

Critical study of folk, bourgeois, and proletarian aesthetics in the works of Dorothy West

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Abstract: Dorothy West was a novelist and short story writer during the time of the Harlem Renaissance. In her novels and short stories, she focused on bourgeois, proletarian and folk aesthetics. West's father was born a slave. He was freed when he was seven and began saving money and started a business and in short span of time he attained bourgeois status. This way there is paradigm shift in his social status, all the way from the status of folk to bourgeois. Dorothy West knows very well the living conditions of folk and proletarian class. She is known for her sharp observations of activities of bourgeois, proletarian and folk class. Out of experience and keen observation she highlighted these issues in her works. Being a famous journalist, novelist and short story writer she explored on folk, proletarian and bourgeois aesthetics in detail and turned attention of readers towards her for seven decades and departed as last leaf of Harlem Renaissance.

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I. DETAILED STUDY

Dorothy West is one of the greatest African American writers of twentieth century in focusing issues of present day in a grand manner. African American literature can be categorized into three aesthetics—folk, bourgeois and proletarian. Literature of the folk aesthetics features the black vernacular, dialect, and an emphasis on the oral tradition and a working class perspective. In contrast, literature reflecting the bourgeois aesthetic uses Standard English, and avoids the African American English or black vernacular as a form of expression. Literature of the proletarian aesthetic critiques class, gender and racial oppression suggesting bourgeois or folk perspectives and seeks to promote social justice and equality for African Americans in direct or overt manners. There is an undercurrent of culture in her works. Dorothy West who launched a career as a writer of short fiction a writing life wrote short stories, novels and reminiscences and that lasted for more than seven decades. It was an adventure for its creator, who was both an enigma of and a significant contributor for the landscape of twentieth century American literature. Throughout her life, Dorothy West was a curiosity. Her career was bookmarked by many essays about life in Boston and Harlem, as well as living on Martha's Vineyard. Most of her work points an idyllic portrait of life as Dorothy West saw it. Through her writings she empowered the black power movement which sought to liberate blacks from social, political, and economic oppression. Her father moved from rags to riches as a black businessman of folk descent and bourgeois aspirations. West's parents influenced her life and writing greatly, and the fusion of folk and bourgeois aspects of her background enabled her to view the world in dualistic terms. West's chronicle of her childhood reveals the folk and working class roots of the black bourgeois on Martha's Vineyard, as well as providing insight into the settings, themes, and characterizations in her exploration of racial, class, and sexual politics. She explored the color and caste system, criticizing interracial color and class prejudice and analyzing the harmful effects on the collective psyche of African Americans. She managed to align herself with a variety of powerful voices in African American literature forming friendship with such writers as Richard Wright, Countee Cullen and Zora Neale Hurston. Little serious critical attention has been devoted to West's short fiction. They convey powerful themes of racial, color, and gender lines revealing her earlier explorations of folk, bourgeois and proletarian themes. Despite the prior critical assessments the close reading of her works amid the social, historical and economic aspects of the period reveals the presence of bourgeois, folk, and proletarian aesthetics. In her point of view in this world social and economic status and light or white skin are more valuable commodities than political consciousness and social responsibility. Dorothy West, a closet revolutionary, the last leaf of Harlem renaissance explored on the themes social, gender, class, racial and economic issues using her talent in the language and being sharp observer of developments taking place in her social milieu. In 1948, it seemed as if Dorothy West would become a household word when editors of the Ladies Home Journal contemplated serializing her novel 'The Living Is Easy' in the national women's magazine. However, the editorial board changed its mind and stopped serializing her novel on the grounds that she was a black woman writer. West's

interpretation of the Ladies Home Journal's decision not to include her novel in their magazine suggests the politics of race, class, and gender, which militated against black female writers in the twentieth century. West truly functions as a closet revolutionary, for while on the surface her work and her life seem to reflect the black bourgeoisie, her novels, short stories, and essays reflect a proletarian stance. Born in 1907 in Boston, Massachusetts Dorothy West was the daughter of Isaac Christopher West and Rachel Pease Benson. Both her parents came from folk backgrounds; her father was born a slave in Virginia. He eventually relocated to Springfield, Massachusetts, and his entrepreneurial bent prompted him to open an ice-cream parlor. Her father would later serve as the model for the character Bart Judson in her first novel 'The Living Is Easy', who moves from rags to riches as a black businessman of folk descent and bourgeois aspirations. In 'Fond Memories of a Black Childhood', West notes that despite her parents southern folk origins, they managed to acquire the wealth and status of the black northern bourgeois class, making them one of the first black families to obtain a house on Martha's Vineyard. By revealing the origins of her family, she valorizes the southern folk as the root of African American culture. West presents the diversity among the black bourgeois class in her reminiscences of her childhood on Martha's Vineyard, a location that later serves as a back drop for the second novel 'The Wedding.' West's formative years shaped her worldview, providing her with a multitude of materials and sources for her short and longer fiction. Her literary talent bloomed early; when she was fourteen years old she won a prize for best short story of the week from the Boston post. When she was seventeen years old she won the second prize for the short story 'The Typewriter' by the Opportunity Magazine at the annual awards function. The story blends realism, naturalism, and modernism in its depiction of an African American man who feels disenchanting with his limited opportunities. West discovered the difficulties of being a black female writer in the early part of the twentieth century. Although black writers were somewhat in vogue, many magazine publishers would include only a few in each issue. As many of her contemporaries sought creative freedom abroad, West traveled outside the United States for new experiences. In addition to traveling to London with Porgy in 1929, Dorothy West also traveled to the Soviet Union in 1932 with Langston Hughes and twenty one other African Americans. Their mission included making a film called Black and White, which dealt with race relations in the United States. West started magazines Challenge and New Challenge and both were folded within three years span of time due to poor sales and a lack of good quality submissions. Her foray as an editor over, Dorothy West received a job as a welfare investigator in New York. Despite her bourgeois upbringing, the position gave her insight into the black working class of Harlem and the folk experience. She worked as a welfare investigator for a year and a half and later became employed with the Works Progress Administration Federal Writers Project. Those essays remained unpublished during her lifetime, but they recently were reintroduced to the public in 'A Renaissance in Harlem: Lost Voices of an African American Community,' edited by Lionel C. Bascom (1999). She wrote more than twenty short stories that appeared in the New York Daily News between 1940 and 1960. In 1945 West moved from New York to Martha's Vineyard, where she would live until her death in 1998. While there she would write novels 'The Living Is Easy' and 'The Wedding'. She also regularly contributed stories and articles to the Vineyard Gazette. In the 1960s a more militant tone in African American writing, and her association with the black bourgeoisie would cause some African American critics to write her off as passé and apolitical. Contrary to the common belief, West's life actually represents a blending of the folk, the bourgeois, and the proletarian from her own family history and her experiences as a welfare investigator and her role as editor of Challenge and New Challenge.

In her short story 'The Type Writer' West manifests struggles of a man who migrated from southern region to northern in search of economic opportunity. The protagonist's current socio-economic level as a janitor stands in opposition to his former dreams and ambition of achieving black middle-class status. His race and lack of formal education prevent him from rising socially or economically. The typewriter he rents for his daughter Millie, who wants to be a secretary or administrative assistant, functions as a vehicle by which the protagonist and his family can move from working class to bourgeois status. On another level, the father's practice of dictating letters to his daughter in the guise of an affluent, upwardly mobile man enables the protagonist to fulfill his bourgeois desires in his imagination. He spins tales in which he transforms himself from a janitor into a successful businessman. His imagination allows him to attain his bourgeois dreams and goals. Ultimately he dies in anguish as the rented typewriter has been returned and deprived of his dream and to live out of fantasies. Whereas a typewriter signifies entrance into bourgeois society in 'The Typewriter,' a motion picture projector functions as the key to a family's ascension socially and economically in the short story 'The Five Dollar Bill'. In this bildungsroman, West presents the folk aesthetic through the depiction of a working class black family, the bourgeois aesthetic in the mother and daughter's quest for wealth and social status, and the proletarian aesthetic in the criticism of social and economic inequities in America. Set in an unidentified northern city, the story reveals the tensions caused by lack of money and material possessions in a working class family. In the short story 'An Unimportant Man' West blends folk, bourgeois, and proletarian aesthetics in a compelling bildungsroman about the life of Zeb Jenkins, a southern black man of the folk, who strives for bourgeois status in the North by becoming, an attorney. Money functions as a central concern in the short story

'Funeral', a bildungsroman in that it charts the child's growing maturity and awareness of mortality, and a kunstlerroman in its depiction of the child using the experience as a stimulus to become a writer and transcend the pain by transforming it into artistic expression. The story recalls the impressions of Judy, the protagonist, who decides wants to be a writer after her initiation into mortality through her uncle's death. In 'Funeral' Dorothy West criticizes the bourgeois aesthetic in her depiction of the preacher's sermon on Uncle Eben's death. West reveals how one man transforms a family's loss into personal gain by equating love for a deceased relative with the expense one undertakes in their funeral and the payment to the preacher. Ironically, the preacher espouses a proletarian aesthetic to fulfill his bourgeois aspirations in an attempt to glean more money from the relatives of Uncle Eben. Dorothy West presents the folk, bourgeois, and proletarian aesthetics by depicting one child's initiation into death. In the short story 'Jack in the Pot' which won the New York Daily News Blue Ribbon Prize in 1940, West presents a moral dilemma over whether one should spend jack pot winnings on oneself or others in need as a vehicle for meditating on class and community. The story, told from the point of view of a third-person omniscient narrator, centers on the Edmunds, a black family formerly of bourgeois status, who have become part of the folk once their stationery store goes out of business in the Great Depression. The story's premise is partly grounded in history and fact. When one of the janitor's children dies and he needs fifty dollars for the funeral, Mrs. Edmunds refuses to provide him with financial assistance. Mrs. Edmund's guilt begins to override her self-interest, and she buys a dress for the baby to be buried in with her jackpot winnings, but it comes too late. The father has given the child's body to the medical students at a local college for experiments because he cannot afford a funeral. Ironically, the money she so jealously hoards proves of no benefit to her as her guilt-ridden conscience will not let her use it. West presents the futility of greed and materialism and the detrimental effects upon individuals in the story. Similarly, West meditates on class and race in the short story 'Mammy', set in New York. West presents characters from a variety of backgrounds in the story. The characters include a black middle-class and college educated social worker and an affluent white family who hired a mammy, and the black southern mammy herself, a representative of the folk. West's portrayal of the mammy as a reservoir of strength and fortitude echoes treatment of the black domestic. The story centers on a black caseworker who must interview the former employer of a black domestic to determine whether the elderly black woman is unable to work and in need of financial aid. West analyzes interracial and interracial class and color conflicts in her depiction of the social worker's relationships with others. Dorothy West's short story 'The Penny' focuses on a working-class African American family struggling to make ends meet in an unidentified northern city. Appropriating the narrative strategy of the bildungsroman Dorothy West centers the story on a little boy who lies about abuse at home in order to get a penny from a class-conscious and bourgeois neighbor named Miss Halsey, who dislikes the folk. West depicts class stratification within the African American community as a means of meditating on the folk and bourgeois classes. Similarly, in the short fiction 'The Richer, The Poorer,' West deconstructs wealth and poverty. She defines the two terms in relation to spiritual and emotional rather than material goods. The title itself meditates on the folk and the bourgeois. West presents the competing folk and bourgeois aesthetics in her depiction of two sisters --Lottie, who has material wealth, and Bess, who has lived an emotionally fulfilled life. Lottie attempts to hoard her money in an effort to gain middle-class status and prosperity. In West's depiction of reunion scene between the two sisters, she reveals how a folk aesthetic often surpasses a bourgeois one. She criticizes the bourgeois aesthetic of material goods and middle-class status in favor of a folk aesthetic based on the valorization of African American art forms, life, history, and culture. The proletarian aesthetic appears in her valorization of the folk and the criticism of materialism. In contrast, in 'The Bird like No Other,' another bildungsroman that enables West to meditate on folk and bourgeois aesthetics by depicting a youth's growth and development, she focuses primarily on the bourgeois class in her depiction of a young boy's summers as a resort reminiscent of Martha's Vineyard. In the short story 'The Happiest Year, the Saddest Year' Dorothy West returns to a loosely autobiographical account of her own childhood initiation with death as in 'Funeral' through the narrative form of the bildungsroman. West appropriates the bildungsroman as a means of meditating on race, class, and gender by chronicling childhood awareness of these issues to highlight their influence on individuals. Unlike 'The Happiest Year, the Saddest Year,' the short story 'The Envelope', featuring a third person omniscient narrator, centers on the lives of a childless adult couple, Lottie and George Henry. Dorothy West uses an envelope as a means of meditating on folk and bourgeois aesthetics. The short story 'Odyssey of an Egg,' told by a third person omniscient narrator, focuses on the life of a lower class man, Porky, who robs an elderly woman in an attempt to attain financial security and bourgeois status. West reveals the futility and danger when greed, materialism, and bourgeois aspirations override one's concern for other individuals. In the short story 'About a Woman Named Nancy' Dorothy West focuses on Nancy, a black female cook, who saves enough money to afford a cottage on Martha's Vineyard. Narrated through the point of view of a bourgeois neighbor, the story presents the possibilities of harmony between the folk and the bourgeois through the community's acceptance of Nancy, whose affluent neighbors admire her industriousness. To the residents of the island, Nancy represents both the folk through her working-class background and the bourgeois in her acquisition of a summer cottage on

the island. The short story 'The Maple Tree' focuses on two bourgeois couples of no specific race who live on Martha's Vineyard during the summer. In the story, told by a third person omniscient narrator Dorothy West reveals how bourgeois aspirations and customs work to the detriment of those who favor material possessions and real estate over friendship. She portrays the maple tree that exists on the land between the two couples' homes as the symbol of tension and friction. On the whole 'The Maple Tree' illustrates how the erection of boundaries to fit one's bourgeois conception of the ideal summer home jeopardizes a friendship. The short story 'To Market, to Market' examines bourgeois aesthetics and centers on a day in the life of a young middle class boy sent on an errand. Instead of going directly to the store and buying the bread, the boy becomes distracted and fights for a shiny marble with neighborhood boys. By the time he retrieves the bread, he comes home late. Rather than being angry, his father shows understanding, emphasizing with the child and hoping his son wins the fight he plans to engage in the next day. West focuses on childhood adventures and the child's recognition of family love. The short fiction 'Prologue to a Life' centers on a married couple, Luke and Lilly Kane, and their experiences as a black family in nineteenth and early twentieth century America. Lily's boys sink into a pond while ice-skating, and not only do the boys die, but so does Lily's capacity for love and happiness. The loss of identity as a mother means her loss of self, and her relatives are desperate to help her. Her resulting depression leads to physical ailments, respiratory and heart problems. When she again conceived and gave birth to a female child, laughs bitterly. She views women as limited, weak, and of little value, except as potential mothers. The story reveals the modern temper of pessimism, fragmentation and incompleteness.

Dorothy West's novel 'The Living Is Easy' set in the southern United States and Boston. The Living Is Easy focuses primarily on the lives of Cleo and Bart Judson, southern blacks who migrated north in search of the American dream of wealth, success, and fame. West's title is an ironic commentary on the futility of achieving personal happiness and fame through material acquisition and wealth at the cost of losing one's identity and sense of heritage. The novel depicts the movement from South to North and folk to bourgeois through the presentation of Cleo and Bart's struggle to attain wealth, social clout, and renown. West's criticism of greed and materialism, elitism, and interracial discriminations suggests that the key to African American life and culture resides in an appreciation of the folk, the proletarian sense of the communality between humans, and a necessity for the socioeconomic progress of bourgeois values but not at the expense of the community. West presents the communal aesthetic in her depiction of Cleo and Bart's southern childhood and her migration north in search of a better life in the early twentieth century. Her depiction of Cleo and Bart's trek from the rural agrarian south to the industrialized North mirrors that of west's own parents, who left Virginia and South Carolina in quest of economic opportunity and freedom. By presenting the Great Black Migration in terms of her protagonists, Cleo and Bart Judson, West calls attention to the southern folk roots of the black bourgeois class and succeeds in criticizing prejudice, suggesting that elitism among the black bourgeoisie serves as a denial of one's heritage. West represents the folk aesthetic in her depiction of Cleo and Bart's southern childhood, their migration north, and their adjustment to urban living. Each character reacts in a different manner to their new situation. West uses Cleo's ambivalent feeling of love and hatred toward the South and the folk as a means of meditating on color, class, and community. Cleo expresses elicited sentiments that shape her perceptions of the African American community, resulting in an estrangement from African American life and culture. As the wife of Bart Judson, the wealthiest black man in Boston, Cleo is cold, hostile, and manipulative. West analyzes interracial colorism. Cleo writes letters containing false information to her sisters as a means of ending their marriages with men she considers too folksy in their socioeconomic background. Because she has bourgeois aspirations, she wants her sisters to be married to middle-class black men. The plotline of writing false letters echoes utter confusion and commotion. Cleo's ambivalence about the south and her folk heritage contributes to her desire to remove her sisters from their folk environments, while simultaneously surrounding her with family who signify the folk past for her. All her backward looks were toward the spellbinding south. As a consequence, she attempts to reconfigure the folk and the bourgeois in her life, yet her attempts at reconciliation ultimately prove unsuccessful despite the fact that she succeeds in coaxing her sisters to come and live with her. West's presentation of Bart Judson's plight represents the reality of many black businessmen of the early to mid twentieth century, including her own father, a successful entrepreneur and fruit wholesaler dubbed as the Black Banana King of Boston. She shows the tribulation of black entrepreneurs who simply cannot maintain their businesses in the wake of urbanization, commercialization, and industrialism. The novel ends tragically, with Bart Judson as a broken-down man victimized by racism and classism as well as his wife Cleo, whose gross materialism and lack of love for her husband create an empty marriage. Dorothy West's 'The Living Is Easy' stands as one of the most powerful commentaries on the politics of race, class, and gender in the African American literary tradition.

Dorothy West's novel 'The Wedding' is a tale set in the Martha's Vineyard, which satirizes middle class values and explores social and racial issues, to enthusiastic reviews. This novel also depicts the futility and tragedy of elitism, which characterizes her earlier work 'The Living Is Easy'. As in 'The Living Is Easy,' the southern past represents the foundations of African American culture and community. Individuals who elevate

bourgeois values over their folk heritage suffer. Both *The Living Is Easy* and *The Wedding* signify West's crowning achievement in negotiating the wealth, triangularity of heritage, and power of the African American experience. West's interweaving of past and present in 'The Wedding' reveals the power of coming to understand the triangularity. Clark's union with Corinne represents the marriage of two socially prominent individuals, who on the surface seem to be the ideal of African American family, but the foundation upon which the marriage rests reflects more on superficial connections than passion or love. Because Clark never married Sabina, the woman he most loved in college because of her dark skin color and low social class, his daughter Shelby's wedding stirs ambivalent feelings in him. His long term affair with the dark skinned Rachel reflects his regret over allowing his bourgeois aspirations to dominate his existence. When Clark decides to exchange a bourgeois wife with the proper social cachet for a true love in Rachel, he had already waited too late. Although Rachel once had bourgeois hopes of eventually marrying Clark, she opts for a city employee who will meet her needs. Although materially rich, Clark is spiritually poor. While he has money, wealth, and social preeminence, his life reflects emptiness. He has broken with his heritage. West suggests that the black bourgeois class must behave responsibly in the acquisition of power by not inscribing the dangerous hierarchies of race, class, and gender. Dorothy West states that color was a false distinction, love was not. At the death scene of Tina daughter of Lute Mc Neil, Shelby realizes that Lute has been a great deceiver and all of his words about remaining true to one's race, all of his subtle slurs, his sly digs, all were lies, pretexts. All of his deception and envy had led to the death of an innocent, a small girl who wanted a mother more than anything else in the whole world. Shelby could only thank God that it was not too late for her and Meade a white man. Dorothy West portrayed a white woman named Gram in the family of Shelby. This indicates that sole motto of Dorothy West has been to destroy color discriminations and bring reconciliation between white people and black people. Dorothy West believes that a true form of love is as it mentioned in the Holy Scripture as love is patient, love is kind, love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way, it is not irritable or resentful, it does not rejoice in wrong doing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things. Dorothy West wants to see such atmosphere of love in the midst of people in her country United States of America breaking all shackles which bring confusion and commotion in the society.

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