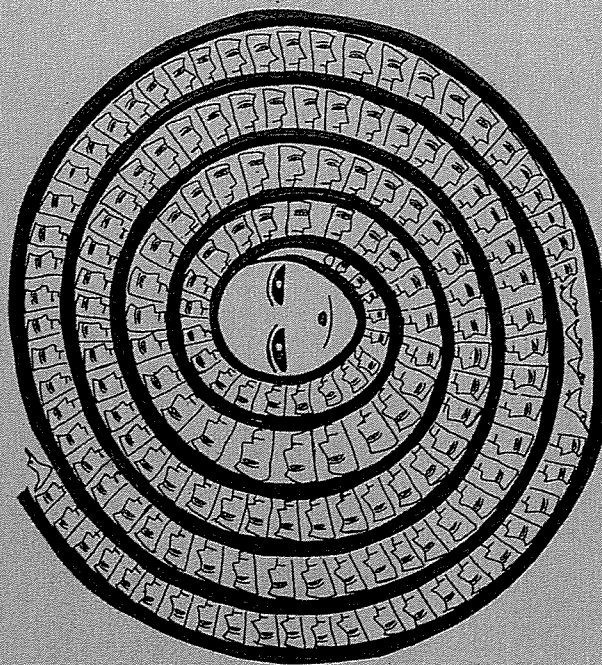


CRISIS AND CREATIVITY
in the New Literatures in English

edited by

Geoffrey Davis and Hena Maes-Jelinek



Cross / Cultures 1

CRISIS AND CREATIVITY – Edited by Geoffrey Davis and Hena Maes Jelinek

Lucia Nankoe
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(*Amsterdam*)

To Keep the Memory of the Past Alive: A Theoretical
Approach to Novels of Black Women Writers

The Great Escape

*Fifteen million
Dead souls
Alive
Never thought
They would
Survive
Come back again
To clean the stain
Left behind
Come back again
To heal the strain
In your mind
Go forward again
And you will find
Fifteen million*

*You'll see those slaves
Are not in their graves*

*Sista Roots*¹

¹Rhonda Cobham and Merle Collins, eds., *Watchers and Seekers*, London, The Women's Press, 1987.

Introduction

Our current work comprises a comparative study of novels by Afro-American and Afro-Caribbean women writers. These two groups of authors share common themes, such as slavery, the African past, the importance of the community, the relations between women and men, between blacks and whites, between different generations and various types of relations between women. There are comparatively more black women writers in the United States than in the whole of the Dutch, French and English-speaking Caribbean put together.² We have chosen to analyse novels in which a black woman or girl is the main character. The authors who are part of our current study have broken explicitly with the stereotypical images of black women that have dominated literature for so long. According to Barbara Christian, the most pervasive stereotypes of black women in literature are the mammy, the loose black woman, the mulatta and the conjure woman.³

²The French-speaking Caribbean has quite a large number of authors, such as Maryse Condé, Simone Schwarz-Bart, Michèle Lacroix, Marie-Magdeleine Carbet, Liliane Dévieux-Dehoux, Jacqueline Manicom, Myriam Warner-Vieyra and Francoise Ega. Their novels, however, are scarcely available, as most of them have not been reprinted. In the English-speaking regions we see a growing number of writers during the seventies and the eighties, among whom are Rosa Guy, Zee Edgell, Merle Hodge, Sylvia Wynter, Jamaica Kincaid, Merle Collins, Michelle Cliff, Joan Riley, Grace Nichols, Beryl Gilroy and Joan Cambridge. On the other hand, one finds hardly any black women novelists in the Dutch-speaking West Indies, apart from Bea Vianen and Astrid Roemer.

³See Barbara Christian, "From Stereotype to Character," in *Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition, 1892-1976*, Westport/Connecticut, Greenwood Press, 1980; see also Gloria Johnson Powell, "Growing Up Black and Female," in Claire B. Kopp, ed., *Becoming Female: Perspectives in Development*, New York, Plenum Press, 1979, pp. 29-67, p. 35: "Within the stereotypical view of Afro-American life are the six caricatures of Afro-American women most frequently depicted in the media and popular literature: (1) the black nanny or the nurse; (2) the black mammy or maid; (3) the beast of burden; (4) the promiscuous 'lady of the night'; (5) the wicked witch with potent voodoo or magical powers; and (6) the emasculating, dominating mother or wife of the notorious Afro-American matriarchy."

Contemporary black women have responded to these stereotypes, both the nineteenth- and twentieth-century versions, not so much by creating countertypes as was done in the past but by attempting to create their own definition of woman within the scope of their particular milieu.⁴

Writers like Paule Marshall, Simone Schwarz-Bart, Gloria Naylor and many others, create women characters that are positive and complex at the same time. Their protagonists often display what Marshall calls "the complexities, the contradictions, the ambiguities that make for a truly rich and credible character in fiction."⁵ In this sense their work is both innovative and liberating.

The purpose of our study is to analyse in what way these writers portray their black women protagonists. The notion of identity is often used by critics in their work on black women writers. This concept, however, is rarely defined in a precise manner. Our research project aims at linking the concept of identity, as it has been developed within the social sciences, with the study of black women characters in literary texts. As far as we have been able to verify, a valid method for accurately analysing identity in literary texts has not yet been developed. In the study of identity within the social sciences, "role" and "norm" can be considered as keywords. Identity is always determined by the norms and values of the society one lives in. Society assigns roles to individuals as well as to groups.⁶

⁴Barbara Christian, *op. cit.*, p. 78.

⁵Paule Marshall, Sarah E. Wright, Abbey Lincoln and Alice Childress, "The Negro Woman in American Literature," *Freedomways*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (Winter 1966), pp. 8-25, p. 21.

⁶See Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1966; Erving Goffman, *Stigma. Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, Englewood Cliffs, Prentice Hall, 1963; Lucia Nankoe and Essa Reijmers, "Identiteit van zwarte vrouwen in romans," *Forum der Letteren*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (1988), pp. 179-191.

In a former article we concentrated on some aspects of the concept of identity from the perspective of the social sciences. On the basis of these aspects we discussed the identity of the black women protagonists of two novels, namely *Betsey Brown* by Ntozake Shange from the United States and *Pluie et vent sur Télumée Miracle* by Simone Schwarz-Bart from the Caribbean.⁷ In this article, however, we would like to focus on the narratological side of our work. A theoretical framework will be introduced. Then this method will be illustrated in an analysis of Paule Marshall's novel *Praisesong for the Widow*.

Some Remarks on the Theoretical Framework

In *An Introduction to the French Caribbean Novel* the Jamaican critic Beverly Ormerod says:

Because French Caribbean writers from Césaire onwards have been so profoundly concerned with definitions of alienation and prescriptions for social change, there has been a persistent tendency among *literary critics* to assess their work according to sociological and political criteria, rather than on purely artistic grounds.⁸

Examining several recent studies on Afro-American women writers, Claudia Tate states in a somewhat similar way:

Afro-American literary criticism has traditionally been mimetic, in that it has described, explained, and evaluated the degree to which a black literary text truthfully represents its cultural, social and historical reality. In addition, Afro-American literary criticism has traditionally been humanistic in its insistence that

⁷ Nankoe and Reijmers, *op. cit.*; Ntozake Shange, *Betsey Brown*, London, Methuen, 1985; Simone Schwarz-Bart, *Pluie et vent sur Télumée Miracle*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1972.

⁸ Beverly Ormerod, *An Introduction to the French Caribbean Novel*, London, Heinemann, 1985, p. 135.

good literature must not only entertain but instruct as well, so as to improve the quality of, here specifically black American life. In fact, most critics of Afro-American literature have emphasized the literature's didacticism as a vehicle for promoting social protest and reform. And, as a result, they have usually avoided the newer critical methodologies of structuralism and poststructuralism - which place, or seem to place, more emphasis on form rather than content - in an attempt to maintain a didactic and humanistic focus in their criticism.⁹

These remarks concern two important issues. First, the function of the literary text. In general texts can serve several purposes. A text can be written for instance with the intention to support some political thesis or to denounce social problems. This is what one might call the "social function" of a text. The social function of Afro-American and Afro-Caribbean women's literature has generally been overemphasized. Too little attention has been paid to the artistic meaning of black women's novels. Tate observes that "all too frequently critics obscure the creative urge of writers who possess a strong social consciousness."¹⁰ According to what her intentions are, an author chooses one textual form or another. If black women writers were only concerned with social and political problems, they probably would not use the form of the novel. They would write essays, pamphlets, etc. instead (as indeed some of them, like June Jordan and Audre Lorde, do). The fact that black women authors write *novels* shows that they are primarily concerned with literary creativity. So their works should be analysed as literary texts, and not only as social artefacts. In our research we would like to underline the importance of both the

⁹ Claudia Tate, "Review Essay, On Black Literary Women and the Evolution of Critical Discourse," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (Spring 1986), pp. 111-123, p. 112.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

artistic and the social meaning of novels by Afro-Caribbean and Afro-American writers.

The second point Tate raises in the above-mentioned article is the choice of method for studying novels by black women writers. Up till now critical methodologies such as structuralism and semiotics have been largely avoided. Among black and white feminist critics there has been a tendency to reject "white, Western and male methods." Although critical examination of current theories is an absolute necessity, we agree with the Dutch feminist scholar Mieke Bal, who once stated: "We can throw away what has been made by men, but I'd rather snatch it from them and put it to my own use."¹¹

Recently, Barbara Christian has reopened the debate as to whether critics of black women's literature should be occupied with theory at all. Christian advocates "practical criticism," because in her opinion too much stress on theory might exclude "teaching or writing one's response to specific works of literature."¹² Doing research on Afro-Caribbean and Afro-American women's literature, we do not necessarily see an incompatibility between these different approaches to the analysis of literary texts. On the contrary, theory might help us gain new insights into the literature we are studying (organization of the text, choice of vocabulary, etc.). It is important nevertheless to point out that theory should be seen as an instrument, not as a goal in itself. Furthermore, the question as to whether to use any theoretical tools at all depends largely on the context in which one works. We find it important that black women novelists should also be studied within academic institutions, which still are mainly white-dominated and where up till now their works have largely been neglected. Within that specific context theory is useful, both as an

¹¹ Mieke Bal, "Methoden in de literatuurwetenschap," *Tijdschrift voor Vrouwenstudies*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (1981), pp. 394-416, p. 416, translation LN/ER.

¹² Barbara Christian, "The Race for Theory," *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (Spring 1988), pp. 67-79, p. 68.

instrument to analyse texts and as a means to communicate about this ignored literature with fellow academics and students. By using theory, a neglected part of world literature can be introduced, the study of which might eventually change ways of looking at literature and analysis in general.

Inasmuch as those engaged in black feminist criticism are dedicated to participating in "the game" of academic discourse they must not only have their turn(s) at dealing, but they must reshuffle and cut the deck for themselves, with the intention of changing the literal and figurative terms of the game.¹³

Of course we agree that it is equally important to present black women's literature to a wider audience and "help to ensure that their tradition has continuity and survives."¹⁴ In our opinion it is essential to work as much as possible in different ways of analysing.

Therefore in our work use will be made of existing theories, which implies critical evaluation of methodological tools and adjustment to our purpose. The method we have used for the analysis of Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* is the semiotic theory of A.J. Greimas.¹⁵ We have chosen his approach for several reasons. First, we think it is necessary to stay within the text at the beginning of the analysis, i.e., not to refer immediately to extra-textual data, but to find out "how the text says what it

¹³ Claudia Tate, "Reshuffling the Deck; Or, (Re)Reading Race and Gender in Black Women's Writing," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (Spring 1988), pp. 119-132, p. 120.

¹⁴ Barbara Christian, "The Race for Theory," p. 78.

¹⁵ A.J. Greimas, "Réflexions sur les modèles actantiels," in *Sémantique structurale*, Paris, Larousse, 1966, pp. 172-191; "Les actants, les acteurs et les figures," in *Sémiotique narrative et textuelle*, Claude Chabrol, ed., Paris, Larousse, 1973, pp. 161-176; "Un problème de sémiotique narrative: les objets de valeur," in *Du Sens II*, Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1983, pp. 19-48; A.J. Greimas/J. Courtès, *Sémiotique. Dictionnaire raisonné de la théorie du langage. Tome I*, Paris, Hachette, 1979; *Tome II*, Paris, Hachette, 1986.

says.¹⁶ Greimas has developed a theory which makes it possible to analyse a text on different levels. His complex method - more often used to analyse short texts than novels - shows the network of relations between elements within the text. Far from reducing a text to some of its constituents, Greimas' method takes into account the very complexity and internal coherence of a text. Greimas distinguishes for instance the discursive from the semio-narrative level. On each level further subdivisions can be made. Greimas' complicated structure of levels has been adapted by the Groupe d'Entrevignes. They handle a simplified version in which a first distinction is being made between the level of manifestation (the text in itself) and the level of analysis. The level of analysis can be subdivided into a surface and a deep level. Eventually, the surface level consists of a discursive and a narrative component. The subsequent explanation of theoretical notions can be situated on the narrative level of this adapted model and presents only a part of Greimas' theory. Focusing on the protagonist (the subject) we examine the objects she tries to acquire.

Secondly, Greimas has incorporated the notions of role and value in this theoretical framework. As stated earlier, within the social sciences these notions are closely connected with the concept of identity. So here different parts of our study can eventually be linked.

In Greimas' approach the old concept of character has been replaced by the dichotomy of "actor" and "actant." These two concepts operate on different levels of his semiotic theory. An actor can be equated more or less with a character. On a more abstract level the actor is determined by its place in the succession of events. It is on this narrative level that we use the notion of "actant." An actant can be defined as a syntactic unity on the narrative level, independent from further realization or semantic investment. An actant is determined by the place it occupies in the succession of events as well as by the relationship with other actants. A

¹⁶ Groupe d'Entrevignes, *Analyse sémiotique des textes*, Lyon, Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 1979, p. 7: "comment ce texte dit ce qu'il dit."

study of the relationships between the various actants can give us an understanding of the balance of power among characters in a text.

Greimas distinguishes six actants: subject, object, "destinator" or sender, "destinataire" or receiver, helper and opponent. In this article we will concentrate on the first three of these actants.

These notions have been adopted by numerous other theorists, such as Mieke Bal, Pijl Dählerup and Philippe Hamon.¹⁷ Some of them, like Bal, have simplified Greimas' actantial model in order to make it more applicable for students. Unfortunately not everyone has defined these notions in the same way, which has resulted in ambiguities.

Greimas distinguishes four potential phases in the narrative trajectories: manipulation, competence, performance and sanction. The actants have different relations with each other in the various phases. Each phase can be considered as a narrative program. A succession of narrative programs constitutes a narrative trajectory. In all four phases the subject pursues an object, or to speak in Greimas' terminology: the subject moves from a position of disjunction - separation - to a position of conjunction - union - with an object or vice versa. The nature of the object pursued varies from one phase to another. The object can be the acquisition of a certain capability as in the phase of competence. On the other hand, the object desired by the subject can be material or spiritual. In itself the object has no value. As the subject tries to obtain the object, the latter is invested with value. These values are determined by the actant called "destinator" who is the source of the so-called universe of values. This universe of values is situated within the text - implicit though it may be.

¹⁷ Mieke Bal, *De theorie van verhalen en vertellen*, Muiderberg, Coutinho, 1978; "Verteltheorie als instrument voor ideologiekritiek," *Spektator*, Vol. 13 (1983), pp. 206-280; Pijl Dählerup, "Theoretical Problems in Analysing the Literary Works of Woman Authors: Exemplified Through the Woman Naturalist Amalie Skram," *Feminology*, 1975, pp. 90-105; Philippe Hamon, "Pour un statut sémiotique du personnage," in *Poétique du récit*, Roland Barthes a.o., Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1977, pp. 115-180; *Texte et idéologie*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1984.

Yet, the norms and values within the text are related to value systems in society. A linking of the intra- and extratextual universes of values can be useful in the analysis of novels.

During the phase of manipulation the destinator gives the subject the will to pursue an object on the basis of certain values.¹⁸ During sanction the previous phases are evaluated in terms of the same universe of values.

The notion of norm is not defined explicitly by Greimas within the narrative structure. Yet, as Korthals-Altes¹⁹ has shown, a definition can be derived from other elements in the actantial model. Like values, norms are set by the destinator. The relationship between norm and value has to be specified with the help of concepts from the social sciences.

The notion of role - within the social sciences often connected with those of norm and value - occupies a somewhat different place in Greimasian theory. The actants can be further analysed in terms of actantial roles. These actantial roles correspond with thematic roles on the discursive level. The whole issue of roles however will not be further developed in the present article.

In summary, Greimas' approach has been chosen mainly for three reasons: 1) the very complexity of the method and its insistence on the coherence between elements within a text are a safeguard against reductionism and simplification; 2) the method offers the possibility to analyse how the text says what it says, i.e., to stay close to the main object of our study before taking the context into account; 3) the incorporation of

¹⁸ A character can be subject to different manipulations at the same time. In our article on "Identity of Black Women in Novels" (1988) the crisis that Shange's Betsey Brown faces was explained in terms of different sets of expectations she has to live up to. These expectations are based on norms and values rooted in conflicting symbolic universes. The crisis can also be analysed in terms of contradictory manipulations. A connection might be made here between the social sciences and the semiotic approach to literary texts.

¹⁹ Elisabeth Korthals-Altes, "Normes et valeurs dans le récit," *Revue des Sciences Humaines*, Tome LXXII, no. 201 (January-March 1986), pp. 35-47.

notions like role and value makes it possible to connect this semiotic approach with concepts from the social sciences.

Paule Marshall and the Right to Be in the World

Paule Marshall was born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1929. She is the daughter of immigrants who went from Barbados to the United States during the First World War. After completing her studies in English literature she worked as a journalist. During the fifties she started writing short stories and in 1959 she published her first novel, *Brown Girl, Brownstones*. A second novel, *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People*, appeared ten years later, in 1969. Marshall says about herself: "I'm a slow, slow writer." In 1983 her third novel, *Praisesong for the Widow*, was published.²⁰ Over the years Paule Marshall has continued writing short stories.

A very important aspect in her work is the Caribbean background. Marshall is one of the few Afro-American women writers who focuses on the relationship between black people in the United States and the West Indies in her literary work. Other writers in whose work this connection to the Caribbean is featured are Toni Morrison (*Tar Baby*) and Audre Lorde (*Zami*).²¹ In *Brown Girl, Brownstones* Marshall portrays a girl growing up within the West Indian community in New York. Her second novel is set

²⁰ Paule Marshall, *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959), London, Virago Press, 1981; *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People* (1969), New York, Random House, 1984; *Praisesong for the Widow*, London, Virago Press, 1983.

²¹ Toni Morrison, *Tar Baby*, London, Granada, 1981; Audre Lorde, *Zami. A New Spelling of My Name*, London, Sheba Feminist Publishers, 1982. The title of Lorde's book is reminiscent of Carriacou, the island that plays such an important part in *Praisesong for the Widow*: "Zami. How Carriacou women love each other is legend in Grenada, and so is their strength and their beauty." (p. 14); and: "Zami. A Carriacou name for women who work together as friends and lovers." (p. 255).

on an imaginary island in the Caribbean. In *Praisesong for the Widow* Marshall describes a journey through the West Indies.

Important themes in Marshall's work are the relationship between the individual and the community, relations between women and men, ritual, dance and the influence of the past on the present, often symbolized by older characters such as Miss Thompson in *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, Leesy Walkes in *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People* and both great-aunt Cuncy and Lebert Joseph in *Praisesong for the Widow*.

Marshall's literary work can be considered as liberating as it aims explicitly at replacing stereotypes about black women by a more complex and therefore more truthful portrayal of them. During a conference in Amsterdam in 1985 Paule Marshall stated:

My work is very much involved, yes, with the individual, especially with the individual black woman coming into a sense of her right to be in the world. At the same time her larger concern is her right to be in her community and to be important and helpful to that community, to help that community realize itself. And that has to do with something I feel very deeply about, what the new literature, as I call it, is all about, the new literature written especially by black women in the United States. One of the ways that a people are able to move effectively politically is when they have a sense of their right to be in the world and that's what literature can do for them. When you read about yourself as you are, truthfully, not the kind of stereotypes and demeaning portrayals and so on, but when you read about yourself as you really are, that gives you - I mean this is not conscious, because literature is not only a conscious experience - it gives you a sense that you have a right to be here. And once you have that right, then you become a more affective person and then you can join with others to move in a collective manner, the kind of rescuing your community. So that, to my mind, it seems to me, is what the literature is about, certainly what I'm struggling for in my own work.

To Keep the Memory of the Past Alive: Analysis of *Praisesong for the Widow*

Paule Marshall's third novel *Praisesong for the Widow* tells us the story of Avey Johnson, an Afro-American middle-aged, middle-class woman, who travels in the Caribbean for the third time after her husband's death. After five days she decides to abandon the cruise and fly home. She wants to take a flight home from Grenada, but is unable to do so as she feels unwell - just as she did during the cruise. She has disturbing dreams about her past, in particular her great-aunt Cuncy who told her about the arrival of the Africans in Tatem and her marriage to Jay that deteriorated over the years. In Grenada she meets Lebert Joseph, an old man who sees her struggling to come to terms with her past. He invites her to a fête in Carriacou. After having participated in the annual ritual on this small island she returns reinvigorated to New York.

Analysing the objects in *Praisesong for the Widow*, one can trace one of the most important lines of the story as follows: as a child Avey hears the story of the landing of the slaves, the Ibos, in Tatem from her great-aunt Cuncy who had learned it from her grandmother. By narrating this story again and again, great-aunt Cuncy entrusts Avey with the mission to keep the memory of the past alive. As stated, from the perspective of the subject value is accorded to the object by the destinator. We can explain in Greimasian terms that Avey is the subject, great-aunt Cuncy the destinator, and the object is to carry out a mission. Although the precise meaning of this mission still escapes her, little Avey feels that she has been given a task:

Moreover, in instilling the story of the Ibos in her child's mind, the old woman had entrusted her with a mission she couldn't even name yet had felt duty-bound to fulfill. (p. 42)

In the course of the story the subject Avey neglects this particular object - the mission - and tries to acquire other objects, like social ascension and material wealth. The destinator here is society, not a personified sender. The norms and values in this society are determined by white people:

it was *their* companies, *their* firms, *their* offices, *their* country, and therefore theirs the power to give or deny, to say yes or no. (p. 135)

In their struggle for social ascension, Avey and Jay have to accept the norms and values of the dominant group in society. They neglect their own cultural heritage. They become successful members of the black middle-class, but underneath the surface Avey always has the feeling that they have given up some essential part of themselves. At the end of the story, the subject reaches the initial object, that is fulfillment of the mission. Avey sets out to make the history of the Africans in the United States known:

She would quote him the line from the story that had been drilled into her as a child, which had been handed down from the woman whose name she bore. (p. 245)

A destinator can appear at different moments in the text, as is the case of great-aunt Cuney. First she is present in Avey's childhood as the destinator during the phase of manipulation. A destinator-manipulator tries to persuade the subject to act. Although as a child Avey tells the story of the Ibos to close relatives she is quick to abandon her cause and sets out to acquire other objects. Avey is a middle-aged woman when her great-aunt reappears in a dream during the cruise in the Caribbean. We can speak of a new phase of manipulation. The object is the initial one: fulfillment of the mission. After Avey has left the ship she looks back on her life over the years: her marriage, her parents, her children, her work,

her great-aunt Cuney On the balcony of the hotelroom in Grenada Avey finds herself in a crisis caused by the sudden reappearance of her great-aunt and her thoughts of the past. She then realizes that she has gained material wealth but has lost the most essential things in life like "the small rituals" she and Jay used to enjoy in the beginning of their marriage:

Something vivid and affirming and charged with feeling had been present in the small rituals that had once shaped their lives. (p. 137)

Would it have been possible to have done both? That is, to have wrested, as they had done over all those years, the means needed to rescue them from Halsey Street and to see the children through, while preserving, safeguarding, treasuring those things that had come down to them over the generations, which had defined them in a particular way. The most vivid, the most valuable part of themselves! They could have done both, it suddenly seemed to her, bowed over in tears there on the hotel balcony. (p. 139)

The scene on the balcony has to be considered as a phase of sanction, i.e., an evaluation of the previous phases.

A new series of phases starts when Avey meets Lebert Joseph, an old man who can be considered as another destinator. There are clear resemblances between him and great-aunt Cuney, the first destinator, in particular their age, knowledge of history, a special relationship with the ancestors, the so-called "Old Parents." Transcending both great-aunt Cuney and Lebert Joseph, the "Old Parents" can be considered as the ultimate destinator, the final source of the universe of values. Both of the personified destinators in *Praisesong for the Widow* represent the strength and wisdom of the "Longtime people." Like the first Africans who were brought to the United States, and who "could see in more ways than one," (p. 37) Lebert Joseph has a special gift:

It marked him as someone who possessed ways of seeing that went beyond mere sight and ways of knowing that outstripped ordinary intelligence (*Li gain connaissance*) and thus had no need for words. (p. 172)

In another manipulation phase this destinator Lebert Joseph succeeds in renewing the interest of the subject in the "Old Parents" and the African traditions. In Carriacou, a small island near Grenada, Avey attends a fête and she participates in the annual ritual dance. Reconciled with both her personal life and her cultural heritage she leaves the Caribbean to return to New York.

Through the intermediary of the second destinator, Avey is thus reminded of the continuing influence of the past on the present. Her stay in the Caribbean makes her fully aware of the importance of keeping the memory of the past alive. The task of the initial destinator, great-aunt Cuney, will finally be fulfilled:

And at least twice a week in the late afternoon, when the juniper trees around Tatem began sending out their cool and stately shadows, she would lead them, grandchildren and visitors alike, in a troop over to the Landing.

"It was here that they brought them," she would begin - as had been ordained. "They took them out of the boats right here where we're standing . . ." (p. 256)

Conclusion

The aforescribed analysis of *Praisesong for the Widow* offers only a partial illustration of the possibilities of Greimas' approach. It is far from complete. This is due, on the one hand, to the short amount of space allotted to us here (a poor excuse). On the other hand, the novel contains several layers of meaning and there is a constant play with the chronology of the story. This very richness and complexity make *Praisesong for the*

Widow an interesting object of study. Moreover, as Lukken²² has pointed out, the process of interpretation based on Greimasian approach is never really closed, but rather continuous.

So far Greimas' method has mainly been used to analyse short texts. This has to do with the elaborate character of the theory, which makes it easier to apply to short texts than to voluminous novels. In the analysis of novels choices will have to be made, like for instance our option to concentrate for the time being on the narrative level.

The main advantage of the method is that it allows one to stay close to the text, while providing tools that make possible fruitful discussion about the text. Accordingly a semiotic approach is well suited for working in pairs or groups.

²² Gerard Lukken, ed., *Semiotiek en Christelijke uitingsvormen. De semiotiek van A.J. Greimas en de Parijse school toegepast op bijbel en liturgie*, Hilversum, Gooi en Sticht b.v., 1987, p. 10.

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