

### 3 Signifying in African American Fiction

Signifying provides the basis for the instructional unit on which this study focuses. Signifying is important because it is employed as a literary device in works of African American literature. It is also important because the metaphoric and ironic nature of signifying is applicable to literature in the more general sense. The purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate how signifying is employed as a literary device in several works of African American literature and to demonstrate how metaphor and irony in these texts are embedded in African American Vernacular English. Additional examples of signifying in African American literature are well explicated in the works of Gates (1984, 1988) and Smitherman (1977). Additional examples of how African American Vernacular English and aspects of the oral tradition of storytelling and the musical tradition of the blues are embedded in African American texts may be found in Baker (1980), Morrison (1989), and Jones (1991).

Perhaps the most classic example of signifying in a text of African American fiction is Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1935). Gates (1988) makes a thorough analysis of Hurston's use of signifying. My own analysis of Hurston is an attempt to build on Gates's analysis, not simply to replicate it. Hurston begins the novel with a scene of ordinary folk in Eatonville sitting on the front porch signifying in raucous verbal duels and eventually signifying about the protagonist, Janie Woods. Janie has returned, apparently empty handed, after running off with her lover, Tea Cake, who was considerably younger than Janie. Hurston says of these people,

These sitters had been tongueless, earless, eyeless conveniences all day long. Mules and other brutes had occupied their skins. But now, the sun and the bossman were gone, so the skins felt powerful and human. They became lords of sound and lesser things. They passed nations through their mouths. They sat in judgment. . . . They made burning statements with questions, and killing tools out of laughs. It was mass cruelty. A mood come alive. Words walking without masters; walking altogether like harmony in a song. (1-2)

This passage is replete with metaphor and sets the motif of signifying into play. It also establishes a sociocultural context for the massive presence of signifying in the African American community. Signifying in the novel is the symbol for power plays both within the black community and between the black and white communities. It is the conduit through which the reader can gauge both Janie's oppression and her personal liberation. Janie's second husband, Joe Starks, who, to use Hurston's words, was "too full of his own big self," refuses to allow her to participate in the signifying conversations primarily of men, but also of some women, who sat on the front porch of his store. Because he is mayor of Eatonville, Joe feels that it is socially beneath his wife to participate in such low-down talk, even though he participates in this powerful world of verbal dueling. But, we are told, "Janie loved the conversation" (47), conversation that "was a contest in hyperbole and carried on for no other reason" (55).

Participation in signifying talk is an index of Janie's sense of her own power and self-worth. The scenes in chapter 6 where the menfolk go on at length to signify about Matt Bonner's mule are viciously funny:

"... at mule uh yourn, Matt. You better go see 'bout him. He's bad off."

"Where 'bouts? Did he wade in de lake and uh alligator ketch him?"

"Worser'n dat. De womenfolks got yo' mule. When Ah come round de lake 'bout noontime mah wife and some others had 'im flat on de ground usin' his sides fuh uh wash board."

The great clap of laughter that they have been holding in, bursts out. Sam never cracks a smile. "Yeah, Matt, dat mule so skinny till de women is usin' his rib bones fuh uh rub-board, and hangin' things out on his hock-bones tuh dry." (46)

Janie sympathizes with the mule, who is symbolic of not only her plight but that of women. Janie's grandmother earlier had said that the Black woman is the mule of the world. Janie then suggests to her husband, Mayor Joe Starks, that he buy the mule from Matt Bonner in order to get the mule some needed rest. Joe Starks takes Janie's idea, buys the mule, gets praises for his generosity from the men on the porch, but never acknowledges to anybody that this was, in fact, Janie's idea. A major foreshadowing of Janie's impending powerful voice comes when she subtly signifies on Joe Starks for usurping her thoughts and not giving her credit:

Janie stood still while they all made comments. When it was all done she stood in front of Joe and said, "Jody, dat wuz uh mighty fine thing fuh you tuh do. 'Tain't everybody would have thought of it, 'cause it ain't no everyday thought. Freein' dat mule makes uh mighty big man outa you. Something like George Washington and Lincoln. Abraham Lincoln, he had the whole United States tuh rule so he freed de Negroes. You got uh town so you freed uh mule. You have tuh have power tuh free things and dat makes you lak a king uh something."

Hambo said, "Yo wife is uh born orator, Starks. Us never knowed dat befo'. She put jus' de right words tuh our thoughts."

Joe bit down hard on his cigar and beamed all around, but he never said a word. (51)

Voice is the metaphor of empowerment. Shortly thereafter, Joe Starks verbally lashes out at Janie in front of the menfolk in the store. Janie had thrust herself into the signifying conversation. When Joe begins to signify about Janie no longer looking like a young girl, Janie fires back:

"You big-bellies round here and put out a lot of brag, but 'tain't nothin' to it but yo' big voice. Humph! Talkin' 'bout me lookin' old! When you pull down yo' britches, you look lak de change uh life."

"Great God from Zion!" Sam Watson gasped, "Y'all really playin' de dozens tuhnight"  
(68-69)

Janie's voice has the effect of a killing tool and Joe Starks literally dies as a result. Joe attempts to control Janie through his repression of her signifying voice. In contrast, Janie's new lover and soon-to-be husband in fact pampers and supports Janie's becoming a part of the people. Their life together in the swamps of Florida and his ironic empowerment of Janie by teaching her to shoot a rifle ultimately lead to his untimely and tragic death.

Early in Janie and Tea Cake's relationship, signifying becomes the indicator that her life with Tea Cake is going to be very different from her life with Joe Starks. In this very early conversation between Tea Cake and Janie, she breaks the restrictive mold Joe Starks had set for her and playfully signifies with Tea Cake:

[*Tea Cake*] "Evenin' Mis' Starks. Could yuh lemme have uh pound uh knuckle puddin' till Saturday? Ah'm sho tuh pay yuh then."

[*Janie*] "You needs ten pounds, Mr. Tea Cake. Ah'll let yuh have all Ah got and you needn't bother 'bout payin' it back." (83)

After Tea Cake and Janie are married and move to Florida to pick crops on the muck, we are told,

The men held big arguments here like they used to on the store porch. Only here, she could listen and laugh and even talk some herself if she wanted to. She got so she could tell big stories herself from listening to the rest. (112)

Thus, in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* Hurston quintessentially defines signifying, employs the discourse as motif, symbol, and an index of the protagonist's transformation.

In addition to these more obvious uses of signifying, Hurston plays with figurative language throughout the novel. Hurston defines the essential elements of signifying as "crayon enlargements of life," "a contest in hyperbole," "pass[ing] around pictures of their thoughts," "burning statements with questions, and killing tools out of laughs." These elements of signifying parallel the consistent obser-

vations that innuendo, indirection, metaphor, and irony are associated with signifying. Often a clue that a statement is intended as signifying can be found where an obvious contradiction is stated, as in the previously cited dialogue where one sister says to the other, "We both here soaking wet and you trying to tell me it ain't raining." I have identified one hundred forty statements or passages in this novel which I classify as either statements of obvious contradiction, irony, metaphors or imagistic allusions, or proverbial statements. Each of these categories shares the characteristics which have been attributed to signifying. These characteristics are all the more salient when one thinks about the Delain et al. study (1985), which linked skill in sounding (i.e., a form of signifying) and skill in interpreting figurative language.

A few brief examples of each category are offered below. These statements carry many levels of embedded meaning and are keys to the major themes in the novel:

### **Obvious Contradictions**

They mocked everything human in death. (53)

She sent her face to Joe's funeral, and herself went rollicking with the springtime across the world. (76)

### **Irony**

Ah done had six chillun—wuzn't lucky enough tuh raise but dat one—and ain't never had uh nigger tuh even feel mah pulse. White doctors always gits mah money. (117)

[Mrs. Turner, a mulatto looking woman, has tried to get Janie romantically interested in her light-skinned brother. In order to show Mrs. Turner that he's in control, he hits Janie. His friend on the Florida muck suggests that Tea Cake hit Mrs. Turner.] 'Knock her teeth down her throat,' 'Dat would look like she had some influence when she ain't. Ah jus' let her see dat Ah got control. (122)

### **Metaphor/Image**

Mah tongue is in my friend's mouf (9). [Janie tells her story to her dear friend Phoeby who vows never to tell anyone else what Janie has confided to her.]

She [Granny] saw Johnny Taylor lacerating her Janie with a kiss (14).

[Janie's first innocent kiss which sent her grandmother into a rage of fear.]

[Joe was] . . . building a high chair for her to sit in and overlook the world and she here pouting over it (54). [The high chair is both the literal chair for the baby who pouts and the symbol of Joe's desire to keep her above the common folk.]

### Proverbial

Us colored folks is branches without roots. (17)

Take a stand on high ground. (18) [Jane's grandmother, Nanny, wanted material wealth and a man to protect Jane from the cruelty, racism and sexism of the world. Ironically, the high ground of material wealth represented by Janie's first two husbands, Logan Killicks and Jody Starks, does not protect Janie from oppression nor fulfill the dream of love and oneness with the ordinary folk, the dream which Janie's grandmother had tried so desperately to erase from Janie's being. There is further irony in that once Janie has immersed herself in the world of the common folk on the muck in Florida and has found her true love in Tea Cake Vergible Woods, there is no literal high ground to save her from the thrashes of the wind and water of the hurricane. Saving Jane for the literal high ground ultimately costs Tea Cake his life.]

All she found out was that she was too old a vessel for new wine (100).

Signifying and, by extension, figuration become critical mechanisms in the work of Zora Neale Hurston. It was Hurston's specific desire to represent the talk of her people in her literary work. Hurston received much criticism from such literary giants of the Harlem Renaissance as James Weldon Johnson, and later from Richard Wright, for her use of Black English Vernacular in her novels and short stories.

Alice Walker consciously walks in the shadow of Zora Neale Hurston. She says that Hurston haunted her throughout the writing of *The Color Purple*.

About *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Walker (1979) writes,

. . . it speaks to me as no novel, past or present, has ever done; and that the language of the characters, that "Comical nigger `dialect'" that has been laughed at, denied, ignored, or "improved" so that white folks and educated black folks can understand it, is simply beautiful. There is enough self-love in that one book—love of community, culture, traditions—to restore a world. Or create a new one. (2)

The issue of using African American English Vernacular as a creative tool was important to both Walker and Hurston. Both writers realized not only the metaphoric tenor of the language, but also appreciated its capacity for communicating depth of thought with a terse yet pungent use of imagery. Like Hurston, Walker received criticism from members of the black community for the language she placed stage-front in this novel. On the issue of the significance of the language in *The Color Purple*, Walker (1988) writes:

Celie speaks in the voice and uses the language of my step-grandmother, Rachel, an old black woman I loved. Did she not exist; or in my memories of her, must I give her the proper English of, say, Nancy Reagan?

And I say, yes, she did exist, and I can prove it to you, using the only thing that she, a poor woman, left me to remember her by—the sound of her voice. Her unique pattern of speech. Celie is created out of language. In *The Color Purple*, you see Celie because you "see" her voice. To suppress her voice is to complete the murder of her. And this, to my mind, is an attack upon the ancestors, which is, in fact, war against ourselves.

For Celie's speech pattern and Celie's words reveal not only an intelligence that transforms illiterate speech into something that is, at times, very beautiful, as well as effective in conveying her sense of her world, but also what has been done to her by a racist and sexist system, and her intelligent blossoming as a human being despite her oppression demonstrate why her oppressors persist even today in trying to keep her down. . . .

She has not accepted an alien description of who she is; neither has she accepted completely an alien tongue to tell us about it. Her being is affirmed by the language in which she is revealed, and like everything about her it is characteristic, hard won and authentic. (63–64)

Walker also employs signifying in *The Color Purple* as an index of Celie's will. In the beginning of the novel, Celie presents a naive, frightened, and passive exterior. However, among the details which foreshadow the assertive will that later emerges are small instances of signifying of which only Celie and the reader are aware. Early in her marriage to Mr. \_\_\_\_\_, two of his sisters come to visit. They criticize Annie Julia, Mr. \_\_\_\_\_'s deceased ex-wife, for keeping a nasty house. The background information that Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ was repeatedly unfaithful to Annie Julia and he flaunted his relationship with Shug Avery before his wife is important. One of the sisters, Carrie, says of the dead wife, "And cook. She wouldn't cook. She act like she never seen a kitchen" (20). Celie signifies in her response written in her letter to God: "She hadn't never seen his" (20). Later in that same letter, the sisters begin to talk about Shug Avery. The sister, Kate, says, "I'm sick of her too. . . . And you right about Celie, here. Good housekeeper, good with children, good cook. Brother couldn't have done better if he tried" (21). Again, Celie signifies in her written response, "I think about how he tried." These early evidences of signifying are stances that Celie takes, internally revealing only to herself and God. She has not yet found the voice to make public that which is evolving internally.

As her fascination with Shug Avery develops, Celie begins to signify not only through the public silence of her written voice, but also through action which remains private and written. When he comes to visit, Mr. \_\_\_\_\_'s daddy maligns Shug Avery. In the process it becomes clear that in his relationship with his son, Harpo, Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ is merely reenacting his own dilemma with his father. Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ refuses to accept Harpo's marriage to a woman who does not fit his stereotype of the good woman, just as Mr. \_\_\_\_\_'s daddy would not accept Shug Avery when Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ was young, unmarried, and courting Shug.

Old Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ say to Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ , Just what is it bout this Shug Avery anyway, he say.  
She black as tar, she nappy headed. She got legs like baseball bats.

Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ don't say nothing. I drop little spit in Old Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ 's water. (56)

In this scene, Celie seems to follow the admonition of Alice Walker that ". . . women did not have to speak when men thought they should, that they would choose when and where they wish to speak because while many women had found their own voices, they also knew when it was better not to use it" (Washington 1990, xii). The irony of this signifying scene is not only that Celie signifies on Old Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ , but that her action overpowers her public silence and demonstrates that she is not only more powerful than Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ in the presence of his father, but that ironically she stands up for him, a subtle foreshadowing of Mr. \_\_\_\_\_'s transformation at the end of the novel. In that same passage, Old Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ signifies on Shug, "And her mammy take in white people dirty clothes to this day. Plus all her children got different daddys. It all just too trifling and confuse" (57). Celie signifies with her inner voice, "Next time he come I put a little Shug Avery pee in his glass. See how he like that" (57).

The voices of signifiers are voices of power and assertiveness. Sofia and Shug Avery represent a reformulation of the traditional feminine role. When Sofia returns after having left Harpo and visits Harpo's juke joint, or bar, Celie recounts in her letter,

Oh, Miss Celie, she cry. It so good to see you again. It even good to see Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ , she say. She take one of his hands. Even if his handshake is a little weak, she say. (84)

In that same scene,

Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ whisper to Sofia. Where your children at?  
She whisper back. My children at home, where yours? (85)

Celie observes that these two women who signify with the best of the men "talk and act sometimes like a man. Men say stuff like that to women" (85).

If signifying serves as the metaphor through which we gauge Celie's growth, then the major transition occurs when Celie signifies on God. In a critical letter, Celie recounts her conversation with Shug Avery about the nature of God. This conversation is important because it supports one interpretation of the significance of the title of the book and is the first explicit reference to what will be-

come the philosophy of life assumed by Celie and the transformed Mr. \_\_\_\_\_. Shug signifies on the idea that God is white:

Nettie say somewhere in the bible it say Jesus' hair was like lamb's wool, [Celie] say.

Well, say Shug, if he [God] came to any of these churches we talking bout he'd have to have it conked before anybody paid him any attention. The last thing niggers want to think about they God is that his hair kinky. (202)

In Celie's very next letter, she writes not to God, but to Nettie, her sister.

When I told Shug I'm writing to you instead of to God, she laugh. Nettie don't know these people, she say. Considering who I been writing to, this strike me funny. (205)

For Celie to signify on the only one outside of Shug Avery to whom she has been able to confide her frightening secrets for almost two decades is a clear statement that she has initiated her own emancipation and that she has begun to internalize a philosophy of life in which God is not an old white man who will protect you, but rather a creative force that exists within all of creation. This transition is epitomized in the scene which so clearly parallels the scene in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* in which Janie kills Joe Starks with the power of her voice. Celie's voice at this juncture encompasses her realization that God is within all of creation and is within her, just as God is in the small, insignificant, purple flower, and God is "pissed off" if you do not pay attention to it. When she announces to the family, and most importantly to Mr. \_\_\_\_\_, that she is leaving with Shug Avery, Celie's killing words signify:

You a lowdown dog is what's wrong, I say. It's time to leave you and enter into Creation. And your dead body just the welcome mat I need. (207)

This classic confrontation in which Celie signifies not silently, but loudly not merely internally, but publicly—is the verbal bridge over which she struts to release herself from his mental, emotional, physical, and sexual oppression.

Like Hurston, Walker not only uses signifying as a motif and symbol in the novel, but also uses metaphor and imagery in the context of Black English Vernacular to convey multiple levels of meaning in the text. Like Hurston, Walker makes extensive use of natural imagery. Trees represent one such natural image which serves as an index of the symbiotic relationship between humanity and nature, a relationship which is at the core of Walker's philosophy in the novel. This relationship is evident in the important conversation between Celie and Shug about the nature of God. Shug says that her "first step from the old white man was trees. Then air. Then birds. Then other people. . ." (203). "The old white man" is the reference to an image of God as a white man. Celie imagines when she first meets Shug that

because of the beauty she perceives in Shug that the trees stand up in Shug's presence. When Mr.\_\_\_\_ beats her, Celie says she turns herself into a tree. Thus, it is proper that when Celie lays her killing words on Mr.\_\_\_\_ the words are given to her by the trees:

Until you do right by me, I say, everything you even dream about will fail. I give it to him straight, just like it come to me. And it seem to come to me from the trees.  
(213)

Celie's power, now interwoven with the trees and nature itself, is exercised through her voice. The curse befalls Mr.\_\_\_\_ because Celie says it will.

Walker creates a story in Africa with Celie's sister Nettie that parallels many aspects of the African American story. Within that parallel story the image of trees has symbolic value. The Olinka people use the leaves of the roofleaf tree to make roofs for their homes. We are told, "Where roofleaf had flourished from time's beginning, there was cassava. Millet. Groundnuts" (159). Foreshadowing the saving grace of the roofleaf is the description of the effects of a great storm during one rainy season:

For six months the heavens and the winds abused the people of Olinka.

Rain came down in spears, stabbing away the mud of their walls. . . .

Soon the village began to die. By the end of the rainy season, half the village was gone. (159)

Recognizing the intimate and symbiotic relationship between nature, humans, and God, Nettie reflects on the significance of the roofleaf for the Olinka people:

We know a roofleaf is not Jesus Christ, but in its own humble way, is it not God?  
(160)

This tree represents the sacred relationship between Olinka man/woman and God, and stands in stark contrast to the foreign rubber tree which the British colonialists bring. The rubber tree is imported and planted on Olinka soil not for the benefit of the people but for the profits of the British Empire. The planting of the rubber trees is the surgery that aborts the Olinka life and opposes Creation as it is culturally represented by the worldview of the Olinka people. Thus, trees in this novel are images which act as a leitmotif, similar to signifying as motif. Both serve as indices of the inner well-being of the characters; both are metaphorical, carrying multiple layers of indirect meaning.

The most powerful signifier in the novel, however, is the transformation of purple, purple-black, black-black—the many associations with the color purple—*The Color Purple*. Purple is associated in the novel with royalty. Because Celie thinks Shug Avery is like a queen, she imagines Shug

would wear purple. Purple is associated with blackness, and with pain, when, after she is beaten so badly by the police, we are told Sofia's face looks like an eggplant. The image of black-black, like the purple-black of the eggplant, is re-presented as the image of African beauty when Nettie, in amazement, is dazzled by the elegant beauty of the blue-black Senegalese people. Nettie's first visit to Africa redefines black for her.

These are the blackest people I have ever seen, Celie. They are black like the people we are talking about when we say, "So and so is blacker than black, he's *blueblack*." They are so black, Celie, they shine. Which is something else folks down home like to say about real black folks. But Celie, try to imagine a city full of these shining, blueblack people wearing brilliant blue robes with designs like fancy quilt patterns. Tall, thin, with long necks and straight backs. Can you picture it at all, Celie? Because I felt like I was seeing black for the first time. And Celie, there is something magical about it. Because the black is so black the eye is simply dazzled, and then there is the shining that seems to come, really, from moonlight, it is so luminous, but their skin glows even in the sun. (147)

This instantiation of black stands as politicized contrast to Old Mr.\_\_\_\_'s diminution of Shug Avery when he calls her black as tar and nappy headed. Squeak, Harpo's second wife, a mulatto-looking woman, realizes that the high admiration of physical characteristics which are closest to the ideal of white beauty is just the reverse side of the coin which belittles black. Squeak asks Harpo, ". . . do you really love me, or just my color?" (102). Just like the gramophone which "sit in the corner a year silent as the grave. Then you put a record on, it come to life" (103), the once quiet and passive Squeak makes public the contradiction. She sings:

They calls me yellow  
like yellow be my name  
But if yellow is a name  
Why ain't black the same  
Well, if I say Hey black girl  
Lord, she try to ruin my game. (104)

Purple is associated with assertiveness when Celie decides that the first pants she makes for Sofia should be purple and red (a color she has previously associated with happiness). Celie writes, "I dream Sofia wearing these pants, one day she was jumping over the moon" (223). Purple is associated with that which we underappreciate and undervalue in life when Shug says, "I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it" (203). Purple becomes the color of transformation, the color of the breadth of human experience and the representation of the

power of the human will. It becomes, by the end of the novel, Celie's favorite color. In her home, her entire room is decorated in purple and red. As an indicator of Mr. \_\_\_\_'s transformation, he gives Celie a purple frog which he carved especially for her.

The image of purple and its family of associated colors is the vehicle through which Alice Walker signifies upon a culture thick with racism. She plays on purple/black and reverses its intended meaning, expanding its meaning from a reaction to a pro-active stance which enriches life and all of humanity. The dictionary meanings of black as "soiled, dirty; evil, wicked, harmful; disgraceful; full of sorrow or suffering; disastrous; sullen or angry," the related family of blackball, blackguard, blacklist, black magic, blackmail, black mark, black sheep," (from *Webster's New World Dictionary*) belong to another constellation. They are not part of the constellation redefined in *The Color Purple*.

Besides looking at how signifying is utilized and transformed within the texts which made up this instructional unit, it is also important to see how signifying is employed in the two stories which were used for pre- and post-testing. Both stories were excerpted from *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison (1970). The two excerpts were chosen because the dialogue includes both Black English Vernacular and the more standard English. The registers switch back and forth, with the narrator in each story using standard English and the characters speaking in BEV. There are aspects of signifying which all the literary texts in this unit shared: (1) ritual insults that are stylized and metaphoric; (2) rich metaphoric language and images which serve as vehicles for conveying multiple layers of meaning. The story that served as the reading material upon which the pre-test was based is taken from the chapter entitled "Winter." It is the story of the confrontation over values between two sisters, Freida and Claudia, and a well-to-do, light-skinned, beautiful by popular standards, new girl in school, Maureen Peal. Freida and Claudia are poor. When Maureen enters school, everyone, including the teachers, lavishly pours attention on Maureen. The complex and subtle theme of this story is capsulized in the closing passage:

We were sinking under the wisdom, accuracy, and relevance of Maureen's last words. If she was cute—and if anything could be believed, she was—then we were not. And what did that mean? We were lesser. Nicer, brighter, but still lesser. Dolls we could destroy, but we could not destroy the honey voices of parents and aunts, the obedience in the eyes of our peers, the slippery light in the eyes of our teachers when they encountered the Maureen Peals of the world. What was the secret? What did we lack? Why was it important? And so what? Guileless and without vanity, we were still in love with ourselves then. We felt comfortable in our skins, enjoyed the news that our senses released to us, admired our dirt, cultivated our scars, and could not comprehend this unworthiness. Jealousy we understood and thought natural—a desire to have what somebody else had; but envy was a strange, new feeling for us. And all the time we knew that Maureen Peal was not the Enemy and not worthy of such intense hatred. The *Thing* to fear was the *Thing* that made *her* beautiful, and not us. (57–58)

Freida is a very strong-willed and assertive child. Her aptitude and willingness to signify at the drop of a hat signal the strength of her character. She calls Maureen "Six-finger-dog-tooth-meringue-pie." When a group of boys surround their friend Pecola, taunting her with "Black e mo Black e mo Ya daddy sleeps nekked," Freida fires back, "You shut up, Bullet Head." One of the boys responds, "You want a fat lip?" Freida signifies, "Yeah. Gimme one of yours." Morrison builds another layer of evidence to support the story's theme when she, the author, signifies through Maureen. Maureen tells the story of a girl named Audrey who had gone to the beauty shop and asked that her hair be fixed like Hedy Lamarr's. As Maureen tells the story, the hair dresser responded, "Yeah, when you grow some hair like Hedy Lamarr's."

Perhaps more important, for the purposes of this instructional approach, than the examples of pure signifying are the uses of metaphor and image to carry multiple layers of meaning. This is the domain onto which signifying knowledge was to be mapped. Winter and spring are two central metaphors in this story. The story opens with a paragraph which compares the sisters' father to aspects of winter. The description is rich in imagery and is there to serve metaphoric purposes:

My daddy's face is a study. Winter moves into it and presides there. His eyes become a cliff of snow threatening to avalanche; his eyebrows bend like black limbs of leafless trees. His skin takes on the pale, cheerless yellow of winter sun. . . . Wolf killer turned hawk fighter, he worked night and day to keep one from the door and the other from under the windowsills. A Vulcan guarding the flames, he gives us instructions about which doors to keep closed or opened for proper distribution of heat. . . . And he will not unrazor his lips until spring. (47)

This opening paragraph is difficult for novice readers precisely because the father is not involved in the story as an active character, and because its significance is clearly not literal, but metaphoric. Winter is the metaphor for the life of poverty which Freida and Claudia live, for the cold tensions of growing up, and for the harshness of a racist society which these black girls must learn to negotiate. Winter stands in contrast to spring "when there could be gardens," a time of hope and replenishment:

By the time this winter had stiffened itself into a hateful knot that nothing could loosen, something did loosen it, or rather someone. A someone who splintered the knot into silver threads that tangled us, netted us, made us long for the dull chafe of the previous boredom. (47)

We are told it was a false spring day when Maureen "pierced the shell of a deadening winter." Maureen is like a false spring day. The silver threads are metaphors for the tinsel beauty and signs of material wealth which Maureen brings as an ideal into the girls' lives. The girls had at first been jealous of the attention Maureen received because of her perceived beauty and wealth. Yet, they too were drawn to Maureen and had hoped that the inner Maureen was as nice, friendly, and caring as the outward persona they perceived. Later, when Maureen reveals her true colors, so to speak, Claudia and Freida are drawn into a web of tension and self-doubt. All of these layers of meaning are embedded in the images and metaphors of the opening page of the story. The ability of students to explore these metaphors and images is tested in several of the questions in the pre-test.

The story on which the post-test is built is the chapter entitled "seemother-motherisverynice." The significance of the orthography of the title can only be gleaned from reading the entire novel, which begins with a mimicking of the stereotyped Dick and Jane school reader.

As in "Winter," the narrator uses a standard English and the protagonist, the only other speaking character, speaks in Black English Vernacular. There is only one instance where Pauline, the protagonist, signifies. Pauline has been doing day-work for a white "family of slender means." Pauline doesn't really like the woman and signifies about the family's dependence on her:

None of them knew so much as how to wipe their behinds. I know, cause I did the washing. And couldn't pee proper to save their lives. Her husband ain't hit the bowl yet.  
(101)

As in the other stories, signifying serves as an index of a character's transformation, sense of self-worth, and assertiveness. It stands as the yardstick by which the reader judges how much Pauline has changed by the end of the story. In the later scene, Pauline is again doing day-work, but now for a well-to-do white family. The irony of Pauline's transformation is reflected in the narrator's crisp observation that Pauline had become "what is known as an ideal servant, for such a role filled practically all of her needs" (108). The irony of Pauline's transformation is punctuated by the narrator's observing that

When she bathed the little Fisher girl, it was in a porcelain tub with silvery taps running infinite quantities of hot, clear water. She dried her in fluffy white towels and put her in cuddly night clothes. Then she brushed the yellow hair, enjoying the roll and slip of it between her fingers. No zinc tub, no buckets of stove-heated water, no flaky, stiff, grayish towels washed in a kitchen sink, dried in a dusty backyard, no tangled black puffs of rough wool to comb. Soon she stopped trying to keep her own house. (109)

In the context of the entire story, then, the signifying scenes convey those layers of meaning which in fact constitute the major theme of the work.

In addition to the signifying by the protagonist which fits the more traditional oral model, Morrison signifies subtly through the voice of the narrator. The language is standard in register, but the innuendo is there, the killing cut is there, and the metaphor is the action she satirizes. The narrator comments further on the extent to which Pauline has abandoned her own family and internalized values of beauty, family life, and material well-being that the Fishers represent:

More and more she neglected her house, her children, her man—they were like the afterthoughts one has just before sleep, the early morning and late-evening edges of her day, the dark edges that made the daily life with the Fishers lighter, more delicate, more lovely. (109)

The image of "late-evening edges of her day, the dark edges" is a metaphor that is ironic and profoundly black. Pauline has been hurt as a child and all her life limped with a foot that flopped. She dreams as a child of a "Stranger" who will come and sweep her away with an ideal romantic love. When she meets Cholly, Pauline believes he is that romantic ideal lover. After they are married, the couple move north. In much of African American literature, the move north assumes mythic proportions and often forbodes danger, the promised land becomes the ironic usurper of tradition and continuity, the move from hell to another hell. As one would expect, their marriage begins to deteriorate, and Pauline takes refuge in the movies. She looks at the prophetically black-and-white movie screen and tries to make herself look like the Jean Harlow she idealizes, and wishes Cholly would be the Clark Gable of the black-and-white screen. While in the movie watching Jean Harlow and Clark Gable, Pauline bites into a piece of candy and her tooth falls out. After that, any hope of emulating the white ideal of beauty and the silver screen image of material wealth, romantic love, and family life becomes impossible for Pauline. After this, Pauline turns devotedly to the church and her life as the ideal servant for the Fishers. Within this complex context, Morrison's words, her reference to the dark edges that her family has come to represent, is metaphorically related to the nappy edges of the black woman's hair, the traditional "kitchen"<sup>1</sup> (an ironic twist if ever there was one). When black women attempt to straighten their hair by either applying heat or chemicals, the process is only temporary. During the historical time frame of this novel, black women would straighten their hair by applying heat. Any humidity or physical activity which resulted in sweat would revert the "dark edges" back to their original kinky texture. In this sense, then, Morrison is signifying not only on Pauline for abandoning her family, but she is also signifying on the ideal for which Pauline has abandoned her family. Her family has become that part of her natural being which she so desperately wishes to change—but no matter how hard she tries, she can't! This interpretation of the metaphor, this signifying metaphor, represents a reading based on prior social knowledge that is distinctively cultural. It is the kind of subtle interpretation that even novice African American readers can bring to such a text once they realize that a literary stance is similar to a signifying stance. The two stances are similar in that they both presume an underlying and unstated relationship between two situations, people, or objects. They both require a kind of analogical reasoning and a sensitivity to subtle details.

#### Note

1. "Kitchen" is a vernacular, although dated, term used by African American women referring to the hair along the neckline.