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H. Cordelia Ray: An African American Poetess of the Nineteenth Century

Informe final del Seminario de Grado "Transgression and Dissidence in American Literature of the
Nineteenth Century", para optar al grado de Licenciado en Lengua y Literatura Inglesas

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Santiago Enero de 2008

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A agradecimientos

A través de este trabajo final con el cual finalizo mis estudios de pregrado, quiero expresar mis más sinceros agradecimientos a Alicia y Gastón, mis padres, por su incondicional apoyo durante estos años de estudios, pero principalmente por la confianza que siempre manifestaron hacia mis capacidades y proyectos, y por sus innumerables mimos.

También deseo mencionar especialmente a mi hermana Marcela por su complicidad y agradecerle por conformar junto con su familia el que fue mi hogar en estos últimos años de universidad, y a Juan Pablo por su paciencia, comprensión, y amor.

Junto con mis hermanos Alejandro, Pamela, Gabriel y Carolina, agradecer particularmente a mi abuela, Mamina, por todas las velas y oraciones que puntualmente dedicó a mis desafíos académicos más importantes, cuando fuese que se lo pidiera.

También hago mención honrosa del amigo de toda la vida, Ignacio, y todos ustedes que siempre estuvieron alertas y pendientes del desarrollo de este trabajo.

Finalmente, pero en lo absoluto menos importante, un inmenso agradecimiento a mis compañeras de la U; Analía, Carola, Maca, y Natalia por su amistad y solidaridad en la vida y el quehacer académico.

Daniela Flores.

Stgo., 4 de Enero de 2008.

Introduction

In 2007 graduation seminar “Transgression and Dissidence in the American Literature of the Nineteenth Century”, the group discussed around the figures of those writers who settled the basis for the development of a new and unique country’s literature that nowadays stands as an unquestionable referent for western modern world’s culture, and how they managed to imposed their voice while breaking the traditional standards originated in foreign territories centuries earlier.

The present work is placed within the framework proposed by the seminar topic, but it expands its focus and includes an element that in the author’s opinion has been arbitrary excluded by theorists and critics, and that was definitely fundamental for the American literature of the century; the African American.

There is common agreement among authors about the crucial role of the nineteenth century in the development of the United States’ literature. Ann Woodlief ¹ defines the period as containing “... the first maturing of our letters... It was definitely and even defiantly American, as these writers struggled to understand what "American" could possibly mean, especially in terms of a literature which was distinctively ours and not British.” comprising in that way all the authors who, as Whitman and Dickinson, took part on this movement and that theory have considered as the canonical giants of the beginnings of the country’s literature.

¹ The American Romanticism (or the American Renaissance). Ed. Ann Woodlief. August 2007.<
<http://www.vcu.edu/engweb/eng372/intro.htm>.>

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Also in the web ², another author refers to the period as “the appearance of a literature national in scope and of importance sufficient to command recognition by the people of England and the Continent, and possessed of an artistic excellence felt and enjoyed by all”, emphasizing the importance of the national character involved in it.

The causes for such a phenomenon to take place in the 19th century are encoded in the agitated social atmosphere the young country was immersed in during those years. Abraham Lincoln took office on March 4, 1861, in a country divided with slavery as the major issue before the Republic. Soon after that, on April 12, 1861, the American Civil War began.

With slavery as a central problem, the eyes of authors turned towards the dilemma of race and freedom, and works of poets as John Pierpont, or John Greenleaf Whittier with his canon of anti-slavery poetry Anti-Slavery Poems: Songs of Labor and Reform ³ started to appear all over the territory.

But the problem of those who were actually affected by the deep reflections and changes regarding race and freedom, was not a matter to be interpreted only by the white literary establishment; it was also to be expressed from the inner sight of Americans who were brought from the African continent to serve as slaves, including those who by the time had already become free men and women, and those who remained slaves until the prohibition of the practice. This is why when we talk about the birth of an American literature by taking into consideration its sources and origins, it is necessary to give account of the appearance of a new perspective from which a feature unique to what is “American” was being narrated; The African American of the 19th century.

The main proposal and the founding idea of this work is that there is a particular element within the complexity of the black literature that had usually been ignored; the creations of those women who do not fit the traditional image of black slaves, but those who belonged to a part of the population that grew in freedom and whose families built the basis of an incipient black community. This idea is the one that best characterizes the element of transgression and dissidence of this work; meaning the radical change of perspective upon a subject that has been systematically studied as a one-sided and plane phenomenon containing only the narratives of the slaves.

In order to accomplish this task, the present work focuses on a New York poetess, Henrietta Cordelia Ray. Her poetry will be treated by following two significant approaches; on the one hand, the New Historicist literary theory allows us to understand the contents she dealt with in relation to the socio-political and cultural power relations of her context; and on the other, relevant elements from African American literary theory will be used in order to reveal the presences, hidden images and ideas of her poetry in relation to her black identity.

The theoretical framework chosen and named above dictate that the appropriate

² History of American Literature. August 2007. <<http://www.bibliomania.com/2/3/270/frameset.html>>

³ Whittier, John Greenleaf. *Anti-Slavery Poems: Songs of Labor and Reform*. New York: Houghton, Mifflin & Co, 1888. Online. Project Gutenberg website. August 2007. <<http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/9580>>

methodology to follow involves the transversal reading of the book, section by section, in order to identify the most prominent literary elements which will be later presented with its corresponding analytical explanation and extracts from the book.

Once the previously mentioned goals have been achieved, this work is to be considered as an introduction of this almost unknown author to the reader, being this the central contribution of this monograph.

Historical background

According to Jessica McElrath ⁴, by the end of the fifteenth century European trade relations with Africa were well established, and forts and trading ports were built. However, the slave trade was not exceedingly profitable, as there was no substantial demand for slaves in European countries. But these countries were expanding their territories into new parts of the world where natural resources to be exploited were, so they took African slaves with them as working force to wherever they went.

In 1517, the trans-Atlantic slave trade officially began. England came to dominate the business, and started providing slaves to not only its own colonies, but to other countries' colonies. That's how by the year 1619, according to M. Sylvester ⁵ the use of indentured servants brought the first Africans to America at Jamestown, Virginia.

First African Americans in the territory, as well as poor white people, were treated as indentured servants, which meant that after seven years of work they would become free men. During this early period some of the first enslaved Africans worked their way out of this system and became free tradesmen and property owners on American soil.

With the growth of the country's economy slaves became more appreciated as a profitable way of working the land, therefore they were highly prized commodities as the

⁴ Afroamerican History. Ed. Jessica McElrath. August 2007. <<http://afroamhistory.about.com>>

⁵ The African American: A Journey from Slavery to Freedom. Ed. Melvin Sylvester. August 2007. <<http://www.liu.edu/cwis/cwp/library/aaslavry.htm#election>>

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system was dependent upon lots of manual labour. America condoned the "peculiar institution"⁶ of slavery in 1619 and by 1750; there were over 200.000 African slaves in the country. Fifteen years later, the number grew to 700.000. Around the same time, the free African American population expanded to about 40.000 throughout the colonies.

This figures demonstrate that African American Community started to develop in two directions, those who had the possibility of being owner of their own lives, and those who were submitted to embody the widely known physical cruel practices from the white masters, the complete omission of their rights, and the forbiddance to acquire any type of academic instruction, among other things. With the passage of the 13th Amendment to the Constitution on December 18, 1865, "slavery and involuntary servitude"⁷ was abolished.

Nowadays, when people talk about the African American literature of the 19th century it is usually assumed as a well defined and edge clear category comprising authors talking from a stereotypical idea of poverty and slavery, but this unity is nothing more than that; a stereotype. The John Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism⁸ makes it clear when presenting a review of the many different conceptions that African American critics have about their own literary production and the ways they have been interpreted.

Although the last source deals with the black culture of the twentieth century, this may as well be applied to the very beginnings of the configuration of the American Black community, since this first differentiation can also be evidenced in the literary works of the nineteenth century African American writers, especially in terms of the contents they dealt with and the forms they chose to use.

⁶ Likewise 4.

⁷ Likewise 4.

⁸ Groden, Michael and Kreiswirth, Martin; Ed. The Johns Hopkins Guide to literary Theory and Criticism. The JH University Press. 2005. pp. 9-19.

African American Women Writers of the 19th Century

In 1999, Howard Dodson, chief of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture⁹ released a digital version of a compilation of the work of women writers of the 19th century, in an attempt to make public a corpus of African American literature that had remained unknown to the common public, since most of the titles reprinted in the 20th century were about and by men. This is a complete research work where biographical information is provided besides the literary work of these women, so among the authors we find writers who were slaves, daughters of slaves, or daughters of free black people, which provides a first insight into the themes on the literature they produced.

Of the 37 authors included in the compilation, 17 were daughter of slaves or slaves themselves, and the majority of their works are narratives and autobiographies dealing with the struggles and horrors that slavery meant for them. Other 6 authors presented no biographical background as there were no registers available about their lives, and the final 14 authors were free born women. Most of the later come from well positioned and prestigious families belonging to an incipient black community; therefore they received education and were in contact with the intellectual development of their nation. Moreover, many of them become university students, school teachers or community leaders.

From this last group comes the selected author; Henrietta Cordelia Ray, a teacher

⁹ New York Public Library website. <<http://www.nypl.org/research/sc/collections.html>>

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and poetess from New York City.

In her Homespun Heroines and Other Women of Distinction, Hallie Q. Brown¹⁰ wrote about Ray: "was well-born, well bred and enjoyed all the advantages accruing to her position in a family where birth, breeding and culture were regarded as important assets". According to Leela Kapai¹¹, her father, Charles B. Ray, was a blacksmith turned Congregational minister and leading abolitionist who became editor of the *Colored American*, the third black-owned newspaper in America. As a journalist, and later as a clergyman serving the Bethesda Congregational Church from 1845 to 1865, Ray's father was actively engaged in lecturing and fund-raising for the causes of abolition, temperance, suffrage, and education. He served the Underground Railroad in arranging the escape of slaves to the North. His work brought him in close contact with well-known leaders, and William Wells Brown observed his importance to the advancement of black causes in The Rising Sun¹²: "In the multitude of national and state conventions held thirty years ago and thereabouts, the assembly was scarcely considered complete without the presence of Charles Ray." He named his daughter after his first wife, Henrietta Green Regulus Ray, co-founder of the African Dorcas Association, a support group for the Free African Schools, and first president of the New York Female Literary Society.

H.C. Ray grew up enjoying the advantages of coming from a prominent black family where all the daughters received education: Florence earned the master of pedagogy degree from New York University; Charlotte obtained a law degree from Harvard University; and Henrietta studied languages (Latin, Greek, French, and German) and also earned the master of pedagogy degree from New York University.

She is said to have owned a pacific and even shy personality, in the words of Hallie Quinn Brown¹³: "Among a generation of brainy New York women, she was probably the most accomplished, yet outside her immediate circle the least known. Her modesty was excessive, she never boasted nor appeared self conscious." But despite her reticent nature, Ray was distinguished by her refinement and manners, as according to the same biographer, "there was a transfiguring light that radiated from her, for she bore herself as one endowed with an innate sense of things divine."

Even though most of her time was destined to the teaching in N.Y public education system, where she worked for about thirty years, she was always concerned with his labour as a writer. In fact, she was one of the few African American women writers who obtained certain degree of public recognition while alive due to the unveiling of the

¹⁰ Brown, Hallie Q. *Homespun Heroines and Other Women of Distinction*. Xenia, Ohio: Aldine Pub. Co, 1926. October 2007. <<http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/brownhal/brownhal.html>> p. 172.

¹¹ Kapai, Leela. *Dictionary of Literary Biography*. University of the District of Columbia. 2005. July 2007. <<http://www.bookrags.com/biography/henrietta-cordelia-ray-dlb/>>

¹² Wells W, William. "The House of the Raising Sun". 1873. August 2007. <<http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/USASbrownW.htm>>

¹³ Likewise 8.

Freedmen's Monument in Washington, D.C. for which William E. Matthews read Ray's ode, "Lincoln".¹⁴

Years later, H. Cordelia Ray received praise for the biography of her father: *Sketch of the Life of Rev. Charles B. Ray*, published in 1887. By then, Ray's poetry had appeared in several periodicals, which encouraged her efforts to publish a complete collection of her lifetime poems, to finally reach her goal with the publication of *Sonnets* in 1893, and after that *Poems*¹⁵, which contains *Sonnets*, in 1910.

Poems, her last published work constitutes the most complete and valuable literary source from which we will obtain the keys to enter Ray's world, who died at the age of 64 in New York City, on 5 January 1916.

¹⁴ Ray, H. Cordelia. *Poems*. New York: The Grafton Press, 1910. New York Public Library Website. <http://digilib.nypl.org/dynaweb/digs-t/www9719/@Generic__BookView> p. 167.

¹⁵ Ray, H. Cordelia. *Poems*. New York: The Grafton Press, 1910. New York Public Library Website. <http://digilib.nypl.org/dynaweb/digs-t/www9719/@Generic__BookView> 2007.

Poems, by H. Cordelia Ray

When dealing with black literature of the nineteenth century the issue of identity has been inflexibly built under the image of black slaves who narrate their lives in a two side manner; the American experience and the African origin, and how these two mixed and combined in order to create what African American is. But an evident problem arises when assuming that slavery is the only characterization to be taken into account with regard to those two elements since it involves the omission of the work of an important section of the African American population that acquired a significant degree of financial independence and intellectual development away from the cultural representations shared by slaves, which led them to express in a direction that could be defined, perhaps, as closer to the white intellectual and artistic sensibilities of the time.

Of this group, Henrietta Cordelia Ray is a suitable representative because, according to an online biography,¹⁶ she was "... one of the few black women poets... who achieved a certain amount of local recognition in the nineteenth century..." a fact that allows us to trust her work to provide significant information to understand the already mentioned group's literature in terms of their African American identity, especially in its origins.

According to Cultural Studies and Critical Theory¹⁷, identity is the recognition of the self as members of knowable ethnic, national, gender, religious, and sexual groups in

¹⁶ Likewise 9.

¹⁷ Fuery, Patrick and Mansfield, Nick. Eds. *Cultural Studies and Critical Theory*. Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2000. P. 143.

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relation to other social groups and how they interact in terms of subordination and dominance. From this perspective is that Poems¹⁸, Ray's ultimate collection, is analysed on the basis of a central dichotomy; the African and the American.

The African in her work rather than being related to a direct native African legacy, is most of the time connected to her family strong commitment to the cause of abolition and black community development instead of a textual or literal use of pure African inherited cultural influences.

The presence of the African influences is better understood through the concept of Nommo, which according to Jacqueline Wood¹⁹, can be seen as a defined approach that encapsulates the more general interpretations of African American protest literature reflected in all African American literature, an approach intended to ultimately illustrate what makes black literature black.

Nommo can be applied to all forms of African American literature since it addresses the dynamics of black art in culture-specific ways, delineating in particular those qualities of African American creation that seem most grounded in both evident and hidden examples of the africanisms that have survived as part of black communal experience. Existence of these connections to African culture is commonly accepted, and Nommo is one approach that effectively established through these connections a uniquely African American literary analysis which in this case seems perfectly suitable for the recognition of references that the poetess makes to her African source.²⁰

The other element of the dichotomy, the American, due to her family life and especially to the influence of her father and her educational background, lies in Ray's total awareness of the social and cultural situation of her time. In her literature it consists mostly of the influences of other fundamental authors in the configuration of Western culture who were highly appreciated by American intellectuals of the century and that are most of the time directly addressed, as well as of the use of literary practices belonging to white tradition.

Throughout her creations these two elements appear in combination, sometimes one seems more preponderant than the other, but there is always possible to recognize how they interact to comprise her literary identity as representative of her particular cultural origin.

Once the concept and elements of identity had been established in relation to Ray's work, it is necessary to pay attention to the manner in which her literary identity gains a valid voice in the cultural and socio-political context in which she developed; i.e. How she presents the African and the American in a way that allows her to possess a valid voice as

¹⁸ Likewise 12.

¹⁹ Wood, Jacqueline. "African American drama, politics, and presentation in the African American literature classroom." 2005. November 2007. <<http://findarticles.com/>>

²⁰ Nevertheless, in this work is preferred the term "African" instead, since "Nommo" has been almost exclusively used in the analysis of protest literature.

a representative of her class to the eyes of her own community as well as to the eyes of the white establishment "... at a time when even free African Americans were subjected to virulent racism in the north, and women held little standing in general...", so "...these women applied their strength and creativity to overcome tremendous barriers in answering an inner call to express themselves and their ideas publicly."²¹

In order to understand the previous idea, it is pertinent to introduce Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *Intellectual Fields*²², which, in brief words, refers to the social space in which the production of a society's symbolic goods occurs. In this space different agents try to legitimize their manifestations with regard to the dynamic of powers that are encoded in such space, whether as official, marginal, or emergent intellectuals or artists. To do so, agents displays certain strategies that can be identified as recurrent in their works.

By taking into consideration all the concepts proposed above, we are in position to introduce Ray's analysis through the exposition of a relevant amount of his work which was inspired by and dedicated to people of great influence in the cultural and intellectual reality of the century, therefore it is nor surprising to find poems under the title of "Lincoln", "Longfellow", and "Dante"²³, among others.

Of them, one of the most outstanding pieces is "In Memoriam, Paul Laurence Dunbar"²⁴; a poem dedicated to "...the first African-American to gain national eminence as a poet... gifted in poetry -- the way that Mark Twain was in prose -- in using dialect to convey character."²⁵

This poem illustrates the way in which the poetess includes both elements that constitute her identity in verses as:

"She touched his lips with true Olympian fire..."

Here the author makes use of her western educational background to refer to Dunbar's poetry's true essence and nature characterized in elements of the classical knowledge. To this respect, an online biography of Ray²⁶ says: "... Her poems are characterized by superb control of form and technique. They reflect the poet's knowledge of classical and historical lore..." while in:

Who was this child? The offspring of a race That erst had toiled 'neath slavery's

²¹ Hear Them Write: Ellen Watkins Harper & Pauline Hopkins. The Emergence of The New Woman of Color in the Late Nineteenth Century. Dicember 2007. <www.urop.uci.edu>

²² Information provided by teacher Andrés Ferrada in a ppt presentation made by himself. December 2007.

²³ Ray, H. Cordelia. Poems. New York: The Grafton Press.1910. New York Public Library Website. <http://digilib.nypl.org/dynaweb/digs-t/wwm9719/@Generic__BookView> 2007. Pp. 197-169, 155-157, 154-155.

²⁴ Ray, H. Cordelia. Poems. New York: The Grafton Press.1910. New York Public Library Website. <http://digilib.nypl.org/dynaweb/digs-t/wwm9719/@Generic__BookView> 2007. Pp. 166-167.

²⁵ Paul Lawrence Dunbar Website. University of Dayton's. 2003. Novemer 2007. <www.dunbarsite.org>

²⁶ Likewise 9.

galling chains.

Ray directly addresses her shared origins with the poet by using two strong words: race and freedom, and even further, she also mentions the issue of slavery. These lines are proof that besides being a woman of high knowledge and intellectual skills, she was an African American totally aware of her origins; moreover, she shows her pride of them.

But beyond the evident facts reflected in those verses, what is of interest for this work is to reveal the form in which Ray combines the African and the American as a whole, so her literature becomes a pertinent and suitable representative of a particular time (19th century) and situation (an African American community's woman).

Despite the fact that she is a black woman, she is also an educated and economically well-positioned one; she was in the midway between being a marginal social entity and a person of social value and recognition, therefore her literature is impregnated with a sense of double militancy: On the one hand, her contents are in total accordance to what was expected of a person with certain degree of intellectual preparation by the white establishment; on the other, she still introduces slight degrees of criticism against what that very same establishment did against her people.

This last idea is present in the thought of postmodern political activism theory in their believe that differences need to be recognize and respected at all levels of culture ²⁷, in contrast to the traditional liberal view in which "... differences in values, practices, and representations are respected only in so far as they do not contradict general liberal understanding of the common humanity that binds us together and must be respected" ²⁸, under which basis American as a country was founded, and under which logic Ray's poetry works. Is in this way that the reader is able to realize the social position from where Ray proposed contents that were legitimized both by black and white community.

With regard to the same notion treated above, another good example of Ray's African identity in relation to her being American is presented by "In Memoriam" ²⁹, dedicated to F. Douglass, who according to Sandra Thomas "...was one of the foremost leaders of the abolitionist movement... A brilliant speaker... recognized as one of America's first great black speakers... served as an adviser to President Abraham Lincoln during the Civil War and provided a powerful voice for human rights during this period of American history and is still revered today for his contributions against racial injustice". ³⁰

In this poem Ray is able to demonstrate how the origins and present of blacks combine in terms of what is great of being African that also is of paramount importance in

²⁷ This idea is supported by what postmodern theorists called "Identity Politics". For further reading: Fuery, Patrick and Mansfield, Nick. Cultural Studies and Critical Theory. Melbourne: Oxford University Press. 2000. Pp. 149-155.

²⁸ Fuery, Patrick and Mansfield, Nick. Cultural Studies and Critical Theory. Melbourne: Oxford University Press. 2000. P.149.

²⁹ Ray, H. Cordelia. Poems. New York: The Grafton Press.1910. New York Public Library Website. <http://digilib.nypl.org/dynaweb/digs-t/wwm9719/@Generic__BookView> 2007. Pp. 161-164.

³⁰ Thomas, Sandra. Frederick Douglass: Abolitionist/ Editor. November 2007. <<http://www.history.rochester.edu/class/douglass/home.html>>

being American, as in stanza 1:

***The civic splendor. Say, among all men, Who was this hero that they buried then,
With saddest plaint and sorrow-stricken face? Ay! 'twas a princely leader of his
race!***

The poetess claims, and this is a point that needs some further development, that Douglass is worth of recognition as much as because of her civic commitment as because of his embodying the highest qualities of Africans. Of importance here is the notion of *civic*, since according to Henry Louis gates Jr., “early black literature, in American and abroad, was used by whites opposed to the predominant attitude... to prove that blacks were indeed fully human; they were not things but intelligent beings capable of the same sort of thinking and feelings as whites”³¹, therefore it is possible to conceive her words as a recognition of the importance of black intellectuals in reaching black community social status as well as in the maintenance of a national commitment towards justice.

Stanza six of the poem constitutes the highest point in the exposition Ray presents of Douglas’ transcendence to the black cause. Here the reflections upon him never transgress the limits whites would accept as reasonable when referring to African Americans needs; it rather characterizes Douglas importance by using pompous solemn words that indirectly refer to the issue in delicate terms instead of the literal expression of it:

***Shall the race falter in its courage now That the great chief is fallen? Shall it bow
Tamely to aught of injury? Ah, nay! For daring souls are needed e'en to-day. Let
his example be a shining light, Leading through duty's paths to some far height
Of undreamed victory. All honored be The silv'ry head of him we no more see!
Children unborn will venerate his name, And History keep spotless his fair fame.***

With this poem it is possible to visualize the connection between the two components of her identity in the image of this black man of great importance and appreciation as much as to the black cause as to the white civic interests. Ray’s Douglass embodies the perfect portray of an African American who struggled to achieve freedom and equality for her people, but who did not threat the United States’ morals and innermost spirit as a nation, being the use of this kind of images what allows Ray to obtain a cultural place and voice with regard to her being American and at the same time African in a society governed by whites.

The employment of words and images that most of the time function as adornments of the themes dealt with, is the most recurrent method applied by Ray in order to achieve a kind of literature that accommodates both aspects of her identity. According to an online critical biography³² of Ray, she was “... a black women poet in the genteel tradition...”, and that the most noticeable feature of Rays poetry was “...the genteel sentimentality that pervades her tales of forlorn maidens and jilted and scorned lovers”.

In this gentile influence is possible to identify the central means by which Ray adjusts

³¹ Gates Jr., Henry Louis. *The signifying Monkey: a theory of African-American Literary Theory*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988. P. 25.

³² Likewise 9.

her contents and meditations to a socio-cultural and political environment that otherwise would not have allowed her to possess the degree of public dissemination she obtained. This property can be understood as both an aesthetically pertinent choice regarding the literary sensibilities of Americans at that time, and as a convenient device to soften the hard and true essence of problematic themes as slavery was.

In Sentimental Materialism: Gender, Commodity Culture, and Nineteenth-Century American Literature³³, Lori Merish proposes that sentimentalism in American women's literature was originated in a materialistic social system where economic status reflected people's inner values and moral quality, a belief that was widely expanded throughout sentimental literature since republican culture establishes it in the concept of capitalism and freedom. Though this feature is proper of white women literature, the author extrapolates the analysis to the African American and claims that some, like Sojourner Truth³⁴, did not accept the implicit requirements of the dominant culture and rejected all the ladylike underpinnings of sentimentality, finding herself criticized by both white and black men, therefore her work never enjoyed the degree of public recognition and acceptance Ray had while alive.

This point rather than delineating a new theoretical construct from which Ray's work is analyzed, serves the purpose to illustrate the way in which the poetess positioned herself in an adverse system by employing that very same system means in order to attain a status that allowed her to express in literary terms, as Elizabeth Keckley did in her Behind the Scenes or, Thirty Years a Slave and Four Years in the White House³⁵; the story of a slave who became seamstress to fashionable Washington women, including and most importantly Mary Todd Lincoln, President Lincoln's wife. In this book Keckley managed to impose an identity that perfectly adapts into, and almost never questions, white establishment.

This adjustment to white rule is widely expressed in Ray's work through an element in the constitution of her literary identity that possesses a fundamental role in the Africans' experience towards their becoming Americans: Religion and Protestantism, clearly reflected in stanza 3 of "In Memoriam":

That he in chains was held, what matter when He could uplift himself to noblest heights. E'en with his native greatness, neither slights Nor wrongs could harm him; and a solemn wrath Burned in his soul.

In these verses we are able to identify Ray's identity configuration in a complete African

³³ Merish, Lori. *Sentimental Materialism: Gender, Commodity Culture, and Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (New Americanists). Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000. November 2007. <<http://www.questia.com/PM.qst?a=o&d=65777661>>

³⁴ Sojourner Truth (1797-1883) wrote *Narrative of Sojourner truth or a Bondswoman of olden time. Emancipated by the New York Legislature in the early part of the present century: With a history of her labor and correspondence drawn from her "Book of Life.* For further reading: <http://digilib.nypl.org/dynaweb/digs/www97268/@Generic__BookView>

³⁵ Keckley, Elizabeth. *Behind the Scenes or, Thirty Years a Slave and Four Years in the White House.* New York: G.W Carleton & Co., 1868. <http://digilib.nypl.org/dynaweb/digst/www9713/@Generic__BookView>

American historical scenery containing the slave experience and the native origin condensed in the life of Douglass, which is gloriously culminated by virtue of the religious grace with word as *heights* and *soul*.

It reminds us again about the way in which Ray positions her voice in a consciousness of the African through the use of western white means; the principles of American society in Protestantism, and how, again, the African is made present through it in her work.

Religion in her poetry gains significance as a literary theme mainly in terms of the pervasiveness of the divine presence in any artistic work. This presence takes different forms and has different origins from whose recognition we are enabled to establish the kind of knowledge and influences the poet received through her life and that were relevant for her.

A recurrent and the most expected manifestation of this divine presence takes the form of a Christian god, directly, or in relation to other elements that are typical icons of Christianity, as in "The Sculptor Vision"³⁶, where Ray establishes the most notorious relation between these two already mentioned interconnected ideas when saying:

...It seemed no mortal hand had share In what was like embodied prayer.

or

...Pursue our toil with deathless will, Advancing toward a glorious height.

It exemplifies God's omnipresence in human life, and how He and his highness take part in the most refined and delicate human manifestations, especially art.

In another poem, "The Perfect Orchestra"³⁷, Ray presents a God embodied in high quality musical creation distinct from banal earthly world issues.

***Up to those heights where angels rest, Where dreams and yearnings
unexpressed Mount like the mist of day, Ascends a solemn symphony Soft
gliding through the ethereal sea, From mortal realms away.***

The importance of this divine presence in all aspects of human life, originated in the great success Congregational Church had in evangelizing African Americans in the 19th century, of which Ray's family was an active and valuable member. But its importance does not only relies in the fact that they converted African descendants into a white religion, but of the crucial role that congregational church played in the early development of a black community as a social entity.

In Born in Struggle, 1819-1860: Movements for change³⁸, a comprehensive history of the congregational church in America, it says that the church "... founded by the African Religious Society, soon contributed to the formation of the Black community... from this

³⁶ Ray, H. Cordelia. Poems. New York: The Grafton Press.1910. New York Public Library Website. <http://digilib.nypl.org/dynaweb/digs-t/www9719/@Generic__BookView> 2007. Pp. 6-7.

³⁷ Ray, H. Cordelia. Poems. New York: The Grafton Press.1910. New York Public Library Website. <http://digilib.nypl.org/dynaweb/digs-t/www9719/@Generic__BookView> 2007. Pp. 14-16.

³⁸ Born in Struggle: Movement for a change. November 2007. <www.hartford-hwp.com>

church community arose many of the leaders who would eventually shape the community's future." So it is not surprising to find characters of social importance and admired by Ray obtaining their greatness reward in God's admittance of their worth, as in the case of "In Memoriam" with the image of Douglass.

In relation to the artistic activity itself, the religious element appears most of time in the notion that art is worth value as long as it constitutes a means by which to worship God, and from there this characteristic applies to any other human activity as well, a point that is effectively reflected in stanza 8 of "The Sculptor Vision":

...Pursue our toil with deathless will, Advancing toward a glorious height...

And stanza 9 of the same poem:

...And when our ideal grows more fair, More earnest should be all our care To carve with added grace and skill; And then the task that we pursue, Will serve to give us impulse new, Our souls with calm content to fill.

But of all the poems devoted to this issue, the "Poet's Ideal"³⁹ portrays in the most expressive and complete manner Ray's conception that artistic creation must pursue the noblest object of all; to worship God. This because the poem deals with the very same artistic activity the poetess adopted as her instrument to do so, therefore it can be considered as the most private and personal manifestation of her belief, as the final stanza well represents:

Mid the vistas blue and shadowy, 'Mid the ether iris-tinted, I erect Ideal Perfection, And then worship at her shrine; To the poet she has hinted Sense of things divine.

This repeated use of artistic activity as a means by which to worship God is definitely Ray's preferred strategy to carry out the task of educating people through her poetry; a notion expressed in what an online source called "... an element of didacticism"⁴⁰, meaning the use her work to guide people towards, in this case, protestant morals. The excerpt above reflects the way in which Ray accomplishes the religious purpose of art in that she deals with it as a poetic theme, and she also uses her work to serve that purpose in a didactic manner.

In "Repose (On every height there lies repose--Goethe.)"⁴¹, Christian God appears in the image of an angel who bring the most precious heaven's gift to men, but it will only be obtained through love and acceptance of duty. This is best delineated in stanzas 6 and 7, which are charged with a high didactic and moral sense that effectively limn what seems to be the central aim of Ray's poetry:

"How may I gain this priceless flow'r?" I cried. The angel in a flute-like voice replied, "Neither by works nor penance, prayer nor pain, Canst thou this rare

³⁹ Ray, H. Cordelia. Poems. New York: The Grafton Press.1910. New York Public Library Website. <http://digilib.nypl.org/dynaweb/digs-t/wwwm9719/@Generic__BookView> 2007. Pp. 12-13.

⁴⁰ Likewise 9.

⁴¹ Ray, H. Cordelia. Poems. New York: The Grafton Press.1910. New York Public Library Website. <http://digilib.nypl.org/dynaweb/digs-t/wwwm9719/@Generic__BookView> 2007. Pp. 9-10.

celestial flower gain. But when love of mankind and duty flow In one all-perfect song, one golden glow, When purest echoes soar from purest aims, Then will I come once more to head thy claims.

This didactic function reveals a deeper feature to all African American literature of the nineteenth century, especially towards the end of the century, as proposed by several theorists. According to Louis Gates, 18th and 19th centuries African American literature stood for “the black’s potential for culture”⁴² and the widely extended notion in those times that it had to pursue blacks’ racial uplift and social development, therefore “...besides being beautiful, it also needed to be utilitarian”.⁴³

This last term gains significance when dealing with Ray religious believes in relation to her poetry and the fact that it definitely possessed an utilitarian character which enabled it to promote certain moral conceptions originated in the author’s background and acquired social position due to her origin and being a teacher, therefore, a black community leader and model.

By taking into account Ray’s social role and poetic occupation in connection to the didactic character of her work, we are able to identify an early concept African Americans leaders had in mind when aiming a social positioning of their community in equanimity with whites: to attain white’s standard of life, and to do so it was necessary to adopt as many aspects of their system as possible. Rosey E. Pool makes it clear in Beyond the Blues: New Poems by American Negroes⁴⁴ ; a critical review of African American literature from its origins to the first half of the 20th century, when saying: “... a typical exponent of the last decades of the nineteenth century. One heard free Negroes who apologize because they were not able in less than one man's lifetime, to rise to the 'level of their masters.’”

Though previous quotation may be too hard in tone, it is useful for the purpose of this work since it shows the politic and socio-cultural factors that motivated Ray to follow the strategies and models she did in order to build her identity as an African American in her literature, and gives us the clues to interpret her use of white means in order to achieve the raising African American community’s goal.

The problem of having a black author whose identity is most of the time reflecting the influence of the American white model that by centuries had abused and suppressed her African origin should not be interpreted under the eyes of prejudice as if it were a voluntary strategy applied by Ray in order to deny their origins and become as white as possible, but as a cultural consequence of the system blacks were forced to adopt.

According to Pool the problem of African American identity lies in the fact that they

⁴² Spikes, Michael P. *Understanding Contemporary American Literary Theory*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003. P. 46.

⁴³ Groden, Michael and Kreiswirth, Martin; Eds. *The Johns Hopkins Guide to literary Theory and Criticism*. The JH University Press, 2005. P.9.

⁴⁴ Pool, Rosey E. *Beyond the Blues: New Poems by American Negroes*. Kent: Hand and Flower Press, 1962. Online. December 2007. <www.urop.uci.edu> p. 17.

were "...people who had suffered almost three centuries of slavery and who had no conscious memories of their African past, and had got into the habit of seeing them selves as slaves. They identified themselves with the picture the 'boss-man' (and woman) had created. When Negroes awoke to the recognition of the crime of slavery, they still had no way to identify themselves other than in terms and images created by the white man."⁴⁵ It explains why blacks saw white model as the one that should be acquired, as well as the use of white literary features to express their own cultural products.

What all the above information suggest in relation to the religious theme in Ray's work is that protestant tradition as a socio-cultural construction was of particular transcendence in nineteenth century American socio-economical system, therefore, black community realized that in order to integrate white model, as a way to obtain validation as a community and social uplift, it was necessary to follow the commands of the institution that conformed the basis of such society, i.e. religion.

That American cultural, economic, and political system has been since its origins in direct relation to Protestantism is a widely accepted and known proposal. Many authors have dealt this issue, but it was initially stated by Max Weber in his 1905-05 The protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism⁴⁶. Without detailing in deep, suffice is to say with respect to the object of analysis of this monograph, that in Weber thought that in mixed religious composition's countries "...business leaders and owners of capital, as well as the higher grades of skilled labor, and even more the higher technically and commercially trained personnel of modern enterprises, are overwhelmingly Protestant." Situation which applies to describe the roots of the United States as the head of world's capitalist systems.

Weber's idea gives us a clue to comprehend the importance for African American community (a minority) to adopt the innermost elements, in this case religion, that constituted the basis of the higher system (white establishment) they intended to integrate, therefore it is absolutely understandable to find religion as a central poetic theme presented under the form of didactic contents in the work of an author of the black social role such as Ray's.

The way in which Ray builds identity in her work and the means by which it is expressed in terms of the elements proposed above, also apply for the recognition of another aspect that by no means can be taken for granted; gender, and the forms in which womanhood is constructed in her poetry.

In Poems, just a few pieces are dedicated or admittedly inspired by women, being maternity the most recurrent theme. "Niobe"⁴⁷, a sonnet dealing with the universality of

⁴⁵ Pool, Rosey E. *Beyond the Blues: New Poems by American Negroes*. Kent: Hand and Flower Press, 1962. Online. December 2007. < www.urop.uci.edu > p. 16.

⁴⁶ Weber, Max. *The Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Ch 1: "Religious Affiliation and Social Stratification" 1904-1905. Online. December 2007. <<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~hyper/WEBER/toc.html>>

⁴⁷ Ray, H. Cordelia. *Poems*. New York: The Grafton Press.1910. New York Public Library Website. <http://digilib.nypl.org/dynaweb/digs-t/www9719/@Generic__BookView> 2007. Pp.76-77.

motherhood in the tragic figure of the Greek goddess who had all her children killed, stands for the notion of mothers' suffering and despair when facing their children deaths; as it is expressed in the following verses:

...Could fitly voice thy anguish! Sorrow grew To throes intensest, when thy sad soul knew Thy youngest, too, must go. Was it not well...

And:

...O image of despair, Sad Niobe, thy maddened grief did flow In bitt' rest tears, when all thy wailing prayer Was so denied...

The image presented through these lines inevitably brings to mind the image of those American mothers who lost their children on the Civil War, that by the time was a recent experience and its effects were still vividly felt by American population, and that inspired other author's works as Whitman's "Come up from the Field, Father"⁴⁸, as shown in these verses:

...Open the envelope quickly; O this is not our son's writing, yet his name is sign'd; O a strange hand writes for our dear son—O stricken mother's soul!..

Or:

...By day her meals untouch'd—then at night fitfully sleeping, often waking, In the midnight waking, weeping, longing with one deep longing...

Both poems stressed the situation in which mothers foreseen the inevitable destiny of their children as well as the pain it provokes as central themes, but both expresses it in different ways. While Whitman, a white men author, directly refers to a white American family of farmers that received a letter telling about the son being injured in battle, explicitly criticizing the reality of war; Ray, a black woman poet, uses the classical figure of an Greek goddess in order to convey in an indirect way the horrors of such a situation.

As well as in other poems, the use of classical knowledge in the expressing of contents encoded in Ray's time and environment, is a strategy employed by the poetess in order to legitimize her voice within the cultural and social boundaries imposed by the white rulers. As stated earlier in this work, the fact that Ray makes use of the knowledge acquired in the white education she received, enabled her to manage the cultural resources by means of which her literary work obtains a valid place within the cultural constructs of the United States of the 19th century.

Within the same social context, "Niobe" and other poems also reveal deeply rooted conceptions regarding womanhood in the American society's spirit of the time, as in "To my Mother"⁴⁹, a sonnet inspired by the image of Charlotte Augusta in which sacrifice and loving care constitute the major attributes a mother embodies. This is showed in lines as:

...Thou who didst nurse my child-life into bloom...

And:

...O precious Heart! so rich in sacrifice, And--boon beyond compare--supremest

⁴⁸ Whitman, Walt. Leaves of Grass. *Come up from the Field Father*. 1900. Online. December 2007. <<http://www.bartleby.com/142/>>

⁴⁹ Ray, H. Cordelia. Poems. New York: The Grafton Press.1910. New York Public Library Website. <http://digilib.nypl.org/dynaweb/digs-t/www9719/@Generic__BookView> 2007. P.74.

love...

The image of a tender mother for whom children and household are the only priorities in life has its foundation in what has come to be known as the *Cult of Domesticity*; a notion first named and identified in the early part of the 19th century and that was solidly entrenched by late nineteenth century, proposes Dorothy Hartman in her online *Women's Roles in the Late 19th Century*⁵⁰. The beliefs embodied in this *Cult* gave women "... a central, if outwardly passive, role in the family. Women's God-given role was as wife and mother, keeper of the household, guardian of the moral purity of all who lived therein." The author explains that Victorian home was to be a haven of comfort and quiet, sheltered from the harsh realities of the working world; the place where children were to be cherished and nurtured. In this space, the mother has the duty to protect morality through the promulgation of Protestant beliefs and social protest against alcohol, poverty and the decay of urban living. According to David S. Reynolds, this *cult* "taught American women the value of gentle virtues such as piety, purity and passivity."⁵¹

These elements and motherhood are present in "To My mother"⁵², a poem in which Ray makes noticeable that the one who transmitted the values of her native African origins was her mother; displaying in this way the image of a woman in charge of the promoting of the family's innermost values. This is seen in verses like:

Sweet Mother! rare in gifts of tenderness! Thou who didst nurse my child-life into bloom, And for each native grace made ample room To blossom in love's light,

In this poem, the maternal figure is also enhanced by the employment of typical words related to the concept of womanhood previously exposed, such as "smiles... loving words... heart so rich in sacrifice", which in addition to the transmission of African origin's conception represents what constitute a model African American mother in Ray's times.

The social role of women presented by the ideas above gets importance beyond house boundaries, since it was understood as a means by which to promote and to maintain a way of life representative of the American national family identity, therefore it is not surprising to find Ray's poetry including this kind of description rather than others that may not fit within white parameters, as slave motherhood images.

In fact, the only poem in which Ray relates slavery to a female image is "Greeting"⁵³, and she does it through the image of a white woman: Harriet Beecher Stowe⁵⁴. Ray wrote this poem for the occasion of Beecher's 85th birthday as a way to honor her

⁵⁰ Hartman, Dorothy. *Women's Roles in the Late 19th Century*. Online. December 2007. <<http://www.connerprairie.org/historyonline/1880wom.html>>

⁵¹ Reynolds, David S. *Behind the American Renaissance*. Ch 12: "Types of American Womanhood". Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988. p. 337.

⁵² Ray, H. Cordelia. *Poems*. New York: The Grafton Press. 1910. New York Public Library Website. <http://digilib.nypl.org/dynaweb/digs-t/www9719/@Generic__BookView> 2007. P. 7774.

⁵³ Ray, H. Cordelia. *Poems*. New York: The Grafton Press. 1910. New York Public Library Website. <http://digilib.nypl.org/dynaweb/digs-t/www9719/@Generic__BookView> 2007. Pp. 164-166.

commitment with abolitionist cause and her help to many slaves, but the major recognition Ray makes of her is with respect to her being a woman writer of great quality and personal value.

In Stanza 1, Ray addresses Beecher in the following way:

“O Friend of Freedom! thou who in those days When human rights were scorned and Justice slept, Though loud the bondman cried, didst dare to raise Thy voice to aid the lowly.

The image presented through these lines talks about a woman of immense courage and dedication to democracy and equanimity of rights for the African Americans; a model of grace and virtue that deserves the highest rewards, and who by all means can be identify as a central inspiration for Ray’s personal life.

The fact that the only woman presented by Ray in terms of her value as a social activist rather than as a housewife and mother is embodied in the image of a white writer, reminds us again of the cultural deprivation blacks were forced into in American postbellum⁵⁵ society. This led them to identify themselves and their longing for community ideals with those features and forms belonging to white tradition, not allowing them for the acknowledgment of their own cultural constituents and their value.

This fact is effectively reflected in Ray’s treatment of the female component of her work, which does not only reveal the identity and social in terms of African Americans and whites, but also about the woman position within black community itself.

That there is little information in the net about African American men abolitionist leaders in comparison to white figures; is a fact that also extends, and in worse levels, to the situation of black women who fought against white abuses and slavery. It is only necessary to enter the first option in the web searcher to find only 5 females names among a list of 29 African American abolitionists.⁵⁶

But the situation changes when it comes to African American writers of the century; the amount of African American women writers of the 19th surpasses that of men published in the net, a fact that may expose an African American community social feature related to the role of women within this group and how this originated.

When slaves, black women were the only African Americans destined to serve inside white masters’ houses, therefore they were in closer contact than men with white women’s way of life, which has been identified earlier in this monograph with the concept of *Cult of Domesticity*. Because of their being closely exposed to the daily routine of white women, black women slaves acquired more cultural elements of the establishment, as education, art, morality, and most importantly womanhood; a fact that is evidenced in the prolific

⁵⁴ H.Beecher Stowe (1811-1896), white American writer. Author of American canon “Uncle Tom’s Cabin”(1850) Further reading <<http://www.lkwdpl.org/wihohio/stow-har.htm>>.

⁵⁵ The term, although general and applicable to any post-war period, is widely use to refer to the period after the American Civil War.

⁵⁶ www.google.com

literary activity and the contents they dealt with, and under which consideration it is possible to understand that black women's role in their community is not really different from that of white women.

From her own position as a woman within black community, it is possible to assert that Ray carries out her duty with it through her literary work, hence that her poetry adjusts to the requirements imposed by the white standard in order to, as it has been stated before in this work, pursue the objectives of social and racial uplift of African Americans by means of morals and didactic forms to express content.

Other constituents of Ray's work, which will not be treated in detail in this work, say relation to general and common issues to most of the American literature of the 19th century, such as the influence of British Romanticism and gentile tradition, which in the work of Ray appear in the form of poems under the names of "Longfellow" or as complete sections of the book such as "The Procession of the Seasons", where in the gentile fashion Ray describes month by month how nature changes to create marvelous and touching landscapes. Also "Rosary of Fancies", a section mainly constituted by pieces strongly influenced by British romanticism with the presence of mystic beings, exoticness, and lonely and melancholic places in poems like "The Mist Maiden", "May's Invocation After a Tardy Spring", or "Dream of Efland"⁵⁷, or "The Dawn of Love"⁵⁸:

In her lovely face so mournful, Where her star-eyes gleamed with tears, And he said: "Fair maid, take comfort! For I've loved thee many years, "Oft thou camest like a vision, Flinging wide thy golden hair, While thine eyes, so sweet, so holy, Seemed to make for me a prayer.

Though the above named features are not treated in deep in this work, suffice is to say that if seen under the viewpoint held by the author of this final report in the writing of it, they would provide further support for the notion that the by large more important employment of recognizable white elements in comparison to the use of Africanisms finds its source in the problematic of black community's cultural identity, social objectives and white model in the diverse and instable 19th century American society.

When assessing the findings of this work in relation to the principles proposed in early pages, the most remarkable point has to do with the supremacy of easily and unmistakably recognizable white american elements over any kind of africanisms present in Ray's poetry. In fact, the author dares to claim that no explicit literal use of African references appear in her work, unless those named above under the form of reflections upon the issue of slavery and black community reality.

It is not the author's position that in order to identify black literature of the century as positively African American, a defining principle is the presence or absence of explicit africanism which provide the only means to establish a reliable connection between the American and the African origin; because as it has been exposed through the work of

⁵⁷ Ray, H. Cordelia. Poems. New York: The Grafton Press.1910. New York Public Library Website.<http://digilib.nypl.org/dynaweb/digs-t/wwwm9719/@Generic__BookView> 2007. Pp.155-156, 148.151,

⁵⁸ Ray, H. Cordelia. Poems. New York: The Grafton Press.1910. New York Public Library Website. <http://digilib.nypl.org/dynaweb/digs-t/wwwm9719/@Generic__BookView> 2007. P. 136.

Ray, nineteenth century black identity had to do mainly with the social objectives and racial uplift, rather than with the maintenance of pure african legacy or a returning to the native sources.

Hence that the use of literary forms highly regarded by white tradition has a pervasive presence throughout African American literature of the century, which needs to be understood not as a denial of their origins, but as the natural course of actions; African Americans by that time were already, as the name well says and although by force, Americans. What they as a community pursued was, since they were not purely africans anymore, to be fully Americans, but never to forget that at the same time they constituted a different kind of Americans with respect to whites or to any other ethnic group.

It can be stated that the work of authors as the one treated in this work, and of slaves that narrated their lives in slavery, or of any other artist that expressed from the experience of being black in the 19th century, with the pass of time mixed and melted into just one, though not uniform, tradition; a literary identity proper of a black community that by the time of Ray it could not claim to possess as now can.

As discussed in a seminar meeting, the role that African American literature of the nineteenth century plays with respect to all posterior black uncountable and diverse literary manifestations that nowadays constitute the complex black literary phenomenon, is that of a original source. The work of writers as Ray gave the chance to publish and disseminate their voices to the new generations of African American writers; they settled the basis for a battle that by no means has stopped being fighting, as Toni Morrison, the first black woman who was awarded the nobel prize for literature in 1993, well postulates in her lecture: "Tell us what it is to be a woman so that we may know what it is to be a man. What moves at the margin. What it is to have no home in this place. To be set adrift from the one you knew. What it is to live at the edge of towns that cannot bear your company."⁵⁹

By taking into account Morrison's thought the work of Ray gains even more importance, since it deals with the very same issues current African American women writers do, becoming in that form an original reference that is fundamental for the comprehension of them. This should be also considered as the main contribution of this work; the introduction of Ray as a first insight into the remarkable amount of literature that talks from a reality that is most of the time ignored, and that has an unquestionable transcendence in the configuration and understanding of a phenomenon that has never ceased evolving nor expanding, even the less expressing; the African American literature, particularly that of women.

⁵⁹ Toni Morrison, originally Chloe Anthony Woffors (1931-) author of canonical master pieces of African American literature as *Song of Solomon* (1977) and *Beloved* (1987). For further reading <<http://www.kirjasto.sci.fi/tmorriss.htm>>

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