Chapter 6 ~

Strength as Disease
Bordering on Evil

Dorothy West’s Cleo Judson

If any strong black female character in African American literature lives up to the stereotype of being destructive and domineering, then that character is Cleo Jericho Judson in Dorothy West’s *The Living Is Easy* (1948). Not only does Cleo dominate, silence, and emasculate her husband, but she turns her daughter into a mousy, obedient drudge and destroys the marriages of two of her three sisters; the third sister’s husband ends up in a mental institution. Throughout all her destructive and psychologically damaging behavior, however, Cleo is never effectively challenged in her position of authority. Her husband, her daughter, and her sisters understand, accept, welcome, and/or tolerate her will to power and her will to be first and foremost in their lives. Her refusal to consider their wishes, combined with her absolute refusal to allow any opposition, makes clearer than any other portrait in the literature the pathological nature of the strength of some strong black women characters. The strength that may be excused or understood in some instances has, with Cleo, metamorphosed into a disease that feeds on the perceived weakness or lack of decision-making ability of those around her. Cleo is an insatiable cancer, and those around her keep willingly giving her new cells on which to feed. She feeds ravenously and is consistently effective in suppressing any tinges of guilt or other expressions of conscience. She masks her emotions by taming down within herself any urge to show sustained affection. She posits such expressions as weakness and as minor battles lost in the war against men and poverty. In fact, she describes getting the money from her husband to rent a ten-room house as a “minor skirmish with her husband.”¹ Determined to win at all costs, she refuses to count

¹ T. Harris, *Saints, Sinners, Saviors* © Trudier Harris 2001
those costs until it is much, much too late. The implications of what she 
does as well as a consideration of how she is constructed place Cleo and _The 
Living Is Easy_ into an especially problematic consideration of strong black fe-
male character.

The novel is set primarily in Boston in 1914 and the four years following it. It has a brief but important flashback to Cleo’s childhood in South Car-
olina as well as a look at her husband Bart’s early days as an entrepreneur in 
Springfield, Massachusetts, where Cleo was sent to work in service when she 
was 14. Bart Judson, the “Black Banana King of Boston,” marries the beau-
tiful young Cleo Jericho, who is 23 years his junior, in part to save her from 
the young white man enamored of her in Springfield as well as because he 
falls desperately in love with her. In Boston, when she is 29 and Bart has cor-
nered the banana market for which he is famed, Cleo schemes to move to a 
larger house where she can more appropriately raise Judy, her five-year-old 
daughter, and to which she hopes to bring her three sisters, Lily, Charity, and 
Serena, each of whom has a child. Lily resides in New York (where she has re-
mained after a planned trip to Boston because she was too frightened to con-
tinue on the train and where she has married the porter who took pity on her 
during that fateful ride); Charity and her husband and child live in South 
Carolina, a short distance from the family home; and Serena, her husband 
Robert, and their child live in the family home with the sisters’ father fol-
lowing the mother’s death. Cleo succeeds in bringing her sisters and each of 
their children to Boston for an extended period of five months that turns into 
four years, which effectively means divorce for Charity and Lily, and separa-
tion for Serena.

There is also a communal influential dimension to Cleo’s character that, 
with the exception of Baby Suggs, is not apparent in the characters of other 
strong black women characters. Cleo’s scheming has as its base—in part—
an effort to move into the best circles of “colored” upper-class Boston Soci-
ety. She has, prior to the novel’s opening, become friends with a white/black 
woman of substantial family name. This woman, Althea (Thea) Binney, and 
her brother Simeon provide additional grist to Cleo’s strength mill. She in-
tercedes with another society woman on Thea’s behalf and schemes to get 
that woman, known as The Duchess, married to Simeon. She hosts a Christ-
mas party at which persons judged to be most important in colored society 
show up. They are not bashful about trading on their names for the benefits 
of Bart Judson’s money. As parvenu, Cleo plays her role well and barters lives 
and fortunes as if they were poker chips. Her ability to effect these commu-
nal outcomes lies in large part to the stuffiness that surrounds colored soci-
ety; few of the people actually talk in great depth to each other. That aura of 
silence enables Cleo to lie, lie, lie, and if anyone ever finds out, they are all 
too polite to challenge her.