, but it’s much more tragic that our show is cancelled tonight.” In this line—repeated throughout the play—Baartman’s physique is portrayed as an object to be exploited and her sexuality misconstrued.

Parks utilizes raw language to underscore the injustice Saartje endured due to her unfamiliar physique amongst Eurocentric culture. The nature of the viewers who take pleasure in seeing Saartje’s naked body exposed behind the bars of a human sized cage is verbalized through one of chorus member in Parks’ play.

They say that if I pay uh little more

I’ll get tuh look uh little longer

and for uh little more on top uh that

I’ll get tuh stand

stand off tuh thuh side

in thuh special looking place

(And from there if I’m really quick I’ll stick

my hand inside her  
cage and have a feel  
(if no ones looking)).

Here it is made clear that there are no boundaries to be respected when it comes to Saartje's body. Not only is she subject to the public viewing her naked body, she also risks the chance of unwanted physical harassment. Saartje's body fails meet the normative standard and therefore must be labeled a "Wild female Jungle Creature" who is "physiqued in such a backward rounded way that she out shapes all others" (Parks).

Parks provides a perspective of individuals outside the Black community who assess the bodily aesthetics of the African American—in Baartman's case, simply African—woman. In this particular situation, the perception of Baartman's body stems from outside the Black community, which uphold the normative standard of beauty that favors Eurocentric ideals. In this instance the skin complexion or hair texture is taken into account only for the purposes of categorizing her as Black. The perception of her body would have remained relatively the same seeing that she is a part of a race deemed inferior. In the same way, lighter-skinned African Americans were still viewed as slaves by Whites nonetheless (despite given better opportunities than darker skinned slaves), it is reasonable to assume that the attitudes portrayed from the White community would not have differed if she obtained lighter skin and a looser hair texture. The same, however, cannot be said for the perspectives that stem from within the African American community.

The authors of *God Don't Like Ugly* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* explore the perceptions asserted in regard to the African American woman's body that stem from within the African American community. From both novels two perspectives arise. One perspective favors

the woman with a lighter skin and looser curls in addition to her curvy physique. The other, condemns the larger physique obtained by the main character in addition to her kinky hair and darker skin. The theory here is that the perception of the African American woman's body is subject to bias based on the supporting features the individual has. Discrimination against features such as darker skin and kinky-coily hair is prominent within the African American community. Granted Annette—from *God Don't Like Ugly*—has a larger overall body size in comparison to Janie; nevertheless her skin complexion and hair texture still play a major role in the perception of her body. All three features together are considered not only to assess the attractiveness of Janie and Annette's physique but also their overall physical aesthetic. While the skin color and hair texture did not matter to the perception of African American beauty stemming from outside the community, these features appear to hold significance amongst other African Americans. Both novels provide evidence in support of this theory.

The voluptuousness of Janie's body is epitomized in her respective novel. Hurston comments on how the men of Eatonville “noticed [Janie's] firm buttocks like she had grapefruits in her hip pockets; the great rope of black hair swinging to her waist and unraveling in the wind like a plume; then her pugnacious breasts trying to bore holes in her shirt” (2). The same admiration of such a curvy physique is not assigned to Saartje whose “bottoms like hot air balloons” caused her to be labeled a “priceless prize” and a “filthy slut” (Parks). Annette's physique, when juxtaposed against Janie's, is not something the characters in the novel readily romanticize.

In *God Don't Like Ugly* Annette is described as a heavy set. In the introductory phase of the plot, she meets Mr. Boatwright—who would later sexually abuse her—and she informs the reader “I was probably the only first grader in Ohio who weighed almost as much as an adult”

(Monroe 9). Annette and her more bore a striking resemblance in regards to facial features. She informs:

Mama and I looked a lot alike but she was called pretty. We had the same high cheekbones and heart-shape face with small nose, bow shaped lips, lashes so long and black they belonged on a doll, and a beauty mark on the right side, just above our lip. People called her beauty mark a mole. They called mine a wart. Not only was mama light skinned, she was slim. Just being light was enough by Black standards for her to be considered attractive. Being slim was icing on the cake. No matter how pretty I actually was, people made it clear I was too dark and too fat. My short kinky hair was a crown of thorns. Black people with dark skin were usually looked down upon by light skinned Black people. I was no exception.

(Monroe 12-13)

Annette's body and skin complexion render her less attractive than her mother, despite sharing the same facial features. This revelation provides support to the theory that the attractiveness attributed to one's body size by other African American within the community is heavily determined by the features included—as Annette confirms to be complexion as well as hair texture. In comparison to Janie, Annette's beauty is overlooked due to her skin complexion and hair. Janie's beauty is praised because of her skin complexion and hair.

For the purposes of better understanding of the theory presupposed a further dissection of its meaning is essential. The theory claimed in this section is that within the African American community the perception of one's body is subject to differential treatment based on the

additional features one possesses—in particular the complexion of one’s skin and the texture of one’s hair. As stated within the previous sections of this thesis, skin complexion and hair texture plays a major role in the level of attractiveness attributed to the African American woman from both the ruling class and those within the African American community. Since the hair texture of African American women can come in different patterns, a prejudice towards those textures deemed as more “manageable” within the African American community tend to be favored. This perception is established by the cultural standard of beauty that differs from the normative.

The normative standard, however, ultimately favors straight blonde hair and offers no favor towards kinky-curly versus kinky coily hair. According to the normative standard implemented by the ruling class those who fall short of the epitomized straight blonde hair lack essential aspects that would allow them to achieve the highest level of attractiveness. That being said both perspectives must be analyzed in the context of the standards it is influenced in addition to the individuals it stems from. The cultural standard within the African American community shows some appreciation to the features natural to the African American woman; it is nevertheless influenced by the Normative standard. Not that African American culture shows favoritism to straight blonde hair as opposed to black curly hair, but on the range from straight hair to kinky-coily hair—the tightest curly pattern acknowledged within the community—a looser curl pattern falls closer to straight hair than does a tighter curl pattern. The same applies to skin complexion. On the scale of white to ebony, lighter toned African American women tend to be deemed more attractive than their deeper shaded sisters—according to the cultural standard of beauty. That being said, biracial women tend to be deemed more attractive than the women with a darker ebony complexion. Both of these standards must be considered in situations where it is seen appropriate. The normative standard applies in all general contexts when it comes to the



perception of beauty within the United States since it is often asserted universally across all racial and ethnic borders. The African American cultural standard can only be considered in situations where other African Americans are conducting the assessment of African American beauty. When it comes to the perspective of the African American woman's body, both the normative and cultural standard should be applied according to the individual from which it stems.

Although it is hard to analyze both characters in the same light since each story takes place at different time periods and in differing communities, the concept of discrimination perpetuated through colorism and hair texture preferences is still eminent within both storylines. Both concepts are exemplified through the treatment of both characters' and therefore can be theorized in an alternative realm where if both were to exist, in the same time period, it can be assumed that each would be treated relatively the same. The assumption is also supported by the color and hair texture discrimination that still exists contemporarily within the African American Community. It must also be noted that the discrimination from the ruling class on both of the features—in addition to body size—is not equivalent to the prejudice perpetuation within the African American community. One is the original source of such perpetuations, while the other stems from said original source. Nevertheless, both play an important role in the perpetuation of negative perceptions towards the African American woman's aesthetic. Each perspective gives insight to why such perceptions still exist and are continuously sustained within the African American Community.

## **Impact of Normative Standard**

The normative standard of beauty implemented across the differing ethnic and racial entities existential within the States leaves an effect on the perception of beauty amongst each respective group. Not only does it this standard affect each individual unable to meet the level of attractiveness set by this ideal, it also affects the standards of beauty created within each culture. Particularly within the African American community the application of this standard to the perception of beauty results in psychological and physiological effects amongst African American women struggling to be considered acceptably attractive. These changes exemplify the intricate dangers of such a standard being applied without regard for the differences amongst each racial and ethnic group. This section will delve into these two major effects that many African American women undergo the due to this standard. In the discourse of this topic, this section will primarily focus on the on the individuals who either strive or are forced to comply with the normative standard of beauty. Those who successfully rebel against the standard are still susceptible to indirect influence, but are not affected to the extent as those who conform.

### **Psychological Impact**

Both psychological and physiological changes coincide in the sense that one must occur in order for the other to take place. In this case, psychological effects that result from the utilization of the normative standard of beauty when assessing the attractiveness of African American women, influence the physiological changes these women are willing to endure in order to be considered beautiful. This section will focus on two psychological concepts that lead

to a particular psychological effect that in turn influence the changes these women undergo. These two psychological concepts are found within the works *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *God Don't Like Ugly*—used to exemplify the perception African American female beauty<sup>5</sup>. The concepts of Double Consciousness and the Lily Complex are produced as a result of colonialism. Each impact the African American community in similar ways, yet neither terms are interchangeable. The former refers to the feeling of divided identity partially due to the perceptions endowed by the ruling class while the latter refers to the attempt to resolve such a feeling through cultural assimilation.

Double-consciousness is “a concept in social philosophy referring, originally, to a source of inward ‘twoness’ putatively experienced by African Americans because of their racialized oppression and disvaluation in a white-dominated society” (“Double-consciousness”). The term was coined by William Edward Burghardt Du Bois and formally introduced in his work *The Souls of Black Folks* in 1903. According to this theory, African Americans are subject to a sense of homelessness when it comes to self-perception. African Americans are therefore subjected to measuring their value through the perception of a society dominated by White ideals. If applied to the realm of beauty standards, African American women are susceptible

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<sup>5</sup> It is difficult to pinpoint these two concepts in *Venus* due to the structure of the play and the lack of dialogue from the “Hottentot Venus.” Since the play primarily constitutes of supporting actors who comment on the main character, it is hard to find examples that Baartman actually underwent these any psychological effects stemming from these concepts. On some level, based on the information provided about Baartman herself and the story of her abuse, it could be assumed that she did suffer these effects. However that assumption is left up to the opinion of each individual and their interpretation of her character.

to perceiving themselves through the eyes of a society biased towards the established normative standard. In this torn sense of consciousness these women struggle to formulate an understanding of self-perception seeing that both cultural and normative standards of beauty are influenced by Eurocentric Ideals. Ultimately these women are unable to either place themselves appropriately within their cultural entity or assess their beauty in a manner liberated from such ideals. This often leads to a lack of awareness of one's own beauty or even the desire to assimilate into the culture of the dominating race in order to appease normative standard. Janie serves as a prime example of this psychological concept. Janie, being a mixture of White American and African American, suffers from self-identity crisis<sup>6</sup>. However in her situation the majority of the pressure she endures to self-identify and assess her beauty within society stems from external sources—such as the people of Eatonville, her grandmother, Mrs. Turner and presumably every other person she comes into contact with throughout the story.

The characters within the story all try to confine Janie into a specific category so much so that her sense of self becomes obscured. Throughout the novel Janie struggles with her perception of self; it isn't until she returns to Eatonville after Tea Cake's death that she finally affirms her own identity. To a certain extent she manages to liberate herself from including the perceptions of others when evaluating her beauty. Nevertheless, prior to coming to embrace such liberation she falls susceptible to the idea of conformity. She

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<sup>6</sup> For some time Janie was unaware that she was considered colored. She assumed herself to be white. (Hurstons 11)

renders control to her husband Joe Stark, who emotionally abuses her, just to comply with his perception of a beautiful woman and she confines her curls to a single braid in order to exude a look that is presentable.

At the beginning of the novel Janie is introduced as a free-spirited young woman returning back to Eatonville after the death of her husband Tea Cake. The description of her posture and confidence embodied as she walks through Eatonville despite the jealous looks received from the women and the sexualized ogling from the men exemplifies the return of Janie's old self prior to her experiences. Before being married to Logan, Janie spent the majority of her time fantasizing under a pear tree in her grandmother's yard. It's underneath this tree that Janie experiences her first taste of erotic fantasy; it's also in these moments that Janie is able to identify herself. She doesn't particularly place herself in a particular race, but rather does take comfort in the idea of individuality tainted with a hint of sensuality. It can be assumed on some level she is satisfied with the perception she obtains of herself in regard to beauty. When the perspectives of Nanny, Logan, Joe, Tea Cake, and the people of Eatonville are introduced Janie's self-perception becomes contorted. According to Janie's grandmother she is considered colored. Prior to Janie's marriage to Logan Killicks—her first husband—her Nanny often states something that resonates with the idea of double-consciousness. She states, "You know honey, us colored folks are branches without roots" (Hurston 19). In the same way Janie's biracial identity complicated any attempts to relate directly to any of her racial roots. She gives into Nanny's adamant desire for her marry Logan; in the process she surprised parts of herself—such as her physical appearance and sexuality—that constituted to her self-perception. Janie's obedience to Nanny's desires marks the beginning the

disintegration of her self-perception. Nanny's desires, however, stem from the perspectives of those outside of the African American community, which portrayed African women as objects who needed to be tamed, and in turn influences Janie's actions. The same applies to Joe Stark whose need to set himself apart from the people of Eatonville stems from the ideologies that created a hierarchal system between African Americans and White Americans. In the process of Joe Starks' attempt to break such a system and achieve a higher societal status, he contorts Janie's perception of self. He manipulates Janie's beauty and obligates her to comply with his own understanding of being presentable. The same ideology is implemented by White Americans amongst African American women. When read from the perspective of double consciousness, Janie's experiences are influenced by forces within the African American community and indirectly from the Eurocentric ideologies—which enable the concept of double consciousness.

Arguably, this sense of double consciousness leads to the Lily Complex—which is the desire to assimilate into the culture asserted by the dominating race. Patton explicates the Lily Complex as “altering, disguising, and covering up your physical self in order to assimilate to be accepted as attractive” which may result in hatred towards one's only physical appearance (26). Both of these psychological effects can lead to self-esteem issues which turn result in the desire to make physiological changes to features natural to the African American Woman. Such changes tend to be expensive and often hazardous to one's health.

### **Physiological Changes**

Physiological changes pertain to the alterations African American women undergo in order to comply with the normative standard of beauty. It must be noted that in these circumstances some women are forced to comply while others chose willingly to comply. Nevertheless, both types of women exchange their natural features to achieve a higher-level perceived attractiveness. In turn they are subjected to health hazards and an extensive amount of expensive just to come close to the epitomized perception of beauty. Although there are a several changes that African American women make to their natural features, this section will limit the discussion to three alterations most common—skin bleaching, hair straightening, and eating disorders. These three physiological changes will be discussed with respect to the hair, skin, and body size of African American women.

In her assessment of African American Women's desire to straighten their hair Patton provides a plausible argument as to why these women chose to alter their hair texture. Imitating white hairstyles was "associated with free-person status" which "offered a certain amount of protection" (28). She further explains this theory by offering that light skinner slaves as an example. It is commonly acknowledged that light skinned slaves receive privileges that darker skinned ones did not. These include access to better "clothes, education, food as well as 'the promise of freedom upon the master's death (Patton 28). This explains why Mrs. Turner—from *Their Eyes Were Watching God*—was so adamant about Janie ascertaining a higher level of attractiveness to her hair and other features that stemmed from her Eurocentric evaluations of beauty. For Mrs. Turner, being as close to White as possible allowed her to set herself apart from the "common black folks" and gave her a sense of privilege already upheld by Whites. Obtaining a hair texture closer to that of Whites symbolized the promise of better opportunities. It also acquired a higher level of attractiveness amongst those within the African American community.

For those who decide to conform it is often a decision to engage in organizational social mobility (Patton 27). In order to survive in a society already biased to certain aesthetic features it's no longer a question of *if* one should comply. For those trying to climb the social ladder to economic success sometimes complying is not a question but a requirement. As previously discussed in the section entitled "Hair," African American women are often required to alter their hair texture not only to be perceived as acceptably attractive but also presentable in the eyes of their employers. Nevertheless, the act of altering one's hair leaves for the possibility of health risks.

In 2013 a study was conducted by the Department of Dermatology at the AJ Institute of Medical Sciences that analyzed the effects of chemically relaxed hair—a form of hair straightening common within the African American community. The study discovered adverse effects including: hair loss, hair thinning, deep-seated staphylococcal infection, and even an increased risk of uterine leiomyomata (Shetty et al. 2013). Despite the risk of hair straightening, African American women often find themselves in a situation where maintaining their natural textures would cause them to be ostracized socially and economically. In turn they are forced to make a choice that should not be required of them to begin with.

The choice to whiten one's skin not only found within the African American community—it is quite popular amongst other minority groups such as Southeast Asians. Nevertheless, the desire to bleach one's skin is ultimately influenced by the standard of beauty implemented that epitomizes lighter skin. The stratification of skin complexion prominent within the African American community can result in the desire of women to acquire a lighter complexion. When taken in into consideration with of the Lily Complex, the desire to whiten one's skin to often results from an overall dissatisfaction with one's self. Researchers conclude



based on studies conducted that the “psychological effects of skin tone bias is more amplified in the lives of African American women (Maxwell et. al. 441). It is also noted that the amplification of such effects manifests as a result of “incongruences between their psychological appearances and societal preferences” (Maxwell et, al 441). In particular, females endure a higher degree of psychological turmoil than men (Maxwell et al 441). The outcome of dissatisfaction with oneself leads to lower-self esteem since “self-esteem is a general evaluation of one’s self worth” (Adams et al. 105). As a result, women are more inclined to succumb to the desire to change themselves according to societal preference. This can result in dangers to their physiological health. Nalini Ravichandran, in her article about skin whitening creams for *DailyMail*, informs that “Most creams sold in the market are dangerous” due to the fact that they are likely to contain “steroids, hydroquinone, and tretinoin; the long-term use which can lead to lethal health concerns like permanent pigmentation, skin cancer, liver damage, mercury poisoning, and others.” Nevertheless, this practice is still quite common in the African American community—as well as in the Black community as a whole.

The third physiological change that African American Women often undergo in order to achieve the perceived level of attractiveness pertains to body size. Dissatisfaction with one’s size is not something uncommon within the States. Women across all ethnic and racial groups experience forms of dissatisfaction with their size. The negative view placed upon body size surpassing the normative beauty standard’s size recommendation often serves as a “central risk factor for clinical eating disorders” (Shannette 2). Little research exists about the prominence of eating disorders within the African American community. For some time, it was assumed that black women at large were not susceptible to such desires. The desire to change their physiological make up in order to fit the normative standard was presumed to mainly persist

amongst White females only. On the contrary, some research shows that “Black American females [do] indeed suffer from disturbed eating symptomatology,” granted, to a lesser extent than white women (Shannette 5). One of the many eating disorder the can occur is binge eating. In *God Don't Like Ugly* Annette compensates for her low self-esteem by supplying herself with comfort food. In addition to this being a mechanism to cope with the sexual abuse she endures from Mr. Boatwright, food becomes a sense of security. She eats to resolve the feelings of insecurity present pertain to her physical appearance, yet simultaneously feels ashamed for doing so—and is verbally shamed by those around her also.

The negative perpetuation of the African American woman's bodily aesthetic is subject to the preferences established by external forces. In the same way Annette formulated a sense of insecurity, and Janie struggled with self-identification, African American women are subject to such perceptions by individuals present with their lives—as well as societal views to a larger extent.

## Environmental Factors

The environmental factors that constitute to the standard of beauty implemented within the States is theorized as the cause of such negative views perpetuated in regard to the beauty of African American Women. The aesthetic features constituting to one's level of attractiveness, as discussed in the previous sections of this thesis, are each influenced by the normative standard. In addition to this normative standard, the cultural standard is also contextualized with relation to the issues arising from the perception of African American females. Plausible explanations are theorized and further analyzed with respect to each literary work as well as the investigations made by scholars pertaining to the topic of beauty. Within the realm of beauty, as aforementioned, the normative standard takes precedent in the decision to attribute a certain amount of attractiveness to one's physical appearance.

Such standard, that favors Eurocentric ideologies, then influences the cultural standard and perception of beauty amongst differing ethnic entities. Nevertheless, the question of why such negative views are persistently ascertained to African American women remains the main focus of the discourse with regard to the perception of their bodily aesthetics. In order to assess why such views are being perpetuated, an investigation of the sources of these views must take place. The sources of such views have been determined to stem from within and outside of the African American community and therefore will be discussed separately.

In addition to slavery and the implementation of Eurocentric standards, the perpetuation of stereotypes that surround African American women's bodily aesthetics are strongly influenced by the men in their lives. As previously mentioned, the men in the novels *God Don't Like Ugly* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* play heavily impact the way the women view themselves.

Although Janie's character is much more confident than Annette, she too falls susceptible to a distorting of self at the hands of the patriarchy. The influence of male preference is one hypothesized explanation about the continued perpetuation of such negative and confined views of African-American bodily aesthetics. This in no way assumes that all men are to blame for the continued perpetuations. While Janie obeys her abusive husband, she eventually finds one who appreciates her Afrocentric features. Annette manages to liberate herself from Mr. Boatwright—the man who uses her distorted image of self as a way for her to submit to his sexual abuse. Both women, though influenced by forces within the African American community, rebel to a certain extent, when they dismiss the perspectives of others in regard to their perception of beauty and acquire their own perception of beauty.

### **External**

The external sources are acknowledged as the Eurocentric ideologies that are maintained by the ruling class. The ruling class sets the normative standard universally therefore influencing the perpetuation of individuals both within and outside of that class. When this hegemonic standard is held in high regard, those who fall short of such standards risk being considered not only less attractive, but least attractive in comparison to others. This existential influence of Eurocentric ideals is represented in the treatment of Saartjie Baartman. The perception of her body is sexualized and dismissed as bizarre. Her captors as well as the viewers deem her to be a “spectacle a debacle a priceless prize, thuh filthy slut” (Parks). It is in the presence of such views that Baartman is stripped of her aesthetic appeal for the pure purposes of entertainment. This act is mentioned to illustrate the influence asserted by Eurocentric ideologies in regards to the perception of self and others perception of an individual's beauty.

Dominant ideologies also hold significant influence over those who constitute to the internal source of such negative perpetuations. Joe Stark's desire to gain societal status in Eatonville causes him to confine Janie's beauty. It is plausible to assume that the pressure placed on him as an African American male in post-slavery America influences his perception of her. The same applies to *God Don't Like Ugly* in which Annette's father abandons her mother for white women in hopes of acquiring a better economic status. His decision to leave Annette and her mother, despite his relentless fight for racial equality, indicates the moment at which the pressure he endured as an African American man became unbearable. In order to relinquish himself of such pressures he chose to eradicate all ties to the movement for racial equality and leave his family for a white woman. Whether he found the women he left with to be beautiful is not clear, but when taken at face value his act of leaving his African American wife provides support that could be interpreted as a preference stemming from the normative standard.

### **Internal**

Two specific internal sources within the African American community serve as an explanation for the perpetuation of such perceptions regarding African American beauty. The perception that stems from women themselves and the perception that stems from men heavily aid in the perpetuation of such ideals. As exemplified in Janie's situation, the men in her life play a significant role in her access to black beauty liberation as well as her definition of self-worth. Janie's loosely curled hair and curvy physique render her a level of attractiveness that surpasses that given to the women in Eatonville. As a result, her perceived beauty by Joe Stark does not go unpunished. She endures abuse at the hands of all of the men in her life—including Tea Cake who resorts to abusing Janie in order to impress Mrs. Turner. In turn, the aspects that make her

most beautiful become the reason for the abuse Stark, Tea Cake, and Killicks inflict on her. Janie submits herself to these men, allowing them to define herself worth and beauty.

In addition to the influences of men within the African American community, self-perception plays a role in the definition of beauty for African American women. Annette's perception of self is composed of a series of comparison she makes between her lighter skinned friend Rhoda as well as her mother—who is perceived as beautiful. According to the cultural standard of beauty represented within the novel, Rhoda's wavy hair and fair skin allow her to acquire a higher level of attractiveness than the darker skinned, kinky headed, curvy Annette. It is Annette's internalized perception deeming herself to be lesser attractive than lighter skin friend that keep the concept of colorism alive within the community. Like her, African American women fall susceptible to such acts, and blatant encouragement of interracial biases. In conjunction with the preference attributed by men, the internalized form of self-depreciation constitutes to the negative view asserted to the bodily Aesthetics of African American women that is perpetuated within the community.

## Conclusion

It is apparent that the scholarship pertaining to the perception of African American female beauty deserves further investigation and acknowledgement of in literary and educational platforms. Nevertheless, some conclusions have been made in regard to the logical reasoning behind the perception of between. The first is that the normative standard implemented by the ruling class is detrimental to the interpretation of beauty itself. Such implementation of one standard universally without regard for differing ethnicities within the United States can lead to psychological and physiological effects. Such effects stem from sources, both internal and external to the African American community, which aid in the perpetuation of such views. African American men impact the level of attractiveness attributed to African American women in their treatment of such women and their vocalized preferences with respect to their aesthetic. These men hold the ability to perpetuate the concept of racial phenotypicality bias, within the community. African American women also impact the perpetuation of negative stereotypes through the internalization of self-hatred and self-depreciation. Perhaps if the sources of such perpetuations were to change their perception of African American women, then the negative connotations that exist in regard to their beauty would dissolve. While the diversity within the United States progresses and the perception of beauty continues to change there is no concrete evidence that such negative perceptions will be completely eradicated. The need for further representation of African American women within literary settings is essential to the perceived perception of their beauty. Perhaps this will help to diminish the negative stereotypes that deprecate the beauty of these women—but there is no guarantee.

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