

Article

Struggle and Fear: a Study of Experience and Identity in Four Short Stories by Chester Himes

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Abstract

Chester Himes was a black American writer who began publishing his short stories while remanded in prison for armed robbery. This paper is a study of the central characters in four of his short stories: 'His Last Day', 'Looking Down the Street', 'Head Waiter' and 'Heaven Has Changed'. The focus is upon Himes's representation of black American protagonists in relation to his own actual experience as a black American, and also within the social context of racial segregation in depression era America in the 1930s.

Keywords: Chester Himes, Black American, Hard-Boiled, His Last Day, Looking Down the Street, Head Waiter, Heaven Has Changed.

1. Introduction: Chester Himes

Hard-boiled fiction in the first half of the twentieth century had few black American contributors and one of the first to make an impression on the genre was Chester Himes. Himes, inspired by his contemporary Dashiell Hammett, in turn made his own remarkable contribution to the hard-boiled canon. Hammett, in conjunction with the then editor of pulp magazine *Black Mask*, Joseph Shaw, helped establish many of the literary conventions of the genre; subsequently writers, many inspired by *Black Mask*, utilised the genre to articulate their own experiences and politics. Of these later writers, Himes became notable as a proponent of the concerns of black American men living through the depression years and later, World War II.

Reality and authenticity form two key components of hard-boiled fiction. Hammett, and subsequently Himes, placed heavy emphasis on representing the authentic and the true to life in their novels and short stories. Considering Hammett, this meant drawing upon and utilising his experiences as a private detective at Pinkerton National Detective Agency – his detective protagonist, the Continental Operative, is authentic precisely because he is the

creation of someone with an in-depth knowledge of being a private detective. Hammett's Operative is directly derived from Hammett's experiences in the field, Himes though, develops his central characters further: they are individuals in situations that relate not only to Himes's personal experiences but also to those of his peers. With this in mind, this article will consider the impression that personal experience has on Himes's representations of his protagonists. Using four of Himes's short stories: 'His Last Day', 'Looking Down the Street', 'Head Waiter' and 'Heaven Has Changed'¹, the circumstances and representations of the central characters will be considered. In addition, the article will consider the representation of the racial stereotyping and discrimination articulated within the aforementioned short stories.

More than his contemporaries, Himes was a product of his time and circumstances. Writing in the depression years of the early 1930s, Himes found himself languishing in jail – an unusual, but nevertheless productive venue for his writing. Given time to pause and reflect upon his misdeeds and experiences, and copious amounts of hard-boiled fiction, including *Black Mask* for company, Himes was able to take inspiration from other writers to channel his frustrations and anger into literature. Once released from prison, he began to pursue a livelihood as a writer, with his works culminating in his two novels: *If He Hollers Let Him Go* and *The Lonely Crusade*. In this article, it is Himes's experiences as a young adult as presented by two of Himes's biographers, William Marling and James Sallis, that are of initial interest to this study. Marling and Sallis provide useful synopses of Himes's early adulthood, education and encounters with the law – prior to his personal reinvention as a hard-boiled fiction writer. Marling posts a comprehensive on-line biography of Himes²; Sallis in his book, *Chester Himes: A Life*. It is with Himes's early life that the study begins.

Himes was born in Jefferson City, Missouri, in 1909 into a middle class family. Though his father, Joseph Himes was a skilled blacksmith and later professor, it was his mother, Estelle, who proved to be the more ambitious of his parents. Initially eschewing further education, a sixteen-year-old Himes found short-lived employment by working in a hotel. Misfortune, never far away from the young Himes's life, saw to it so that a work related accident, where he plummeted down a lift shaft, brought this career to an abrupt end. Unsurprisingly, Himes sustained serious injuries from which he never fully recovered, and perhaps interpreting this unfortunate incident as a sign to resume his education, Himes decided to attend university in Columbus, Ohio. During his brief tenure at university, Himes became acquainted with petty criminals and his studies began to suffer, so much so that he was asked to leave the university. Having dropped out of full-time study, Himes became a full-time delinquent, being involved in petty crime and gambling, which culminated in his incarceration for six years for armed robbery. According to James Sallis, by the time Himes was in his late teens, at some point between his employment and higher education, he had

¹ Hernton, C. (ed.) *The Collected Stories of Chester Himes*, (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1990).

² Biographies and other resources can be viewed on the following web-site: <http://www.detnovel.com/Himes.html> (1st October 2013).

made the acquaintance of another man called Benny. It was under the influence of Benny, a somewhat Dickensian mentor in the mould of the Artful Dodger, that Himes became increasingly involved in crime. Himes's first major encounter with the law saw him charged with burglary; though he was subsequently given a suspended sentence, it was the beginning of an unsuccessful criminal career. In 1928, at the age of nineteen, Himes went on to commit another act of burglary, which on that occasion attracted a far heavier sentence – his being sentenced to over six years in prison. At this point things looked bleak for the young Himes: a modest career working in a hotel ruined by misfortune; an academic career seemingly in tatters due to his wanton self-destructiveness and questionable choice of peers. Nevertheless, being imprisoned became, even more than the physical injury sustained in the hotel, Himes's most profound and defining experience. Sallis notes that "Himes was remanded to the Ohio State Penitentiary... Chester would later say that he grew to manhood in prison."³ Prison, then, became the stern paternal figure that Himes needed to instruct him and give his life purpose and direction.

The routine and rigour of incarceration instilled in Himes the much-needed discipline to channel his destructive anger into something productive and worthwhile. With access to books and magazines, Himes grew interested in writing, earning himself the respect of his peers. Later, his first short stories were published even while he was still imprisoned. One of the first of these short stories to be published in 1932, was entitled 'His Last Day'. This story, rather aptly, has a black man as the central character narrating his state of mind on his impending execution.

2. Experience and Narrative in 'His Last Day' and 'Looking Down the Street'

'His Last Day' is, fittingly for Himes, a tale of prison life; the narrative follows a black protagonist, Spats, a death-row prisoner, as he languishes in his holding cell while awaiting his imminent execution. Though not intended to be autobiographical (Himes was never a death-row prisoner) the story is certainly one which could be considered representative and authentic. 'His Last Day' is a story of a writer drawing heavily on his experiences in prison, in particular his observations of the fears of other inmates, not to mention his own anguish. Thus the prison setting serves to articulate the emotive circumstances and the connection between writer and protagonist: in other words, there is a blending of reality and fiction taking place. Even more than his contemporaries, the strength of Himes's storytelling is in his ability to capture the psychology of that most visceral of emotions: fear. Thus Spats is consumed by fear: "Blind panic boiled up within him at the words. His last day. In just a few hours he would be dead... He began to tremble all over as if he had the ague."⁴ Sallis, in his

³ Sallis, James, *Chester Himes: A Life*, (Edinburgh, Scotland: Cannongate Books Ltd, 2000). p.39.

⁴ Himes, Chester, 'His Last Day', in C. Hernton (ed.) *The Collected Stories of Chester Himes*, (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1990). p.81.

biography, argues that Himes's ability to demonstrate the basic physical sensations of fear was one of the defining characteristics of his writing, and furthermore, that Himes's protagonists are vehicles for driving other visceral emotions. These protagonists articulate negative feelings of desperation, bitterness and futility, all ultimately defining their identities as people: "I didn't ask to come here into this world... He didn't make any provision for me to eat or to get the things I needed to live, so I got them the best way I could."⁵ These characters are frequently approaching or near mental breakdown, barely maintaining the pretence that they are unafraid and still able to conquer their fear. Remarkably, this intimate articulation of personal weakness is quite unlike the contemporary writers' hard-boiled protagonists, such as the Continental Operative, who retains his self-belief and self-control irrespective of circumstances. The fundamental difference, thus, is that Himes's central characters, especially in his early stories, are semi-autobiographical figures; they are real men with real flaws and genuine feelings. Spats, then, can be seen to personify, if not necessarily Himes's own bitterness and anger, those of his peers. In defining his early writing by the blurring of fact and fiction, and in evoking raw emotion, Himes succeeded in personalising the reading experience.

In keeping with hard-boiled convention, Himes's protagonists are mobile city dwellers. In the 1920s, black Americans were no longer restricted to agricultural work, or to the Deep South as the process of urbanisation had brought many to seek employment in the cities. The urban black American man of the 1920s, though mobile, is frequently part of a larger pattern of rootless dislocation that runs through Himes's short stories. Often, his protagonists are driven men, usually in search of work or recognition, an inevitably ill at ease with themselves and their circumstances. Furthermore, almost all are victims of some kind of misfortune; sometimes because of their folly, but usually because of external economic or social factors outside of their control. They feel a sense of futility and powerlessness, dislocated from their circumstances. Though free from the bonds of slavery, Himes's urban black characters should not be considered liberated; they are continually struggling against adversity to achieve a respectable living in a society which still firmly separates white and black communities.

In 'Looking Down the Street', the protagonist is Joe, a working man desperately seeking employment to support himself and his sick wife. Though initially successful, he is defeated at the last, and devastated by unexpected (yet, to the reader, inevitable) failure: "...he had thought he was the luckiest man in the world to get a break like that... Then the first of November he had lost his job."⁶ Joe, an urban blue-collar worker, is unremarkable with one exception: that he is black. As if finding work in depression era America was not challenging enough, Joe feels his skin colour causes him to be rejected from the labour market. More truthfully, it is a combination of skin colour and social class which combine to

⁵ Ibid. p. 295.

⁶ Himes, Chester 'Looking Down the Street' in C. Hernton (ed.) *The Collected Stories of Chester Himes*, (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1990). p.81.

frustrate Joe: the Wall Street crash of 1929 precipitated one of the most devastating economic depressions in American history. As a consequence, blue-collar workers were affected most heavily by the contraction of the labour market and corresponding job losses; Joe's frustration at his inability to find work is thus as much a class issue as it is a racial one. On a personal level, the isolation that Joe feels is indicative of his awareness of the racial prejudice of the time – it is frequently implied that the colour of his skin is the reason Joe is refused even the most menial work. Comparing Himes's two short stories, 'His Last Day' with 'Looking Down the Street', his protagonists, Spats and Joe, share some interesting characteristics: Joe is at his wit's end (the narrative suggests that he may resort to crime to support his wife and himself), and Spats has been driven beyond it. Both narratives suggest that economic necessity and social prejudice drive individuals to criminal acts: Spats takes part in a failed robbery (like Himes); Joe and his wife are impoverished to the extent that they do not know how their meals will be provided for. For Himes, stable, continuous work (or lack thereof) is so important when defining the identity of young, working-class black men. With the importance of self-identity in mind, Spats, awaiting execution, could have been spared his fate had he equal access to employment as his white peers. Joe, unemployed and desperate, is a Spats in waiting, differentiated by the strength of honour that Joe possesses, and also his determination to play the system instead of rebelling against it. These external forces drive the protagonists along an almost pre-determined path towards oblivion, and their sense of powerlessness and frustration is acute.

Andrew Pepper remarks in his publication, *The Contemporary American Crime Novel*, that Himes's writings feature "...rage-fuelled black protagonists battling in vain to find voice and visibility..."⁷ Indeed, this assertion is difficult to dismiss, though it should be noted that Himes's depictions of black Americans' social struggles are frequently more closely related with the need to survive than of asserting one's presence and identity. In other words, that a decent standard of living is being denied the central characters simply because they are working class and black. In fact, rather than being black American visionaries, in the mould of Martin Luther King Junior, the characters of Himes's earlier writings are defined by a sense of humility and ordinariness. Their wishes and desires are allied to the social class to which they belong, rather than solely to racial identity; the desire to possess a respectable house, to have a family, to have a stable job and be paid a living wage. Nevertheless, Himes's protagonists' bitterness lies in the belief that the colour of their skin is the primary reason they are denied their modest ambitions. Pride also has a role to play in identity as Spats and Joe reveal a strong sense of self-value and duty: Spats is proud in the sense that he is determined that he should not show fear on his day of execution, and Joe's sense of duty lies in his belief that it is his role as a man and a husband to provide for his wife, who is sick with pneumonia. He articulates his failure to do so as sustained attacks upon his identity as a man. "With each refusal his pride took a blow. He was glad when the

⁷ Pepper, Andrew. *The Contemporary American Crime Novel*, (Edinburgh, U.K.: Edinburgh University Press, 2000). p.110.

ordeal was over.”⁸ Vulnerability, deep-seated pride and the inevitable assault upon the black American male identity are themes common to both ‘His Last Day’ and ‘Looking Down the Street’ and the black American experience. Himes thus describes the hardships his protagonists endure and then portrays their inevitable self-destruction in the face of insurmountable adversity.

3. Hardship and Abuse in ‘Head Waiter’

Himes’s short stories articulate the kinds of racial abuse which black Americans typically faced within society, in addition to the economic difficulties facing the urban working class and black community in the late 1920s and 1930s. In his short story ‘Head Waiter’, Himes’s narrative becomes a social anthropology, his vehicle Dick Small, is the head waiter of a hotel restaurant. Once again, we see Himes writing from his personal experience, the author himself having worked in a hotel in his teens. ‘Head Waiter’ is set in the restaurant of an upmarket hotel, and provides the reader with a cross-section of affluent, middle-class American society, and functions as an allegory. The white patrons are juxtaposed against a working class black American staff. As a microcosm of middle-class America, the restaurant setting focuses on the struggles of the working class black protagonist, Dick, and the kinds of abuse he faces as a black man working amongst middle class white patrons. As an example of racial abuse, Dick is subjected to derogatory comments from a group of drunken men, who remarking upon his skin colour comment: “What makes you black?”⁹ In another example, one of Dick’s black underlings is recognised by a customer as someone with a criminal record, and therefore undesirable. The diner who recognises the underling is benevolent, if condescending; he trusts Dick’s judgement and is prepared to give the waiter a second chance, as if his attitude is an act of generosity in itself, rather than the opinion of a bigot. Thus Dick, in contrast to Spats and Joe, finds himself being tested by individuals rather than by circumstances; he is after all employed and modestly successful.

In ‘Head Waiter’, much more overt racial discord can be seen, and the confrontation is direct. Dick, though, by being controlled and exercising extreme patience, differs from Himes’s other central characters, whose raw emotions are in the process of consuming them. Dick has become successful, but at a price: being a waiter is a toadying and obsequious vocation, symbolic of the real racial divide between black water/patrons and black communities/white society. Much like a slave, or the segregated society contemporary to Himes’s writing, he is still at the mercy of the caprices of his white patrons, and is a servant to their desires.

⁸ Himes, Chester ‘Looking Down the Street’ in C. Hernton (ed.) *The Collected Stories of Chester Himes*, (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 1990). p.83.

⁹ Himes, Chester ‘Head Waiter’ in C. Hernton (ed.) *The Collected Stories of Chester Himes*, (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 1990). p.9.

Andrew Pepper notes when referring to Himes's later Harlem novels that: "The harshness of ghetto life means that poor blacks are pitted against one another in a desperate struggle for survival..."¹⁰ In 'Head Waiter', there is a twofold conflict; Pepper rightly notes that black Americans are pitted against one another. In 'Head Waiter', the subordinate waiters are competing with Dick's sense of propriety, and in addition, they are also in clear racial conflict with their boorish white patrons. The black American workers, including Dick, are forced to compete for recognition and respect as indeed the standard and quality of their service is often called into question. Conflict, in the metaphorical sense, is against judgement and prejudice and the reward for success: continued employment ("survival", in Pepper's terms). In 'Head Waiter' conflict reaches its nadir when one of Dick's subordinates, Bishop, appears to be working under the influence of alcohol. Bishop, though indeed an alcoholic, suffers from disability in the form of a severe limp, and his leg fails him as he is about to wait upon a particularly difficult patron. Bishop casts the contents of a jug of cream over the patron, who predictably demands Bishop's dismissal. Nonetheless, Dick is sympathetic towards Bishop; indeed, the patron was to be the last of the evening suggesting that Bishop's fatigue was the reason for the incident, not his alcoholism. Bishop's misfortune places Dick in the position that his (and that of the waiting staff) survival is at stake: "...if I ever see him in this hotel again, I'll fire the whole bunch of you!"¹¹ Inevitably, Bishop is sacrificed so that the others may continue to work, and once again we see Himes's protagonists become victims of cruel circumstance: Bishop cuts a hapless figure with more in common with Spats and Joe than with Dick as his personal flaws prevent him from succeeding against adversity (alcoholism, disability, and an extended family to support). Bishop, like Spats and Joe, personifies the futile struggle of black working class in 1930s America.

Lee Horsley, in her book *The Noir Thriller* notes that: "...it is a natural step for noir to use, say, a black protagonist to exacerbate the outcast status of the marginalised man."¹² Indeed, Himes's early stories are themselves concerned with articulating the feelings of marginalised men. The central characters in 'His Last Day' and 'Walking Down the Street' need not necessarily be black Americans: marginalisation in depression era America was universal to many working class men, white and black alike. Nevertheless, as previously argued, the fact that Himes's protagonists are black underscores their marginalisation, and their protestations and remonstrations serve to draw attention to their irrevocably low social status. Thus, Himes's early stories can also be interpreted as allegories of working class struggle as well

¹⁰ Pepper, Andrew. *The Contemporary American Crime Novel*, (Edinburgh, U.K.: Edinburgh University Press, 2000). p.119.

¹¹ Himes, Chester 'Head Waiter' in C. Hernton (ed.) *The Collected Stories of Chester Himes*, (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1990). p.14.

¹² Horsley, Lee. *Rage in Harlem: Black Protest in the Mid-Century American Crime Novel – an extract from Lee Horsley's The Noir Thriller*, <http://www.crimeculture.com/contents/crimefictblackprot.html> (1st September 2013).

as ones highlighting racial prejudice. With this in mind, it is useful to consider how marginalisation is represented in 'Head Waiter', and especially how and by whom it is represented.

In 'Head Waiter', it is fair to say that all of Himes's characters are marginalised to a greater or lesser extent should this be by overt racial discrimination or denial of expression or voice. In one instance we see one of the junior waiters, Bishop, being marginalised and isolated by disability: his known alcoholism and physical limp contribute to his misfortune, as if disability itself is not misfortune enough. Even so, the characters in 'Head Waiter' are targeted for discrimination specifically along racial rather than class lines as demonstrated by the overt racial abuse they suffer by the hotel's patrons. Himes further contrasts this racial division by having exclusively black American protagonists, and no attempt is made to positively associate them with white Americans (there are no white workers on the hotel restaurant's staff, working class or otherwise). Another aspect of this marginalisation is a lack of voice. Himes uses his characters to represent this absence of voice via a descriptive narrative that emphasises the link between ethnicity and disenfranchisement in 1930s America. In 'Head Waiter', Himes expresses the repressed voice and frustration at a lack of recognition that black Americans, could seldom aspire to achieve. Himes's characters, ostensibly frustrated by the hotel patrons, are in fact individuals representing the frustration that they, segregated, can never be an integral part of the wider community.

Despite his modest success as head waiter, Dick remains in an obsequious and servile role, obeying, and indeed suffering his white patrons. He is respected amongst his black American staff, but nevertheless abused by middle class white society. To that extent, while 'Head Waiter' exaggerates the misfortunes of the individual black protagonists (i.e. Bishop) it does not exaggerate those of the wider community. The reader views the struggles of the community located and enacted within the individual and situation in a concentration of abuse and suffering which Horsley refers to as: "...narratives...which express the existentialist consciousness of life's absurdity experienced by the man who stands alone..."¹³ The concentration and articulation of voice within the individual is not without risks, however, and in the process of both underscoring the characters marginality and articulating their voice, Himes's characters sometimes risk becoming exaggerated figures, even a parody of the people they are supposed to represent. Thus Bishop, by being a drunkard, semi-disabled, and desperately unlucky father-of-seven, could be seen a stereotypical figure of the kind of feckless black man that middle-class America held in contempt. Affirming a negative social impression is thus a possible consequence of highlighting the marginalisation of black characters. The risk is that this acts to the detriment of conveying the more important social message or critique. Nevertheless, 'Head Waiter' is a vehicle for black American marginalisation and oppression and the social and economic divide between whites and blacks remains the overriding theme.

¹³ Ibid.

4. Anger, Resentment and Redefining a Black American Identity

Rage. The overwhelming impression upon reading the short stories of Chester Himes is one of individuals who struggle to retain composure while battling with powerful feelings of anger and resentment. In 'Head Waiter', Dick attempts not only to master his own feelings, but also those of his underlings in a way which verges on paternalistic. In contrast with 'His Last Day', the anger within Spats is no longer contained, and itself becomes the voice of struggle, and of personal failure. In writing of his time, Himes also had to consider the effects of the white community's attempts to subjugate and restrict the black community; specifically the Jim Crow laws enforcing racial segregation, but also to negative stereotyping in literature. Briefly stepping back almost eighty years before Himes started publishing, one of the most notable forms of racial propaganda appeared in the 1850s in Harriett Beecher Stowe's novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Nevertheless, Beecher Stowe, her novel first published in 1852, was hailed as a progressive and anti-slavery by her contemporaries. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* has a central character: the eponymous Uncle Tom who as a slave is content at his fate within white dominated, slave-owning society. More recently, having a central black character who was "content with his lot" has been re-evaluated as perpetuating a stereotype of black Americans. In relation to 'Head Waiter', Dick, while certainly far from content with his rude and bigoted patrons, is certainly prepared to compromise his identity, and even arguably selling out the alcoholic Bishop, in exchange for economic security by functioning as a bridge between the staff and patrons. By assuming this role, Dick becomes a Tom-like figure.

Kenneth W. Warren discusses the significance of Tom in his novel, *Black & White Strangers*. He argues that Tom's behaviour remains uncompromising: "[his] spirits and actions [remain] untouched by the moral corruption and hypocrisy that surround them..."¹⁴ This interpretation of the honourable slave is equally applicable to the paternalistic head waiter Dick, who remains admirably composed in the face of provocation and racial abuse. Nevertheless, in 'Head Waiter', Himes does not encourage the reader to view Dick as a proponent of black American identity; he is in fact fundamentally antagonistic. Consider the full name of Himes's head waiter: Dick Small. Here Himes engages in some particularly unsubtle word-play; metaphorically speaking, it could be suggested that Himes's protagonist is actually a representation of an emasculated black male, powerless; a slave. Dick takes much pride in his work, and in his status as head waiter, creating the impression that he, like Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom, has been conditioned to accept his lot in life. Like Tom, when judged by the ideals and prejudices of the white community, he is considered respectable and acceptable, if of reluctantly and condescendingly so. Just as Spats and Joe are honest men and free spirited in their desire to achieve their wants and needs, Dick is passive and acquiescent. Seemingly the protagonists face a choice; either they sacrifice their identity as black men and are, however tenuously, accepted into white society, or they retain their

¹⁴ Warren, Kenneth W. *Black & White Strangers*, (London: The University of Chicago Press, 1993). p.73.

identity and remain outsiders. Himes's position on this sacrifice is clear: he has greater sympathy for his struggling characters than for men like Dick Small. Though frustrated, they serve as agents of change because of their inner rage; individuals who are striving to improve their situation and standing thereby escaping their shackles. Himes's narrative is therefore reacting against what could be considered to be negative constructions of black identity (i.e. Dick) by replacing them with what he considers to be more realistic individuals (Joe, Spats and Bishop). As such, the role of identity becomes pivotal for Himes, and he uses identity as a cultural and racial signifier: he furthermore realises the importance of redefining black American identity to be something which is more representative of the feelings and aspirations that young black American men typically felt at that time. When considering contemporary genre fiction as a whole, it is rare to find a representative black figure (neither contemporaries Hammett nor Chandler have any notable characters in their novels). For this reason, Himes was a trailblazer for black American writers, and stressed the importance of identity or voice through his characters.

As mentioned, black individual identity is a theme consistent within Himes's short stories. The importance of this identity operates on two levels: firstly, that the white cultural hegemony of identity needed to be examined and challenged, and secondly, that a new identity, defined by black American writers should replace the former. In 'Head Waiter', Dick Small attains only the first level of this identity, being regarded with neither fondness nor contempt. He functions as a focal point or concentration of a negative stereotype towards black Americans from whence Himes can begin articulating the kind of values constitute being a young black man in 1930s America.

The short story 'Heaven Has Changed' features a more overt criticism of white misappropriation of black identity. To summarise the story, a black soldier is killed in wartime, and upon his death, arrives in Christian heaven. He almost immediately becomes aware that heaven is in fact a cotton plantation, which is being dutifully attended to by black workers of all ages. Soon enough, the soldier discovers that someone called Uncle Tom has died, and that the plantation is controlled by an elderly white man called Jim Crow. It is also revealed that there are two Gods, being referred to as the "Little God" and the "Big God". As in early mid-century America, a racial divide is prevalent, with the "Big God" being an omnipotent (white) being, and Jim Crow being the personification of racial segregation laws. In this story, the narrative has Himes's central character as an observer only, witnessing the conflict between passive and more proactive black workers. Interestingly, Himes has younger blacks as being more consciously racially aware, seemingly belying a quiet optimism in the power that youth brings to change. It is evident that Himes prefers youthful idealism to the conservatism of age: "The Little God praised the virtues of Uncle Tom. He said Uncle Tom had been a good servant... He lamented the fact that Uncle Tom's children were not like their father... [Uncle Tom]."¹⁵ Indeed, the central characters of 'His Last Day'

¹⁵ Himes, Chester 'Heaven Has Changed' in C. Hernton (ed.) *The Collected Stories of Chester Himes*, (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1990). p.74.

and 'Looking Down The Street' are also younger men. In the narrative, the deceased Uncle Tom is exposed as being a fraud, a tool with which to oppress black people. He is a fraud because he failed to challenge the white hegemony, an act of cowardice in delegating this responsibility to his children. In fact, Uncle Tom's death, far from being lamented, is presented as an opportunity to precipitate change. In 'Heaven Has Changed', Himes presents a utopian vision of black emancipation which makes the story one of the more positive of Himes's expositions. Hope and idealism, rather than frustration and despair, are articulated to the reader. In an optimistic tone, the death of Uncle Tom symbolises the death of negative stereotypes of black Americans, and though transposed from reality into the idealistic setting of Heaven, it is nonetheless a realistic dream, as evidenced by later black American rights activists. As already noted, Himes constructs a personal identity for the Jim Crow laws, which function to demonstrate prejudice and racial segregation; as much as the hotel restaurant in 'Head Waiter' functions as a theatre of middle class American society, 'Heaven Has Changed' fuses together key elements of black struggle, chiefly legal and social apartheid and optimism and change.

5. Conclusion

The four short stories examined in this article were published in the decade between 1933 and 1943. They tend to develop the thoughts and feelings of individuals and for this reason: that these stories in part form Himes's reflective narrative. The lifelike portrayal of the struggles and feelings of Spats, Joe and Dick suggests that Himes's writing has 'insider knowledge' of economic and racial difficulties. In keeping with conventions the hard-boiled genre, Himes strived to create an impression of authenticity, and to this end he succeeds. He is clearly indebted to personal experience, even more so than Dashiell Hammett. It is known that Hammett served as a private detective before finding a career writing detective fiction, and therefore began writing as having been an 'insider'. Ironically, Himes started writing while he was 'inside'; the experience of being in prison making his earlier writing more introspective and articulate, and as a result of this, Himes became a writer of people, their thoughts, their fears and most profoundly, their anger. In the words of Jerry Ward Jr: "Himes... was far more committed to the portrayal of individual characters and less to the task of integrating thesis with an imaginative narrative."¹⁶ Even so, Ward Jr omits to acknowledge that Himes was working within genre fiction, and the focus upon the flaws and vices within individuals is an integral part of the genre. Himes's writing differs from other hard-boiled writing because it is more personal, intimate and introspective. His characters are vivid representations of black American males in conflict with society and themselves:

¹⁶ Ward Jr, Jerry W. 'Everybody's protest novel: the Richard Wright Era', in M. Graham (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the African American Novel*, (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

“He (Spats) took his toothbrush from his vest pocket and lathered some soap on it. Then a little voice whispered in his ear, mocking him. ‘What are you cleaning up so much for?’ it asked. ‘You’re not going anywhere but to hell, and it don’t make any difference how you look going there.’”¹⁷

Himes thus commandeered the pulpit for the voice of working class black men, as they struggle against their personal failings and to find a voice in the segregated society they occupy.

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¹⁷ Himes, Chester ‘His Last Day’ in C. Hernton (ed.) *The Collected Stories of Chester Himes*, (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 1990). p.293.

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