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AN EXPLORATION OF MOTHERHOOD AND SEXUALITY IN LATE-TWENTIETH
CENTURY AFRICAN-AMERICAN LITERATURE

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Abstract

Throughout history, women's bodies have been viewed as either pure or impure; they carry both the potential for mothering and the potential for seduction. Society has categorized females, based on how they have used their bodies, as either the Madonna or the prostitute; in literature we have seen the Victorian "Angel of the House" versus the femme fatale. As patriarchy has perpetuated the notion that women's primary function is reproduction, women have been expected to reserve their sexuality solely for this purpose. Engaging in sexual intercourse outside of marriage, or inside of marriage without procreating is, therefore, inadmissible. This has created the contention that motherhood and sexual agency cannot coexist.

A woman's sexual behavior, or lack thereof, has formed her entire identity, and been the basis for her acceptance or rejection by her community. Females who conform to the patriarchal ideal of a reproductive, nurturing mother are construed as "good" by their community, while those who choose to remain childless and/or sexually active are construed as "bad." This is exemplified by the female characters in Toni Morrison's Sula. This thesis will demonstrate that in the novel, the women who become mothers and abstain from sexual activities are, despite tremendous flaws, deemed natural and good, while the women who exhibit sexual agency are ostracized as unnatural and the "Other." Furthermore, it will look at the effects of the mothers on their children and themselves, arguing that the "good" women are destructive, while the outcast females produce more positive results.

Keywords: Toni Morrison, Sula, womanhood, motherhood, sexuality, Moynihan Report

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	iii
Introduction.....	1
I. The Moynihan Report.....	8
II. Womanhood vs. Motherhood.....	17
III. Outlaw Women.....	22
A. The Independent Woman	
B. The Childless Woman	
C. The Sexual Woman	
D. Results	
IV. The “Good” Woman.....	34
A. Destructive to Children	
B. Self-Destructive	
Conclusion.....	46
Works Cited.....	4?

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Introduction

“When you gone to get married? You need to have some babies. It’ll settle you.”

“I don’t want to make nobody else. I want to make myself.”

“Selfish. Ain’t no woman got no business floatin’ around without no man... It ain’t right for you to want to stay off by yourself. You need... I’m a tell you what you need.”

- Eva to Sula in Toni Morrison’s *Sula*, 1973 (p. 92)

According to feminist theorist Adrienne Rich, throughout patriarchal mythology, there have been two contradictory notions of women. First, the female body is “impure, corrupt, the site of discharges, bleedings, dangerous to masculinity, a source of moral and physical contamination, ‘the devil’s gateway’” (Rich 34). This same body, however, is also viewed as the “physical potential for motherhood,” and through this lens of motherhood the woman is seen as “beneficent, sacred, pure, asexual, [and] nourishing” (34). A woman, then, has had to choose between these two identities; she can either exhibit her sexuality or she can become a mother. If the woman wants to be accepted by patriarchal society rather than outcast as the “Other,” her choice is very limited: to fulfill her constructed gender role, a woman must become a nurturing mother. Patriarchy has perpetuated the belief that women’s sexual capacity exists for the sole purpose of fulfilling this role; that is, a woman does not inherently enjoy sex, and she only wants to engage in it for reason of reproduction. Motherhood in its institutional forms is crucial to the survival of patriarchy, and “therefore [it] has to be treated as axiom, as ‘nature’ itself” (Rich 43). Both women who choose to remain sexually active after they have had children and women who choose to be sexually active without ever having children are a threat to the concept that women are innately maternal. If patriarchal society expanded the narrow concept of womanhood to include these “deviant” females, it would reveal that the heteronormative ideal of maternal womanhood is constructed. To maintain an illusion of power, therefore, patriarchy must construe sexually independent women as unnatural, the aforementioned “Other,” and oftentimes, mentally ill.

The community depicted in Toni Morrison’s Sula exemplifies this patriarchal thinking and its impact on women. Morrison’s southern Ohio town of Medallion, referred to by its

inhabitants as “The Bottom,” functions as more than a merely setting; it is a complex character as crucial to the novel as the protagonists. The Bottom represents “two rather incompatible ideas working at the same time: the complexity of the people living in the community, and also a sense of ‘cohesiveness’ that exists” (Wilson 24). This cohesiveness occurs in response to transgressive behavior, when the community unites together in defense of their patriarchal ideals. The women are judged based solely on their adherence to the previously mentioned patriarchy ideal of the nurturing, asexual mother. This thesis will argue that their deviance from this model is judged more harshly than any other sin. Other immoral behavior, even murder, can be overlooked by the community, as long as the offense occurs in the private sphere.

Additionally, this thesis will prove that the type of mothering so fervently promoted and protected by The Bottom is incredibly destructive, both to the children and the mothers themselves. The mothers whom the communities view as “good” based on their selflessness, abstinence, and nurturing often raise children who are dependent and unhappy. Additionally, by failing to maintain any identity outside of “mother,” the women inevitably experience extreme suffering if their grown children do leave. In contrast, many of the mothers deemed “bad” by their community for being too apathetic about or absent from child-rearing actually produce independent and successful children. Their attention to their own needs, including sexual needs, both strengthens their own self-identity and provides a healthy role model for their offspring.

Why then does The Bottom, and patriarchal society in general, cling tightly to the image of the mother as a Madonna? This thesis will explore the reasons that perpetuating this unrealistic ideal benefits and furthers patriarchy, beginning in the Victorian period. Section II will present the literature of this era that promoted the contention that women do not enjoy sex,

giving us William Acton's infamous line, "What men are habitually, women are only exceptionally."

Though women of all races have had to fight against the deeply internalized notion that motherhood and sexuality cannot coexist, the black woman has had to face an additional hurdle. Feminist Michele Wallace describes her experience growing up as a black woman in the 1960s:

The fact is, we had all been born into a situation in which it was continually brought home to us that there was only one acceptable standard of womanhood: Doris Day, housewife and mother—pretty, attractive, sexy even, yet inaccessible and virginal, married to a prince who never cursed his wife, never raped his children, and always brought home more than sufficient bacon. The circumstances of our lives made that standard not only impossible to achieve, but masochistic to hope for. First of all, we were black and therefore could never be Doris Day. Second, our needs were really quite different. (Wallace 103)

While the black woman was expected to fit the heteronormative model of womanhood required of all females, circumstances, such as divorce and desertion, obliged her to step into a traditionally masculine role as head of household. Black women had to walk a delicate line: exude enough strength to be both the primary breadwinner and primary caretaker for their family, yet still maintain the "Doris Day" standard. The strength exhibited by the black female in executing this job was incredibly threatening to men. The black woman was considered "too domineering, too strong, too aggressive, too outspoken, too castrating, [and] too masculine" (Wallace 91). Section I of the thesis will demonstrate how men attempted to secure their "natural" position as head of the home through the publication of "The Moynihan Report" in 1965. This report, conducted as part of President Johnson's War on Poverty, blamed the matriarchal structure of the black family for black male unemployment, welfare rates, education failures, and poverty. Moynihan attempted to "take the responsibility for racism off white shoulders, where it belonged, and place

it on the blacks [specifically the black females], themselves” (Wallace 109). Moynihan’s study encouraged black men to resume their rightful control of their households and families. It is through control of the mother, Adrienne Rich argues, that “man assures himself of possession of his children; through control of his children he insures the disposition of his patrimony and the safe passage of his soul after death” (64). The white male sought to reinstate the black male as the authoritative family figure by suggesting he take example from the “utterly-masculine” world of the military (“Moynihan Report” 57).

Only a decade later, the black female characters in Toni Morrison’s Sula grappled with the same challenges as the wives criticized in “The Moynihan Report.” Sula, published in 1973, came on the heels of the second wave of feminism, which so greatly threatened patriarchy. As aforementioned, when its power structure is endangered, patriarchy responds by construing the threat as unnatural or pathological in order to maintain its own “natural” supremacy. The females of The Bottom and Brewster Place are deemed to be aberrant if they do not behave according to the heteronormative ideal of womanhood that has persisted throughout history, from the Victorian era’s “Angel in the House” to mid-twentieth century’s Doris Day. The strict definition of a good woman requires that a woman:

- Must feel the innate desire to become a mother; must express her nurturing instincts before and after having children,
- Must actually become a mother; exceptions will not be made for infertility, medical condition, biological clock, sexual orientation, not finding right mate, career, etc., and

- Must control her sexual desires.

Women who do not meet any one of these criteria undermine patriarchy and are labeled “the Other.” For the purposes of this thesis, they will be considered “outlaw women.” Section III will identify the female characters of *The Bottom* who, intentionally or unintentionally, become outlaw women for three different reasons:

- Refusal to place their own needs second to their children
- Refusal to have children
- Refusal to abstain from sexual intercourse after reproducing, or engaging in sexual intercourse without the intention of reproducing

These women will be labeled independent, childless, and sexual, respectively. Section IV will present the “good women” of the novel, labeled as such by their community for adhering to the patriarchal standard. While they are accepted by the community for their conduct in the public sphere, we will analyze the actual effects of their mothering in the private sphere, which are:

- Destructive to children
- Self-destructive

The thesis will conclude in Section V with a recommendation for separating womanhood from motherhood, because, as this thesis will strive to prove, the patriarchal expectations for a “good” woman are unrealistic and do not adequately describe many women’s experiences, as we will see in *Sula*. Becoming a mother is not the only, nor necessarily the best, creative outlet for women,

and womanhood and motherhood should not be considered to be synonymous. Furthermore, the definition of motherhood must be expanded to allow mothers to explore more of their capacities as human beings in order to avoid becoming destructive to themselves and their children, as we will see in Sula.

The Moynihan Report

“The image of the African American as the victim of some vague form of mental dysfunction persists, as does the perception of the inappropriately powerful black woman as the source of the problem.”

- Marta Caminero-Santangelo, *The Madwoman Can't Speak* (p. 130).

Background

In his first State of the Union address on January 8, 1964, President Lyndon B. Johnson declared a “War on Poverty.” Aiming to combat the high national poverty rate, Johnson introduced the Economy Opportunity Act of 1964, a program he told Congress would “strike at the causes, not just the consequences of poverty” (“219: Special Message”). The Act created the Office of Economic Opportunity, and was the beginning of a series of social welfare programs passed during Johnson’s presidency, including, VISTA, Job Corps, Head Start, legal services and the Community Action Program. When Johnson delivered his speech, the national poverty rate had already slightly improved, dropping from 22.4% in 1959 to 19% in 1964. Among the black population, however, the poverty rate was a shocking 41.8%. ([Poverty](#)).

Under the Kennedy and then the Johnson administrations, Daniel Patrick Moynihan served as the Assistant Secretary of Labor. A former Fulbright fellow at the London School of Economics, Moynihan’s job involved studying data from the Department of Labor. While analyzing unemployment charts, he discovered a troubling correlation between nonwhite¹ male unemployment rate and new welfare cases. The graph that became known as “Moynihan’s Scissors,” showed the lines crossing and continuing to diverge; even though the unemployment was decreasing, new welfare cases were increasing [See Figure 1A]. (“Social Disruptions”). Moynihan began research to understand “Moynihan’s Scissors” as well as the reason that, in Moynihan’s words, “the gap between the Negro and most other groups in American society [was] widening.”

¹ Throughout the report, Moynihan uses the terms “Negroes” and “nonwhites” interchangeably.

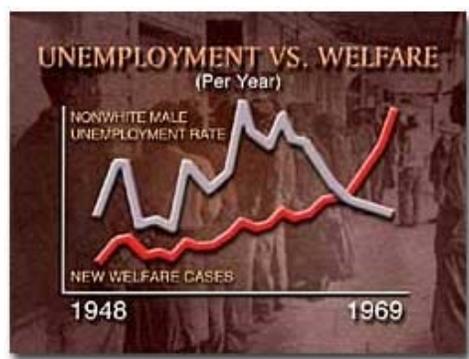


Figure 1A

Overview

In 1965 Moynihan submitted his report, “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action,” later known as “The Moynihan Report,” which identified black family structure as the primary problem. “At the heart of the deterioration of the fabric of Negro society is the deterioration of the Negro family,” the report reads, adding, “It is the fundamental source of the weakness of the Negro community at the present time.” By studying unemployment, welfare, and education statistics, Moynihan discovered that more than 36% of black children were being brought up in single-parent homes, namely with females serving as the head of the household. He therefore concluded that “the Negro family in the urban ghettos [was] crumbling” due to its matriarchal structure.

The “Other”

Throughout the report, Moynihan uses the terms “Negroes” and “nonwhites” interchangeably, creating a false binary: everyone who is not Caucasian is black. However, this binary fails to include numerous other racial and ethnic groups. In a footnote, Moynihan reports that in 1960, blacks made up only 92.1% of nonwhites; the remaining 7.9% consisted of Indians, Japanese and Chinese. Moynihan says that this remaining percent has a lower male unemployment rate and the families are “probably more stable.” He then hypothesizes that if the

“nonwhite” statistics referred only to blacks, “the degree of disorganization of the Negro family and underemployment of the Negro men” would be even higher. However, the main problem with this type of binary thinking is not that it slightly skews statistics, but that it leads to artificial dichotomies. Just as Moynihan assumes what is not white must be black, he assumes what is not white must be wrong. Since whites were the majority of the population, they become normative, and everything that is not white becomes the “other.”

Moynihan uses normative family structures as the standard by which to compare white and black families. He writes that “the white family has achieved a high degree of stability and is maintaining that stability. By contrast, the family structure of lower class Negroes is highly unstable, and in many urban centers is approaching complete breakdown.” It is here that we see the inaccurate dichotomy: since the white family structure is successful, the black family structure must be unsuccessful. In his report, Moynihan takes the concept of “Other” one step further by coining the phrase, “tangle of pathology,” which carries connotations of not just difference, but of disease. Marta Caminero-Santangelo argues that “the Moynihan report can be understood as quite simply a new incarnation of the sleight of hand whereby that which is seen as “Other” is labeled mental illness” (129).

Matriarchy

To demonstrate that the black family has a matriarchal structure, Moynihan presents the following statistics²:

² All of these statistics are from “The Moynihan Report”

- “Family size increased among nonwhite families, with and without fathers, between 1950 and 1960. Family size among white families changed little, with a slight increase in the size of husband-wife families balanced by a decline in the size of families without fathers.”
- “The Negro fertility rate is now 1.4 times greater than the white; the Negro generation rate is 1.7 times that of the white.”
- “Some 29% of Negro males were unemployed at one time or another.”
- “55% of Negro women, age 25 to 64, are in the workforce, versus 42% of white women.”
- “Nearly a quarter of Negro women living in cities who have ever been married are divorced, separated, or living apart from their husbands.”
- “Fatherless nonwhite families increased by a sixth between 1950 and 1960, but held constant for white families.”
- “Almost one-fourth of Negro families are headed by females... The percent of nonwhite³ families headed by a female is more than double the percent for whites.”

Through these statistics, Moynihan traces the problem of black poverty back to population growth. He is able to place the blame for large families solely on the female through his careful wording choices: “Negro women not only have more children, but have them earlier” (25). Conveniently ignoring the fact that men are required for reproduction, Moynihan only says that the *women* have more children, essentially blaming them for a growth that “must inevitably lead

³ Again, this is assuming that all nonwhites are black. Refer to footnote 1.

to unconcealable crisis in Negro employment.” With a large family to support and a father who is absent, unemployed, or low paid, the Negro woman goes to work. Rather than applaud her motivation and work ethic, Moynihan faults her for emasculating her husband. He argues that a “dependence on the mother’s income undermines the position of the father and deprives the children of the kind of attention... which is a standard feature of middle-class upbringing.”

As the primary, and sometimes only, wage earner, the black mother becomes the head of the household. Moynihan says, “A fundamental fact of Negro family life is the often reversed roles of husband and wife,” and later, “Negro husbands usually have low power.” It can be logically concluded, then, that in a family whose husband and wife roles are not reversed—that is to say, in a “normative family”—the wife usually has low power. Moynihan, not surprisingly, refuses to admit this, saying that “the majority of white families are *equalitarian*, [whereas] the largest percentage of Negro families are dominated by the wife” (emphasis mine).

To emphasize the “unnaturalness” of this matriarchal structure, Moynihan informs his reader that while “a very large [rising] percent of Negro families are headed by females... the percentage of such families among whites has been dropping since 1940.” At the time of the report, 14% of black children were receiving Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) assistance⁴, compared to 2% of white children. In two-thirds of these AFDC families, the father was absent because of desertion. Yet rather than make the connection between this abandonment and the female head of household, Moynihan says that “the Negro has been forced into a matriarchal structure.” Moynihan eludes that it is a result of a larger, unseen power, not the fault

⁴ Established by the Social Security Act of 1935 as a grant program to enable states to provide cash welfare payments for needy children who had been deprived of parental support or care because their father or mother was absent from the home, incapacitated, deceased, or unemployed.

of the black men. In fact, Moynihan claims that the black man is the *victim* of this matriarchal structure, as it “seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole, and imposes a crushing burden on the Negro male and, in consequence, on a great many Negro women as well.” The effect of the structure on women is an afterthought.

Surprisingly, Moynihan admits that patriarchy may be constructed rather than inherent: “There is, presumably, no special reason,” he acknowledges, “why a society in which males are dominant in family relationships to be preferred to a matriarchal arrangement.” He contends that it is not the matriarchal structure itself that is the problem, but rather the fact that the patriarchy is trying to function within a matriarchal society. Moynihan says, “It is clearly a disadvantage for a minority group to be operating on one principle, while the great majority of the population, and the one with most advantages to begin with, is operating on another.” *The Moynihan Report* zeros in on this contention —that the black family structure is “out of line with the rest of American society”— as the primary cause of black poverty.

Conclusion

Moynihan claims that the goal of the study was “to define a problem, rather than propose solutions to it.” Solutions, he argues, are difficult to suggest for three reasons. First, many people, both inside and outside of the Government, will disagree that the high number of impoverished Negro families is a problem. Second, the causes behind the poverty are so numerous and interrelated that any program suggestions, no matter how extensive, would fail to address the entire problem. The third, and most alarming, reason that Moynihan gives, is that “a number of responsible persons [believe] this problem may be in fact out of control.” However,

though he stops short of proposing any government initiatives or social legislation, Moynihan makes it clear what *he* believes is the solution: “The cycle can only be broken if these distortions are set right... national effort towards the problems of Negro Americans must be directed towards the question of family structure.”

To reestablish patriarchy, Moynihan suggests the black male enter the “utterly masculine world” of the military. Serving in the United States Armed Forces, Moynihan says, would give young black men “a dramatic and desperately needed change” from their “disorganized and matrifocal” home (57). He further entices men to enlist by saying that the military is the one place in the world where the black man will not suffer discrimination⁵, but will be treated as “one man equal to any other man in a world where the category ‘Negro’ and ‘white’ do not exist” (57). Moynihan anonymously quotes a black man who testified at a Civil Rights Commission hearing that his time in the Army was “the only time [he] ever felt like a man” (57).

Moynihan encourages black males to join the armed forces seemingly for their own benefit, so that they may enjoy military advantages such as the G.I. Bill, mortgage guarantees, Federal life insurance, Civil Service preference, veterans’ hospitals and pensions. However, if we look closely at his description of military life, it appears his motivations for their enlistment are not quite so pure: “The Armed Forces are... a world away from women, a world run by strong men of unquestioned authority, where discipline, if harsh, is nonetheless orderly and predictable, and where rewards, if limited, are granted on the basis of performance” (57). Moynihan hopes that the ultra-masculine military leaders will inspire the black men, so that when they return

⁵ In 1963 the Civil Rights Commission found that, “Negro enlisted men enjoy relatively better opportunities in the Armed Forces than in the civilian economy in every clerical, technical, and skilled field for which the data permit comparison.”

home, they will mimic this behavior and become the unquestioned authoritative figure of their own household. The Army's recruiting message, "In the U.S. Army you get to know what it means to feel like a man," will take on new meaning as the men return home and force their wives to get to know what it means for them to feel like a man.

"Two Halves of an Equation"

In order for the black male to become the authoritative figure, he must have someone to authorize. Patriarchal society "requires that someone other than men exist to establish and maintain a hierarchy whereby maleness is designated superior and men retain power" (Ireland 107). Therefore, for a black man to retain his position as a controlling, masculine husband, he needed an obedient, feminine wife, not the strong, black females serving as the head of their household. In his report, Moynihan, is essentially arguing, "despite his rhetorical disguises, that black men felt 'unmanned by their lack of a dominant position within the family, and that they could not 'protect' the families as befitted their status as men" (Caminero-Santangelo 145). In order to correctly fit their cliché heterosexual role, that is, the other half of the males' equation, head of the household black women and their offspring would have to conform to a strict patriarchal ideal (Dubey 55). This confining ideal, as explained in section II, is both unrealistic and destructive, as we will see in sections IV and V, respectively.

Womanhood vs. Motherhood

“Having a child makes a girl a mother—it doesn’t necessarily make her an adult woman. Yet there is an implicit assumption that motherhood is intrinsic to adult female identity. This assumption necessarily implies an ‘absence’ for any woman who is then not a mother.”

– Mardy Ireland, *Reconceiving Woman* (p. 1)

Woman: Angel or Prostitute

As earlier mentioned, feminist Adrienne Rich asserts that patriarchal mythology has promoted two contradictory ideas of women: she is either a dangerous, seductive temptress or a holy, virginal mother. In reality, women do not naturally fall exclusively into one category or another, therefore, “to maintain two such notions... the masculine imagination has had to divide women, to see [them], and force [them] to see [themselves], as polarized into good or evil, fertile or barren, pure or impure” (Rich 34). This thinking resulted in the common Victorian stereotypes of angel-wife and prostitute, neither of which “had to do with women’s actual sexuality and everything to do with the male subjective experience of women” (Rich 34).

History

For centuries, institutionalized heterosexuality told women that they were “dangerous, unchaste, [and] the embodiment of carnal lust” (Rich 42). A women’s sexuality and her potential for seduction were seen to be too threatening to the male hierarchy. For fear that women might use their sex as a tool to advance their position in society and/or manipulate men, “Victorian women were not allowed to freely engage themselves in sexual acts unless it was with the specific purpose of procreation” (Watson). A woman was expected to engage in conjugal acts only when necessary, that is, to please her husband or to reproduce (Watson). To perpetuate this asexual behavior, generations of women were raised to believe that they would not even enjoy sex.

Literature on this subject worked both to discourage women from exploring their sexuality (by telling them that females couldn't experience orgasm) and to enhance men's feelings of power (it was not necessary to pleasure women; the women existed to pleasure them). One of the most influential publications was *Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs*, written in 1867 by British gynecologist William Acton. Acton promoted the notion that "many females never feel any sexual excitement whatever" (145). He explained that:

The best mothers, wives, and managers of households know little of or are careless about sexual indulgences. Love of home, of children, and domestic duties, are the only passions they feel. As a general rule, a modest woman seldom desires any sexual gratification for herself. She submits to her husband, but only to please him; and, but for the desire of maternity, would far rather be relieved from his attentions... (Acton 145)

There existed, of course, women who did not behave in accordance with this theory of the passionless wife. "It is too true, I admit, as the divorce courts show, that there are some few women who have sexual desires so strong that they surpass those of men, and shock public feeling by their exhibition," Acton acknowledged (144). To account for these women, Acton provided the explanation so often given to "the Other:" mental illness. Acton cited "the existence of sexual excitement terminating even in nymphomania, a form of insanity that those accustomed to visit lunatic asylums must be fully conversant with" (144). Undoubtedly worried that encounters with these "insane" women would influence men's perception of females in general, Acton warned young men not to "form their ideas of women's feeling from what they notice... among loose, or at least, low and vulgar women" (Acton 144). Acton was assuring men that their wives did not enjoy sex, so they need not worry about bringing her to climax, which would be undertaking "marital duties... beyond their exhausted strength" (145). In conclusion, Acton

reported that “I have taken pains to obtain and compare abundant evidence on this subject, and the result of my inquires [is] the majority of women (happily for them) are not very much troubled with sexual feeling of any kind” (144). Acton received some criticism for his work, such as in medical journal *The Alkaloidal Clinic*⁶, which accused him of teaching women that sexual feeling was indecent and immoral. However, despite multiple attempts to disprove Acton’s theories, his views remained dominant throughout the late 1800s and into the next century (Watson).

Challenging Patriarchy

Prior to the availability of effective birth control, “to be a woman and sexual was to become a mother, but to become a mother was to become nonsexual” (Ireland 5). However, with the second-wave of feminism in the early 1960s, “young women [began to] challenge this collective paradox and highlight the difference between a woman’s productive capacity and her sexuality” (Ireland 5). Women engaging in sex without the intention of having children, both in and out of wedlock, revealed “the difference between female sexual desire and a maternal desire” (Ireland 5). This also undermined the long-standing patriarchal belief expressed by Acton that women did not enjoy sex. Society could “no longer ignore the fact that female sexuality exist[ed] and express[ed] itself separately from its reproductive function” (Ireland 148).

The increased sexual behavior of single women, married women without children, lesbian women, widowed women, divorced women, etc., was extremely threatening to patriarchy for one reason: none of this behavior was reproductive. Since women’s role in society

⁶ *The Alkaloidal Clinic* was named *American Journal of Clinical Medicine* and continues to publish today.

is that of the nurturing mother, patriarchy perpetuates the notion that women have an *intrinsic desire* to fulfill this role. Therefore, women having sex without reproducing—choosing not to become mothers—are “a complication in our theories of female development” (Ireland 7). In patriarchal society, there is “no normative female identity for the woman who is not a mother,” which ends up leaving out quite a few women (Ireland 104). The strict definition of womanhood is not representative of the female population. In response to this, Gloria Steinem once asked, “If the shoe doesn’t fit, must we change the foot?” It seems the answer is yes. Since heteronormative ideals will not expand to include all women, women must alter themselves to fit them. Women who choose not to adapt, by refusal to place their own needs second to their children, refusal to have children, refusal to abstain from sexual intercourse after reproducing or engaging in sexual intercourse without the intention of reproducing, or all three, will be harshly viewed by their communities as dangerous and transgressive.

Outlaw Women

“Outlaw women are fascinating— not always for their behavior, but because historically women are seen as naturally disruptive and their status is an illegal one from birth if it is not under the rule of men. In much literature a woman’s escape from male rule led to regret, misery, if not complete disaster.”

— Toni Morrison, *Sula* (p. xv)

Independent Women

"I would give up the unessential; I would give my money, I would give my life for my children; but I wouldn't give myself. I can't make it more clear; it's only something which I am beginning to comprehend, which is revealing itself to me." – Edna Pontellier in Kate Chopin's The Awakening (p. 53)

This realization of protagonist Edna Pontellier in The Awakening— that she loved her children, but was not willing to lose her sense of self by identifying *only* as their mother— is exemplary of an independent woman. These are women who may or may not become mothers, but either way, they don't identify with an innate, nurturing desire. They may have children, intentionally or unintentionally, but they don't feel that mothering comes naturally to them. They demonstrate Rich's contention that "motherhood is earned, first through... pregnancy and childbirth... then through learning to nurture, which does not come by instinct" (12). Though these independent women love their children, they are more apathetic towards their upbringing and do not dote on them the way patriarchy expects of them. As expressed by Edna, they do not sacrifice their own needs for those of their children.

Though Edna has borne children, the narrator tells us that she "was not a mother-woman." The mother-women, we are told, "seemed to prevail that summer at Grand Isle. It was easy to know them, fluttering about with extended, protecting wings when any harm, real or imaginary, threatened their precious brood. They were women who idolized their children, worshipped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels" (Chopin 19). These "mother-women" as Chopin calls them, fulfill the demands of institutionalized motherhood, that is, "maternal 'instinct' rather than intelligence, selflessness rather than self-realization, relation to others rather than the creation of

self” (Rich 42). However, these fictional Grand Isle mother-women are not typical of very many females. In Reconceiving Women, Mardy Ireland argues that “mothers have always had, and will always have, maternal ambivalence, and mothers have certainly always had many other desires besides mothering, whether or not familiar or societal acceptance validation of these desires was present” (130). Morrison creates female characters who demonstrate maternal ambivalence to varying degrees. For this, they are ostracized and considered bad mothers.

In Sula, Hannah Peace moves back into her mother’s home after her husband Rekus⁷ dies to raise her only daughter, protagonist Sula. Hannah is a “kind and generous woman” with “extraordinary beauty and funky elegance of manner” (44). However, she is far from the idealized mother. As a young girl, Sula overhears her mother in the kitchen discussing the problems of child rearing with her two friends, Patsy and Valentine. Out of the three women, Hannah is most vocal about maternal love. As one woman complains about her son and claims she cannot wait until he moves out, Hannah interrupts with, “Shut your mouth. You love the ground he pee on” (Morrison 57). Then, after the second woman reveals that her daughter is grown, and yet she still “can’t say love is exactly what [she] feels” towards her, Hannah replies, “Sure you do. You love her just like I love Sula” (Morrison 57).

However, Hannah is also realistic about the fact that mother-daughter relationships are not always loving. As Rich argues, “the woman with children is prey to far more complicated, subversive feelings. Love and anger can exist concurrently.” She says that “the institution of motherhood is not identical with bearing and caring for children, any more than the institution of

⁷ Rekus never actually appears in the novel; we are told he was a “laughing man” who died when Sula was three years old.

heterosexuality is identical with intimacy and sexual love” (Rich 42). Morrison proves Rich’s argument when Hannah admits, “... I love Sula. I just don’t like her. That’s the difference.” Her companions agree, stating, “Guess so. Likin’ them is another thing” (Morrison 57).

Sula, however, is stunned by Hannah’s words, which send her “flying up stairs.” She then stands at the window in bewilderment, “fingering the curtain edge, aware of a sting in her eye... [thinking] dark thoughts” (Morrison 57). According to Rich, Sula’s shock and distress at the failure of the maternal bond is typical of all females. She argues that “because young humans remain dependent upon nurture for a much longer period than other mammals... where women are assigned almost total responsibility for children, most of us first know both love and disappointment, power and tenderness, in the person of a woman” (Rich 11). Sula’s childhood disillusionment with Hannah and motherhood affects her later decision to not become a mother herself and instead lead “an experimental life” (Morrison 118). Caminero-Santangelo calls this scene a pivotal moment in Sula’s life, arguing that Hannah’s words “sever Sula from a sense of connection to family, and by extension, to community” (146). Sula’s mother breaks the ideological stereotype of motherhood not only through her maternal ambivalence, but because of her sexual behavior, as we will later see. Hannah’s identification as a lover, friend, and daughter in addition to being Sula’s mother is representative of “the ‘third wave’ of feminism; one in which motherhood is only one important facet of female identity, not necessarily central to development of woman’s sense of her adult self” (Ireland 6).

Ireland contends that maternal desire can be thought of not as a black and white concept, but rather as a spectrum. She believes that “the degree of maternal instinct... varies in intensity among women; it is not simply present or absent.” (Ireland 13). While Hannah may exist on the

middle of the spectrum, another character in Sula exists very near the “absent” end. She is Creole prostitute Rochelle Sabat, mother to Helene and grandmother to Nel. Rochelle has never been to The Bottom; she lives in New Orleans. Though Rochelle gave birth to Helene, it was really Rochelle’s mother, Cecile Sabat, who raised her. When Helene and Nel encounter Rochelle at Cecile’s funeral, we are given two very different impressions. Nel is amazed at how young her grandmother is—only 48 years old. She is intrigued by Rochelle’s gardenia smell, her soft skin, and her bright canary-colored dress (Morrison 26). On the train ride home, Nel continues to dream about the “smell and the tight, tight hug of the woman in the yellow who burned matches over her eyebrows (Morrison 28). Based on her lack of affection towards her own daughter, it is surprising that Rochelle hugs her granddaughter Nel before she leaves, giving her an “embrace tighter and harder than one would have imagined her thin arms capable of” (Morrison 27). In contrast, when Rochelle and Helene see each other, there is no recognition in either of their eyes (Morrison 25). While Nel is curiously analyzing Rochelle’s appearance, Helene is remembering the absence of her mother during her childhood. When Rochelle says that she “must be going on” just moments after Helene and Nel’s arrival, Helene relates her rage at this “painted canary who never had a word of greeting or affection or...” (Morrison 26). Helene’s trailed off sentence leaves us to imagine her other disappointments with Rochelle’s mothering. Helene’s sentence could very well be completed by “love.” It is difficult accurately to judge the degree of Rochelle’s maternal ambivalence as we see only her through the biased lens of her daughter and granddaughter. From these perspectives, though, it seems that bearing a child has had little to no impact on Rochelle’s life; it is questionable whether she identifies as a mother at all.

Childless Women

“Some sort of denial of womanhood,” she said. “Is that how you’d put it? ... Is that what women are supposed to be expressing when they didn’t want to have children? That they’re not really women, or don’t want to be women, or something?” – April Wheeler in Richard Yates’ Revolutionary Road (p. 231)

Though April Wheeler is the mother of two young boys, her response to her husband, Frank, is an accurate portrayal of the plight of the childless woman. A woman who chooses not to reproduce is often criticized for her “denial of her ‘natural impulses and inability to come to terms with her ‘real purpose’” (Ireland 13). April’s contemplation of aborting her child sends Frank into anger. He later admits, “I think the main thing was simply a case of feeling that my—well, that my masculinity’d been threatened somehow by this whole abortion business; wanting to prove something” (Yates 277). By not becoming mothers, women are “by their very presence [invalidating] the universality of the restricted female identity, they may also seem to undermine the bases of gender identity for me” (Ireland 133). Frank represents a large majority of men in patriarchal society, who viewed childless women both as a threat to their manliness and their position of power. This threat explains “why patriarchal society seems to have a stake in keeping the childless woman as the ‘invisible woman’” and construing her as unnatural (Ireland 133). Men who construct their identity entirely in opposition to the feminine “will find these new women destabilizing” (Ireland 133).

However, it is not only men who seem threatened by childless woman, as evidenced by the women in *The Bottom*. The females are also horrified when, after a ten year absence, Sula returns to the community as an adult, husbandless and childless. Sula has no wish to be like the mothers of Medallion; she quips, “the narrower their lives, the wider their hips,” believing that

the more children the women have, the more constricted their lives become (Morrison 121). Madhu Dubey cites Sula's refusal of reproduction as "her greatest point of difference from her community; it is what renders her evil and unnatural to the people of The Bottom" (58). As Sula returns home, her grandmother Eva advises her to find herself a man and have babies. Sula rejects the idea that she needs to be settled and replies, "I don't want to make somebody else. I want to make myself" (Morrison 92). Eva's response to Sula, "Selfish," is typical of patriarchal society's reaction to childless mothers. Ireland asserts that "women who are not mothers have been viewed negatively as selfish and unwilling to fulfill their womanly natural function" (7). As Sula and her "unnatural" ways arrive in Medallion, the community begins experiencing strange, "unnatural" phenomena. Sula came back "accompanied by a plague of robins" that made it "hard to hang up clothes, pull weeds or just sit on the front porch when the robins were flying and dying all around" (89). The difficulty the community has in living with the robins foreshadows the difficulty they have in living with Sula. Her return also brings a chilly October and false spring January. Dubey argues these "natural disorders symbolically parallel the disorder that Sula's 'unnatural' refusal to be a mother unleashes on her community" (58). Though the residents of The Bottom find Sula guilty of violating multiple cultural standards, from the minor (refusing to gossip with her fellow townswomen, not wearing underwear to the church dinners) to the major (sleeping with their husbands, putting her grandmother in a nursing home), out of all her transgressive actions, Sula is most harshly judged for her refusal to reproduce. She is criticized at the end of the novel, by her childhood friend Nel, for trying to defy social norms:

"You can't have it all Sula." Nel was getting exasperated with her arrogance, with her lying at death's door still smart talking. "Why? I can do it all, why can't I have it all?" "You *can't* do it all. You a woman and a colored woman at that. You can't act like a man. You can't be walking around all independent-like, doing whatever

you like, takin what you want, leaving what you don't."... "You say I'm a woman and colored. Ain't that the same as bein a man?" "I don't think so and you wouldn't either if you had children." "Then I really would act like what you call a man. Every man I ever knew left his children." (Morrison 142-143)

Sula's independent thinking caused fury among the townspeople; they deemed her a roach and a pariah. Her refusal to act as the ideal patriarchal woman caused the women of The Bottom to follow their own rules even more closely. Sula's subversion of motherhood "caused[d] the black community to construct her as a scapegoat and to defend with renewed vigor their conception of motherhood as the primary feminine function" (Dubey 58). The women began to cherish their men more, become more attentive to their children, repair their homes, and "in general band together against the devil in their midst" (Morrison 117). The alcoholic mother of Teapot, who had previously shown no inclination for motherhood, "became the most devoted mother: sober, clean and industrious. No more nickels for Teapot to go to Dick's for a breakfast of Mr. Goodbars and soda pop: no more long hours of him alone or wandering the roads while she was otherwise engaged" (Morrison 114). The Bottom unites itself in opposition to Sula; as if "by becoming fanatically serious about their own family obligations... they might counteract Sula's radical criticism of their lives" (Caminero-Santangelo 145-6).

Sexual Women

"[Ingrid Bergman] is a free-love cultist... and a horrible example of womanhood and a powerful influence for evil." — U.S. Senator Edwin C. Johnson, Colorado, on the Senate Floor on March 14, 1950.

Johnson expressed the views of much of American in these heated comments regarding married Hollywood star Bergman's having a baby out of wedlock with director Roberto

Rossellini. Though Rossellini was also married and had a reputation as a playboy, he did not receive criticism for his several mistresses. The huge public outrage against Bergman is evidence of patriarchy's policy that women who have become mothers are expected to remain asexual. Counselling psychologist Judith Daniluk argues that there is a "host of cultural messages suggesting that sexuality and motherhood cannot coexist on the same plane... [making] it especially difficult for women who mother to find their way to a valid sexuality" (176). After molding to fit the standards of the pure wife, women were then told that they were "not passionate, frigid, [and] sexually passive" (Rich 42). In navigating through the public and private spheres, the woman has been forced to walk a fine line. Publically, she must not be so overtly sexual as to tempt other men, both single and married. Privately, though, she must be sexual enough to successfully reproduce and please her husband, yet, not so sexually aggressive as to undermine his masculinity. Even if a mother becomes divorced or widowed, she is still expected to abstain from sexual activity. We will see this later with Morrison's Nel, who, after being deserted by her husband, wonders, "And what am I supposed to do with these old thighs now, just walk up and down these rooms? What good are they, Jesus?... are you trying to tell me that I am going to have to go all the way through these days all the way, O my god, to that box with four handles with never nobody settling down between my legs?" (Morrison 111).

Morrison's earlier discussed female character, Hannah Peace, refused to abide by this asexual mother notion. The narrator tells us that "the Peace women loved all men... simply loved manliness for its own sake" (Morrison 41). Though Hannah never dated or remarried after the death of her husband, Rekus, she "simply refused to live without the attentions of a man," and so she maintained a constant stream of sexual partners—namely, her neighbors' husbands

(Morrison 42). What Hannah desired, and “what she succeeded in having more often than not, was some touching every day” (Morrison 44). She would “fuck practically anything,” often taking men into the pantry or cellar to escape the crowded house. She rarely took men into her bedroom, which she shared with Sula, and even more rarely allowed them to stay through the night, because “sleeping with someone implied for her a measure of trust and a definite commitment” (Morrison 44). Hannah exuded sex easily, never rushing to fix her hair, apply makeup, or dress up for her lovers, for without a single “gesture whatsoever, she rippled with sex.” Even while barefoot in an oversized, old dress, Hannah could make men “aware of her behind, her slim ankles, the dew-smooth skin and the incredible length of neck” (Morrison 42). Hannah’s promiscuity obviously did not earn her many female friends. She was loathed by both the prostitutes and the moral, upstanding women in *The Bottom*. The “good” women in town criticized her for being nasty and could not understand how she could be free of the jealous, possessive emotions they felt about men. The whores resented Hannah for her “generosity,” and making business more difficult for them (Morrison 44). Hannah was a threat to women at all levels; she “could break up a marriage before it had even become one—she would make love to the new groom and wash his wife’s dishes all in an afternoon”(Morrison 44).

Though the community faulted Hannah for her blatant and frequent sexual activities, it seems she was quite a healthy role model for her daughter. Sula learned that sexuality was not something of which to be ashamed. Seeing her mother “step so easily into the pantry and emerge looking precisely as she did when she entered, only happier, taught Sula that sex was pleasant and frequent, but otherwise unremarkable” (Morrison 44). Only once did Sula ever see her mother in bed, “curled spoon in the arms of a man” (Morrison 44). Hannah’s openness regarding

sexuality was in stark contrast to the outside world, “where children giggled about underwear.” Sula was able to observe both worlds and form her own opinion (Morrison 44).

Results

Though Hannah and Sula both violate cultural norms by sleeping with other woman’s husbands, Sula is judged much more harshly than Hannah. The women of the Bottom felt that “Hannah had been a nuisance but she had complimented the women, in a way, by wanting their husbands,” whereas Sula had a habit of “trying them out and discarding them without any excuse the men could swallow” (Morrison 115). Ironically, the women preferred their husbands to sleep with Hannah, even though this meant the men would be cheating on them regularly as opposed to just once. Though The Bottom construed her as harmful, Sula’s sexuality brought the couples together, for after she had discarded their husbands, the women “cherished their men more, soothing the pride and vanity Sula had bruised (Morrison 115).

While Hannah challenges one aspect of the ideal woman— that a mother must be asexual— her interactions with the men enforce another. Hannah asserts herself as a sexual agent, but she also continues the stereotypical feminine job of boosting the male ego. She “rubbed no edges, made no demands, made the man feels though he were complete and wonderful just as he was – he didn’t need fixing” (Morrison 43). In his sexual encounters with Hannah, a man did not have to prove himself or attempt to please her; he was able to relax and swoon “in the Hannah-light that shone on him simply because he was” (Morrison 43). Hannah gives the men what they desire “without the slightest confusion about work and responsibilities” (Morrison 43). Though her sexual expression as a mother may be transgressive, Hannah is, at the

same time, continuing to perpetuate patriarchy by “serv[ing] the traditional feminine function of enhancing the man’s sense of his self” (Dubey 54).

It is for this reason that the husbands of *The Bottom* never gossip about Hannah, and I would argue, why Hannah is viewed less negatively than Sula. While Hannah only had the women of the community against her, Sula also offended the men, whose opinions held more weight in society. The men of Medallion “gave her the final label... fingerprinted her for all time” (Morrison 112). They accused Sula of “the unforgiveable thing—the thing for which there was no understanding, no excuse, no compassion. The route from which there was no way back, the dirt that could not ever be washed away” (Morrison 112). Though it was never proven, to the community members or the reader, the men said Sula slept with white men (Morrison 112). In this act, Sula was breaking not just one cultural norm, as was Hannah, but three. Sula was transgressing by sleeping with other people’s husbands, sleeping with another race, and sleeping with men without the intention of getting married or reproducing.

The “Good” Woman

“When we think of motherhood, we are supposed to think of Renoir’s blooming women with rosy children at their knees, Raphael’s ecstatic madonnas, some Jewish mother lighting the candles in a scrubbed kitchen on Shabbos, her braided loaf lying beneath a freshly ironed napkin...”

– Adrienne Rich, *Of Women Born* (p. 275)

The image of the ideal woman as a devoted, submissive, and pure wife existed long before the Victorian period. It wasn't until 1854, however, that the ideal earned a name that would persist for many years to come: "Angel in the House." This phrase was taken from the title of Coventry Patmore's poem about his wife, Emily, who he felt was the model Victorian woman. The poem began, "Man must be pleased; but him to please / Is woman's pleasure." It described a wife so selfless that, "She leans and weeps against his breast, And seems to think the sin was hers." The immensely popular poem, coupled with the Queen Victoria's devotion to her husband Prince Albert, fueled the "Angel in the House" ideal into the twentieth century ("The Angel in the House"). At the time of Toni Morrison's novel, written over a century later, the idea still persisted across all races. Of growing up in the black community in the 1960s, Michele Wallace writes, "The fact is, we had all been born into a situation in which... there was only one acceptable standard of womanhood: Doris Day, housewife and mother—pretty, attractive, sexy even, yet inaccessible and virginal" (103). Wallace says that for black women, this standard was more than unrealistic; it was masochistic.

Destructive to Children

"Motherhood without autonomy, without choice, is one of the quickest roads to a sense of having lost control." – Adrienne Rich

The "losing of control," to which Rich was referring, is responsible, she claimed, for infanticide and abortion. Though Morrison's Eva Peace does not commit either of these two specific acts, we see in her the desperation of a mother who feels powerless. This feeling of losing control has grave effects on Eva's mothering, and consequentially, the wellbeing of her children, specifically of her son, Plum.

Eva's experience with motherhood is difficult from the beginning. During her "sad and disgruntled" marriage to BoyBoy, she bears three children: Hannah, Eva, whom she refers to as Pearl, and Ralph, whom she calls Plum (Morrison 32). Abusing Eva is BoyBoy's third favorite past time after womanizing and drinking. After five years of marriage, he leaves her alone to raise their children with "\$1.65, five eggs, three beets and no idea of what or how to feel" (Morrison 32). Eva does not have time to waste sorting out her emotions because "the children needed her, she needed money, and needed to get on with her life" (Morrison 32). Nine month-old Plum needs constant care, and since Hannah was only five years old, Eva cannot leave them to go to work. She cannot borrow money from her family, having left them in Virginia to come to Medallion with BoyBoy. So during the winter, Eva deals with the acute demands of her children's hunger by begging for food from the neighbors. In December, Plum stops having bowel movements. Warm water, castor oil, and stomach massages do nothing to ease his shrieks of pain. When Plum's cries get so bad that he seems to be strangling, Eva grabs him and rushes out to the outhouse in the middle of the night.

She squatted down, turned the baby over on her knees, exposed his buttocks and shoved the last bit of food she had in the world (besides three beets) up his ass. Softening the insertion with the dab of lard, she probed with her middle finger to loosen his bowels. Her fingernail snagged what felt like a pebble; she pulled it out and others followed. Plum stopped crying as the black hard stools ricocheted onto the frozen ground. (Morrison 34)

Immediately afterwards, Eva is startled by her own incredible demonstration of maternal love. She questions what she was doing outside in freezing cold in the middle of the night, on her haunches, with her baby boy. Shocked by her situation, Eva "shook her head as though to juggle her brains around, then said aloud, 'Uh uh. Nooo'" (Morrison 34). She realizes that her entire life has become concerned with the survival of her children. Being forced into motherhood after

BoyBoy's departure, Eva has followed Rich's predicted quick road to loss of control. She drops her children off at a neighbor's home and tells her she will collect them the next day. Eva eventually comes back eighteen months later.

It is evident that Eva's search for her identity is "initiated by her repudiation of the socially prescribed role of mother" (Dubey 63). When she comes back, Eva truly does have a new self, both physically and emotionally. She is missing one leg; a seemingly traumatic occurrence for which she never provides explanation or even mentions. Dubey argues that Eva's missing leg "frees her to literally reinvent herself," which is seen through her new mothering style (65). As opposed to the very nurturing, protective instincts she showed before, Eva now displays a much more hands-off approach to mothering. Her children grow up under "her distant eye" (Morrison 41). Just like her missing leg, the eighteen-month experience that led to Eva's new sense of self is never discussed. Although Eva has seemingly freed herself from the strict constraints of motherhood, her physical transformation has left her very much prisoner; she now must spend her entire life sitting in a homemade wheelchair comprised of a wagon and a rocking chair.

As the "creator and sovereign of [an] enormous house," Eva "sat in a wagon on the third floor directing the lives of her children, friends, strays, and a constant stream of boarders" (Morrison 30). Eva also rents off a side room to the wandering war veteran Tar Baby. Some feminist critics call Eva's eclectic household, "'a wholly new social collective' which is 'a radical alternative to the bourgeois family model'" (Caminero-Santagelo 170). I argue, however, that despite her crowded and diverse home, Eva does not deviate from heteronormative ideals. She encourages patriarchal values among the newlyweds who stay in her home, "fuss[ing]

interminably with the brides of newlywed couples for not getting their men's supper ready on time; about how to launder shirts, press them, etc." (Morrison 42). She also refrains from sexual activity, though not from a lack of suitors. She had a "regular flock of gentleman callers," with whom there was "a good deal of teasing and pecking and laughter," but no love-making (Morrison 41). It is for her adherence to these cultural standards that Eva becomes highly respected in the community. Despite sitting in a wagon "so low that children who spoke to her standing up were eye level with her," the adults in *The Bottom* are not aware that they're looking down on Eva when they speak. Instead, "they all had the impression that they were looking up at her" (Morrison 31).

However, despite the community's praise, Eva's new parenting style is more than questionable. In what Morrison calls "a private scheme of preference and prejudice," Eva gives herself the right to adopt children who she did not believe were being taken care of: "She sent off for children she had seen from the balcony of her bedroom or whose circumstances she had heard about from the gossipy old men..." (Morrison 37). When she brings three young boys into her home, Eva names them all Dewey and starts them in school all at the same grade level. At the time, no one thinks this will create confusion, as all the deweys are different ages and heights with individual facial features and personalities. However, over time, the deweys morph into one being, both physically, intellectually, and emotionally. Eva's bizarre parenting inhibits "their bodily growth and prevents them from developing beyond the limits of their name. Her naming of them robs the deweys of all specificity and different" (Dubey 65). Barking out commands such as "Send me a dewey," or "You dewey you," leads the boys to answer in unison until they constantly "spoke with one voice [and] thought with one mind" (Dubey 39).

Eva's inattention to the deweys' development carries over to her other children as well. Ever since her night with Plum in the outhouse, she refuses to allow herself to express that level of maternal concern again. When Plum comes back from war in 1920, he seems to have reverted back to a childlike-state. He is "helpless and thinking baby thoughts and dreaming baby dreams and messing up his pants again and smiling all the time" (Morrison 71). Eva feels that he wants to crawl right back into her womb. She tells Hannah, "I had enough room in my heart, but not in my womb. Not no more. I birthed him once. I couldn't do it again" (Morrison 71). Eva says that she has exhausted every possibility for trying to make him grow up and be a man. To spare herself from having to nurture Plum again, Eva decides a way to kill him that would enable him to "die like a man not all scrunched up inside my womb, but like a man" (Morrison 72). In the middle of the night, Eva creeps into Plum's room and douses his bed with gasoline. Before she lights the match, she rocks him in his bed, recalling memories of her nurturing him: "Plum in the tub that time she leaned over him..." (Morrison 46). When Eva begins the fire, she is not only burning her son, she is burning the painful memories of her maternal love.

Despite this horrific act, the community refuses to make any accusations against Eva. They continue to admire her, and are horrified when Sula chooses to put her in a nursing home after Hannah dies (Morrison 100). Sula tries to defend her actions to Nel, saying that she was scared of Eva. "Did you know she burnt Plum?" she asks. "Oh, I heard that years ago," Nel replies. "But nobody put no stock in it" (Morrison 101). Since Eva's transgression occurs in the privacy of her home, the community is not threatened by it. As long as she continues to maintain the proper appearances in the public sphere, The Bottom accepts her as a member of the community, and the harmful effects of Eva's mothering are ignored.

The Bottom also ignores the negative effects of Helene Sabat Wright on her daughter, Nel, since Helene exemplifies the ideological female better than any other character. Growing up in her grandmother's religious and strict household, Helene's life follows a predictable course. She is married young and lives in a "lovely house with a brick porch and real lace curtains at the window" (Morrison 17). She carefully monitors every aspect of her life to avoid any unwelcome and surprise resurgence of her mother's "scandalous" Creole genes. She is a faithful churchgoer, war veteran supporter, and competent mother. Before leaving for her grandmother's funeral, Helene even remembers to cook a smoked ham for her husband, just in case he happens to dock days early. Helene tries to conceal her "great beauty" under highly conservative clothing, such as a thick, wool and velvet dress complete with a high collar (Morrison 18). When worried about going to New Orleans for her grandmother's funeral, Helene consoles herself by remembering that "she had the best protection: her manner and her bearing, to which she would add a beautiful dress" (Morrison 19). Helene, whose tight, thick bun of hair is even obedient, is the epitome of an upstanding Medallion woman.

After nine years of being married to Wiley Wright, Helene becomes mother to Nel. We are told that "she rose grandly to the occasion of motherhood" (Morrison 19). She is content to construct her entire identity around being Wiley's husband and Nel's mother. Helene feels that "all in all her life was a satisfactory one." She admits that "she loved her house and enjoyed manipulating her daughter and husband. She would sigh sometimes just before falling asleep, thinking that she had indeed come far enough away from the Sundown House" (Morrison 19). It is her attentiveness to her husband and Nel which earns Helene respect from The Bottom; she is

able to “win all social battles with a presence and a conviction of the legitimacy of her authority” (Morrison 18).

Over time, with Wiley often gone for work, Helene’s identity shifts from wife and mother to just that of mother. It is Nel who makes Wiley’s absences bearable, and who become “more comfort and purpose than [Helene] had ever hoped to find in this life” (Morrison 18). Nel grows to be Helene’s sole reason for living; Helene describes her Nel’s wedding as “the culmination of all she had been, thought of done in this world” (Morrison 79). While the wedding is the beginning of Nel’s life, it seems to be the end of Helene’s. Though Helene lives with Wiley, she says that once Nel was gone “she would have a lifetime to rattle around in her house” (80).

Though the community thinks Helene is a good mother, her over-possessiveness ends up being quite damaging to Nel. Terrified that Nel might carry some of the promiscuous genes of her grandmother, Rochelle, Helene keeps a close watch on her daughter’s creativity. More than just raising her daughter to be obedient and polite, Helene calms “any enthusiasm that little Nel showed... until she drove her imagination underground.” The orderliness of Nel’s home seems to wear on her; Nel says that it was “oppressive” and regarded it with dread. Even Nel’s future husband, Jude, admits that Helene had “succeeded in rubbing down to a dull glow any sparkle or splutter [Nel] had” (Morrison 83). It is this lack of identity that makes Nel fall easily for Jude and agree to marry him. Once a mother herself, Nel continues the damaging ideal presented to her by Helene, and constructs her entire identity around her children.

Self-Destructive

“Why is it so important that women should bear and rear children to live lives as empty and poor as their own? Surely it is more important to make life something worth giving to children!”

No, it is not sufficient to be a mother: an oyster can be a mother. It is necessary that a woman should be a person as well as a mother. She must know and do.” – Charlotte Perkins Gilman

After suffering personally from postpartum depression, Charlotte Perkins Gilman understood the importance of establishing an identity for oneself outside of motherhood. She demonstrates the danger of not doing this in her short story, “The Yellow Wallpaper,” in which the depressed protagonist is “treated” by being removed from all physical activity and intellectual stimulation. The new mother is simply taken to a country home and left alone in a nursery with yellow paper, which results disastrously as she slips into psychosis.

Gilman’s story also represents not only the need to maintain an identity other than mother, but also the importance of maintaining relationships with others, rather than having the child-mother bond as the only relationship in a woman’s life. Unfortunately, after Nel catches her husband, Jude, and best friend, Sula, having sex, she loses both of them from her life, and her only relationships become those she has with her children. Nel becomes petrified of them growing up and leaving, just as her husband did. Lying alone on her bathroom floor, she thinks “Hell ain’t things lasting forever. Hell is change” (Morrison 108).

Nel as an adult woman is quite a contrast to herself as a young girl. As a child, Nel is “open to difference, even compelled by it” (28). After her trip to New Orleans, she discovers her potential for individuality. “I’m me. I’m not their daughter. I’m not Nel. I’m me. Me.’ Each time she said the word *me* there was a gathering in her like power, like joy, like fear” (Morrison 29). Inspired by the tight hug and canary yellow dress of her grandmother, Nel begins to dream of living a life outside of The Bottom, free of the moral constraints and expectations of her community. Sadly, Morrison foreshadows that Nel’s journey to New Orleans would be the

“last... time she was ever to leave Medallion” (29). A few short decades later, Nel has shed her unconventional fantasies and chosen the life of a “warm, conventional woman, one of those people who you know are going to pay the gas bill and take care of the children” (Wilson 215).

In addition to the aforementioned pressures from her mother, Nel’s transition from dreamer to conformer can be attributed to Jude’s persistence, who, struggling to find success in work, was looking for his “hem— the tuck and fold that hid his raveling edges; a someone sweet, industrious and loyal to shore him up” (Morrison 83). Without a wife, he was “just a waiter hanging around a kitchen like a woman” (Morrison 83). In Jude’s effort to fulfill the role of ideological man: a strong, working father who could provide for his obliging family, he brings Nel into conformity with him. The young girl who once daringly prayed, ““Oh, Jesus, make me wonderful,”” naively slipped into the role of the doting, unquestioning wife. It is not until the reappearance of Sula, ten years later, that Nel realizes just how conventional she has become (29).

By the time of Sula’s arrival, Nel is “aligned with the values of presence, stasis, and community” (Dubey 75). In addition to being Mrs. Jude Greene, she is the mother of two boys and a girl, whom her life revolves around. Dubey asserts that she “clings to a stable identity through her dedication to the institutionalized roles of wife and mother” (65). Nel even finds herself defending marriage to Sula, telling her, “They [men] worth keeping” (Morrison 145).

Sula, however, does not understand Nel’s possessiveness of her husband, and she has an affair with Jude. Though Jude and Sula are only intimate once, he still leaves Nel. With her husband gone, Nel starts to worry that, as a mother, she might not be able to engage in sex again. Without Jude she feels that, “her thighs were really empty... Now her thighs were empty and dead, too” (Morrison 111). Nel prays that she will not go to her grave without being able to feel

the touch of a man: “O Jesus, I could be a mule or plow the furrows with my hands if need be or hold these rickety walls up with my back if need be if I knew that somewhere in this world in the pocket of some night I could open my legs to some cowboy lean hips” (Morrison 111). Nel’s realizes the loneliness and burden that might result from adhering to patriarchy’s criteria for the ideal woman. “You are trying to tell me no,” she says, “and O my sweet Jesus what kind of cross is that?” (Morrison 111).

After Jude’s departure, it doesn’t take long for Nel to “see what the future would be.” She “looked at her children and knew in her heart that that would be all. That they were all she would ever know of love” (Morrison 165). This creates an unhealthy obsession in Nel. With Jude gone, caring for her children becomes her sole thought; she thinks of everything in terms of them: “It was two thirty, only forty-five minutes before the children would be home” (Morrison 106). With the full responsibility of the household weighing on Nel, she takes a job as a chambermaid that doesn’t pay much, but allows her to be done in time to see her children after school (Morrison 139). Her maternal love becomes “something so thick and monstrous she was afraid to show it lest it break loose and smother them with its heavy paw” (Morrison 138). She grows overprotective of her children, even sleeping in their bed to protect them from nightmares:

When the children went to a monster movie at the Elmira Theater and came home and said, ‘Mamma, can you sleep with us tonight?’ she said all right and got into bed... For a long time she could not stop getting into bed with her children and told herself each time that they might dream a dream about dragons and would need her to comfort them. (Morrison 109)

Sadly, though, Nel’s children did not need her to comfort them. They had “quickly forgot the taste of her nipples... and begun to look past her face into the nearest stretch of sky” (Morrison 165). When she is much older, Nel realizes that her love for children had been too strong. It was

a love that “like a pan of syrup kept too long on the stove, had cooked out, leaving only its odor and a hard, sweet sludge, impossible to scrape off. (Morrison 165).

Conclusion

“...one cannot belong to the community and preserve the imagination, for the orthodox vocations for women—marriage and motherhood—restrict if not preclude imaginative expression.”

– Deborah McDowell, *Boundaries* (p.108)

By tracing the progression of the heteronormative ideal of woman throughout history, we see that it is not an image based on actual women's experiences, but rather, a constructed concept whose existence is necessary to perpetuate a patriarchal society. The criteria that women must meet in order to adhere to the heteronormative ideal are both unrealistic and constricting. Women who follow these criteria closely by becoming asexual, nurturing mothers, such as Helene, end up losing any sense of identity other than that of mother. This singular identity can be destructive to their children, or, as in the case of Nel, self-destructive. While these women are accepted by society for their behavior in the public sphere, they have the potential to damage themselves and others in the private sphere.

Women who do not follow the criteria, such as Hannah, and instead maintain identities outside of motherhood, have a much more positive sense of self of which their children may reap the benefits. They will, however, not be accepted by society, because their transgressive behavior undermines patriarchy's assertion that gender roles are natural. In the public sphere, they will be deemed "Other," and perhaps, pathological as well. Women who choose not to enter into motherhood at all will be construed as unnatural as well. By asserting that the only way to become a good woman is to become a good mother, society leaves childless women, such as Sula, with no means of expression. In Sula's community of The Bottom, reproduction was the only outlet for female creativity. Consequently, Sula, "like any artist with no art form, became dangerous" (121).

It is a struggle for a woman to fulfill her own person identity when motherhood and womanhood are presumed to be synonymous. According to Ireland, "The woman who is a mother must discover she is more than the presence of her child; the woman who is not a mother

must discover she is more than the absence of her child” (128). We must alter the definition of motherhood to allow women to pursue their own needs *in addition to*, not after, those of their children. These needs include the need to express sexuality and enter into sexual relationships, the need to develop and sustain friendships with people other than her children, and the need to discover and maintain identifies in addition to mother. Motherhood, then, will not be equivalent to womanhood, but will become one of many identities that fall under the larger term of womanhood. This will enable women who are not mothers to perceive themselves not as lacking a fundamental aspect of their identity, but rather, to see themselves as merely a different compilation of identities.

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Academic Vita

EDUCATION	The Pennsylvania State University <i>Schreyer Honors College</i> Major: Bachelor of Arts in English <i>College of Communications</i> Major: Bachelor of Arts in Journalism	University Park, PA <i>Class of 2010</i>
HONORS	Phi Beta Kappa National Liberal Arts Honor Society Kappa Tau Alpha National Journalism and Mass Communication Honor Society Phi Beta Phi National Honor Society Schreyer Ambassador Travel Grant Schreyer Internship Grant Dean's List	<i>2009 – 2010</i> <i>2009 – 2010</i> <i>2009 – 2010</i> <i>Spring 2009</i> <i>Summer 2009</i> <i>Spring 07 – Spring 10</i>
EXPERIENCE	Teen Voices <i>Developmental Intern</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none">Designed layout for fall '09 solicitation card to be mailed to past and future donorsResearched potential funders, edited grant proposals, maintained donor database for 25 hours each week <i>Editorial Mentor</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none">Served as a role model for three teenage girls and advised them through the editorial process of writing a feature article, "Overcoming Obstacles to Go to College," which was selected to be published in Fall '09 print edition of the internationally-distributed magazine, <u>Teen Voices</u>	Boston, MA <i>June 09 – August 09</i> <i>June 09 – August 09</i>
	Ikaya Primary School <i>Volunteer</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none">Provided supplementary education services to 60 seventh-grade students in an after-school setting for eight hours a week by tutoring students in EnglishEnhanced interaction between the community of Kayamandi and the surrounding Stellenbosch areas fostering integration, tolerance and understanding	Kayamandi, South Africa <i>January 09 – June 09</i>
	Domestic Violence Project, Inc. <i>Intern</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none">Assisted legal advocates in the court in providing information and support to victimsTaught a DV prevention/ drug-awareness program to ninety inner-city middle-school studentsCalculated pre-test and post-test program scores in order to apply for state funding and grants	Canton, OH <i>May 08 – August 08</i>
EXPERIENCE	Collegiate Horsemen at Penn State (CHAPS) <i>Public Relations Officer</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none">Contacted local riding and boarding barns to publicize their establishmentWrote press releases regarding CHAPS activities for Penn St. and College of Ag. publicationsExecuted involvement fairs and establish recruitment opportunitiesMet biweekly with nine other officers to plan meetings and educational field trips <i>Webmaster</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none">Designed and updated a 20-page website: http://www.clubs.psu.edu/up/chaps/index.htm.	University Park, PA <i>August 08 – December 08</i> <i>August 06 – July 08</i>
	Peers Helping Reaffirm, Educate and Empower (PHREE) <i>Member</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none">Educate the student body about sexual assault, domestic violence and eating disordersParticipate in awareness events for the community, including "Take Back the Night" and "Tunnel of Oppression"Organized the first State College branch of "Turn Beauty Inside Out," a day-long national program educating middle-school-age girls about society's affect on body imageFacilitate programs on gender equality to dormitories, women studies' classes, fraternities and sororities	University Park, PA <i>January 07 – May 10</i>
	University Choir <i>Vice-President</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none">Coordinate distribution and collection of more than 10 works of music to 60 membersAssist with the choir's fund-raising efforts and participation in Penn State's THON, the largest student-run philanthropic event in the country	University Park, PA <i>January 07 – May 08</i>