THE MOTHER IMAGE IN SELECTED
FICTION OF ALICE WALKER AND
TONI MORRISON

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by

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Foreword

This thesis concerns itself with the image of the Black mother as characterized by Alice Walker in *The Third Life of Orange Copeland* and Toni Morrison in *Sula* and *The Bluest Eye*. The subject is approached from the aspects presented in these works of fiction without any deeper sociological implications. Many of the statements made about the Black mother can also be applied to other mothers of the world. The strength and independence of the Black mother as presented in these novels serve as an affirmation of her positive qualities rather than a condemnation of the qualities of other mothers.

There is no attempt to subscribe to the Black matriarchal myth. The Wright, MacTeer, Breedlove, and Copeland households are stable in terms of designating a situation where husband and wife are both present.

The Black female-headed household is not the dominant family form.

The denigration of the Black male self-concept is explored only as it appears in *The Third Life of Orange Copeland*, *Sula*, and *The Bluest Eye*. This exploration is not designed to reinforce stereotypes of the Black male as a deserter of his family. Literature out of convention and tradition usually portrays the Black family wherein the father is absent or incapable of supporting his family. According to John H. Scanzoni in *The Black Family in Modern Society* (1971), less than one-third of Black families are characterized by the absence of
the husband. Wiley Wright in *Sula* and Mr. TaPeer in *The Bluest Eye* are not only present in the home, they are the sole supporters of their families.

Poverty is not necessarily a dominant factor in the lives of Black mothers. The link between economic resources and Black family structure is valid only within the scope of the novels examined. Grange and Margaret and Mem and Brownfield in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* and Eva and BoyBoy in *Sula* reflect that it is only among the most economically disadvantaged Blacks that family dissolution is likely to occur. Helene Wright in *Sula* and Mrs. MaPeer and Geraldine in *The Bluest Eye* serve as examples of Black mothers who are reasonably comfortable in their economic situation.

The Black mother as well as mothers of other minority groups is in direct and constant contact with white racism. The overt acts of racism mentioned in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, *Sula*, and *The Bluest Eye* are examined within the context of the novels and do not necessarily reflect the preponderant viewpoint of white Americans toward Blacks. It is important to keep in mind that all aspects of the Black mother's life examined in this thesis are confined to the scope of the novels without any further sociological implications.

This thesis by no means implies that the Black mother is completely and permanently characterized in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, *Sula*, and *The Bluest Eye*. Within the limited scope of their fiction, other authors like Ms. Walker and Ms. Morrison will continue to examine the qualities that make the Black mother such a complex figure.
Introduction

Literature should be viewed not as mere fiction, but as an interpretation and collection of history, sociology, anthropology, psychology, and various other areas. 1 "...The true literary artist reveals life more accurately and with more insight than any historical facts and statistical details, because he deals with the truth of the human heart, with the realities of man in society." 2 In the fiction of Toni Morrison and Alice Walker portrayals of Black family life center around the multidimensional character of the Black mother. She is presented as loving, hateful, strong, weak, raging, comforting - a devil, and an angel. It is this versatility and adaptability that set the Black mother apart from the other mothers in the world of fiction as well as in reality.

Alice Walker's *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* is colored by the treatment that the mothers in the novel receive. Margaret, Grange's wife, suffers abuse from him until he runs out on her and the children. She resorts to suicide as the only method of escape from her dilemma. Maw, Brownfield's wife, is one of the most loving and dedicated mothers in the novel. She suffers the same abusive treatment from Brownfield that Margaret suffered from Grange. Brownfield shoots her down in cold blood before she has the opportunity to devise a means for bettering her condition. Josie is entirely
different from Margaret and Mem. Whereas their worlds revolved around their families, Josie's world revolved around the men in her life. These men included both Grange and Brownfield. Josie exhibits a kind of independence that is missing from the lives of Mem and Margaret. Her independence does not, however, shelter her from the same kind of tragedy that touched the lives of Margaret and Mem.

Toni Morrison's *Sula* also deals with the tragedy that Black mothers suffer. Eva, the most complex mother presented in the novels, is introduced to tragedy when she has to give her children away temporarily because she is unable to support them without her husband's assistance. Lending credence to the belief that Black mothers place the welfare of their children above all else, she makes the necessary sacrifices and returns to raise her children to adulthood. Eva's complexity is further revealed in the treatment that her children receive after they become adults. Eva risks her life to save her daughter Hannah, and calmly murders her son, Plum. Hannah's role as mother provides an opportunity to examine the relationship between a promiscuous woman and her child. Helene, Nel's mother, is a woman striving for the upward social movement of herself and her daughter. Nel as a mother offers insight into the mind of the Black mother who has been robbed of everything but her love for her children. As Ruth McClain states in a book review for *Black World*, "there is conversation in this novel which points out why Black folk love their mothers soooooo very much." W. E. B. DuBois says that in distant memories of our heritage it is mothers and mothers of mothers who seem to count.
The importance of mothers is examined in *The Bluest Eye* also by Toni Morrison. Here she presents several different views of the Black mother. Pauline Breedlove, the crippled mother of Pecola and Tommy, is one of the negative figures in the novel. Her negative feelings toward her children are a result of her inability to adequately provide for them. Pauline feels more comfortable in the luxurious home of her white employer, so she rejects her own culture of poverty and everyone associated with that culture. Her rejection of her daughter drives the child to madness. Mrs. MacTeer is also poverty stricken but she has come to grips with her situation. Rather than becoming bitter like Pauline, she is a very loving and understanding mother. Toni Morrison speaks on the issue of Black mothers who reject their blackness and attempt to instill the same values in their children through the character of Geraldine.

The Black mother's image in fiction is as varied as the shades of a rainbow. It is my intention to further explore the image of the Black mother as she is presented in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, *Sula*, and *The Bluest Eye*. This exploration will revolve around common themes in the novels, with a chapter devoted to each theme. These themes are the Black mother and economic oppression, the Black mother and white racism, the Black mother accepting abuse from her spouse, the negative characteristics of the Black mother, and the Black mother's relationship with her children.
Economic Oppression and the Black Mother

Black women have always been workers, not because they were necessarily "career oriented," but because of economic necessity. The economic necessity is particularly acute in the case of Black mothers. "Because he (the Black male) could offer no protection or security, the Negro woman has worked with and for her family." Black mothers are compelled to supplement the income of their husbands in order to provide adequately for their children. Carolyn Shaw Bell points out in *The Economics of the Ghetto* that:

> For poor families the woman's position as earner can be crucial. . . . More than half the nonwhite families rely on a woman as mainstay. . . . Black families contain working wives much more frequently than do white - in more than half of all the Negro families with both husband and wife present, the wife is employed. . . . Negro women who work also contribute a larger portion of their family's income than do white working wives.

In many instances the mother's income is the sole source of support. Domestic employment for women accounts in part for their ability to obtain employment. "Like the dead-end jobs of unskilled and casual labor so prevalent among nonwhite males, service work provides the largest amount of employment for nonwhite women, especially those living in poverty areas. Because household service offers so many
job opportunities to black women, the average duration of unemployment is comparatively short.\textsuperscript{3} The lack of employment for Black males "can be ascribed to discrimination in one of its many forms.\textsuperscript{4} As Pat Crutchfield Exum points out in \textit{Keeping the Faith: Writings by Contemporary Black American Women}, "there is more behind the black, jobless man than laziness.\textsuperscript{5} "It is the recurrent theme of poverty; that women have the authority because more jobs are open to them and because whites have crippled the black male.\textsuperscript{6}"

The economic oppression of Black mothers results in the suffering of the child comparable to the way children suffered during slavery. The mother is unable to give her child care and attention during the day because she has to work; hence the child is neglected. Margaret in \textit{The Third Life of Grange Copeland} worked by the day pulling baits. Her boss ordered her not to bring Brownfield to work with her because he was afraid of the baits and screamed when he came in contact with them. It was necessary for Margaret to continue her job, so she was forced to leave Brownfield at home alone. The following account is given in the novel:

As a very small child he had scrambled around the clearing alone, chasing lizards and snakes, bearing his cuts and bruises with solemnity until his mother came home at night. His mother left him each morning with a hasty hug and a sugartit, on which he sucked through wet weather and dry, across the dusty clearing or mire, until she returned.... At first she left him in a basket, with his sugartit pressed against his face. He sucked on it all day until it was nothing but a tasteless rag. Then when he could walk, she left him on the porch steps. In moments
of idle sitting he shared the steps with their lean mangy dog. And... the flies buzzed around his face. No one was there to shoo them away, or change the sodden rag that attracted them, and which he wore brownish and damp around his dis-tended waist. For hours he was lost in a dull, weak stupor. His hunger made him move in a daze, his eyes unnaturally bright. When he was four he was covered with sores. Tetter sores covered his head, eating out his hair in patches the size of quarters. Tomato sores covered his legs up to the knee... and pus ran from boils that burst under his arm pits. His mother washed the sores in bluestone water.

Margaret's economic condition forces her to leave her child on the mercy of the world with inadequate food and a hasty hug. The only comfort that she can offer him is a bath in bluestone water to check the running sores.

Margaret's plight is a reflection of the problems that can be created due to entrapment in an undesirable economic situation. Her shortage of resources is directly related to her position in society. William Henderson and Larry Ledebur point out in Economic Depravity: Problems and Strategies for Black America that "Lack of access to respected positions in society and the lack of power to do anything about it lead to insecurity and unstable homes, as existence that tends to perpetuate itself from one generation to the next." Alice Walker treats this theme through the character of Brownfield Copeland in The Third Life of Grange Copeland. He is the son of Margaret and Grange Copeland. Brownfield is aware of the fact that his parents are unable to adequately provide for him due to their poor financial resources. Grange's sharecropping nets very little profit. Margaret's job as a bait puller does not substantially increase their income. Brownfield
does not have enough foresight to avoid the mistake that his parents made. After his marriage to Nem, he decides to become a sharecropper. Like his father, he becomes trapped in the sharecropping system and impoverished as a result of that encumbrance.

Poor people always search for ways to alleviate their poverty. Traditionally, Black people regard education as the key to elevating their social standing and increasing their earning potential. The unfortunate aspect is that poverty often prevents them from obtaining the desired education. School attendance requires money for decent clothes and school supplies. Margaret in The Third Life of Grange Copeland hoped that her son, Brownfield, would be able to attend school. The family's poverty generates the following response from his father:

...Grange had assessed the possibility with the same inaudible gesticulation accorded the house. Knowing nothing of schools, but knowing he was broke, he had shrugged; the shrug being the end of that particular dream.9

The inability of the poor to use education as a means of upward mobility tends to perpetuate their poverty. Their lack of education and job training forces them to accept menial jobs with low wages.

Low wages or inadequate income is reflected in all aspects of family life. According to Henderson and Lebeur, "The housing situation... in rural areas also indicates the great disparity between whites and nonwhites or those people excluded from participating in a full share of the nation's economic wealth."10 The poverty of the Copelands is directly reflected in their living quarters. Brownfield describes the two room cabin as gray and resembling a sway backed animal. With all
of her other concerns, Margaret is forced to attempt to convert this two room cabin into a comfortable home for her family.

The tragedy of the situation is that her son, Brownfield, makes himself satisfied with the same kind of poverty and inadequate housing when he grows up and has a family of his own. His resentment of his wife Mem's superior education and earning ability causes him to reject her attempts to improve their situation. It is men like Brownfield who lend validity to the theory that black men encourage and insist upon the subordination of Black women in the area of financial achievement. Brownfield is satisfied with their poverty because he "wants ugliness around him to reflect the ugliness he has within so that he might feel justified in his squalor." He is "a ruined and thus ruinous man, bent on undermining everyone who feels worthwhile and has a sense of pride and dignity."

Brownfield rejects Mem's attempts to contribute to the upward mobility of the family. He methodically calculates and devises means to intensify her poverty as well as his own and that of the children. The first step is to force Mem to give up her job as a school teacher and forget that she has ever had any education. "First to please her husband, and then because she honestly could not recall her nouns and verbs, her plurals and singulars, Mem begins speaking once more in her old dialect." Brownfield chooses this course rather than allowing her to help him achieve literacy. In spite of many obstacles Mem manages to get a job and a house in town. The following conversation ensues when she informs Brownfield that she will not be accompanying him in his move to a tenant shack on the farm that he wishes to
"You going to move where I says move, you hear me?" Brownfield yelled at her, giving her a kick in the side with his foot. "We going to move to Mr. J.L.'s place or we ain't going nowhere at all!" He was hysterical. Mem lay with her eyes closed. "You listening to me, Bitch!" Mem opened her eyes like someone opening up the lid of a coffin. "I ain't going to Mr. J.L.'s place," she said quietly. "I done told you that, Brownfield." Hesitantly she moved her hand up to wipe the blood from her chin. "I have just about let you play man long enough to find out you ain't one," she said slowly and more quietly still. "You can beat me to death and I still ain't going to say I'm going with you.""12

Mem's job enables her to adequately provide for her family temporarily. Brownfield's refusal to give financial assistance and his contribution to the deterioration of Mem's physical stamina by keeping her pregnant all the time results in the loss of her job and the loss of the house. Giving further credence to the theory that Black men contribute to the oppression of the women, Brownfield moves Mem and the children into a shack worse than all the others that they have lived in. The following account is given:

It was like an overwhelmingly bad dream, and Mem fainted and was loaded half conscious into the cab of the truck that came to move them. She had no chance to pack, to cover her things from the weather, to say good-bye to her house. She was too weak to argue when the friends he got to help him move broke her treasured dishes, tore her curtains, dragged the girls' dresses through the mud. They arrived at the house he had reserved for her "come down" in the middle of the night, and even his skin prickled at the sight of it. Mr. J.L. had promised that someone would clean it out, but it was still full of wet hay. There were no panes in the windows, only wooden shutters. Rain poured into all three of the small rooms and there was no real floor, only tin, like old
roofing, spread out to keep the bottom of the hay bales from getting soggy.  

Brownfield's dedication to remaining impoverished and his cruelty force Mem back into the poverty that she has tried so desperately to escape. The Copeland's return to the farm suggests that "the culture of poverty in the rural areas tends to be fatalistic and pessimistic, compounded by the vicious cycle of poverty." Having been impoverished, rural families usually remain that way. They eventually accept the idea that it is impossible to escape from their poverty. This acceptance leads to the fatalism and pessimism mentioned above. The poor of one generation find it impossible to help the next generation; thus the poverty cycle continues from father to son through the generations. Grange was impoverished as was his son, Brownfield, as would have been Brownfield's son if he had lived. Mem's escape from the rural area and the poverty that she suffered there was doomed to be short-lived.

Mem's escape might have been more successful if Brownfield had contributed to the family income. The husband's unwillingness to support the family is also dealt with in Sula by Toni Morrison. Eva's husband, BoyBoy is capable of making a decent living but he chooses to spend his money on women and whiskey. He finally decides to do his wife a favor and leaves her with three children prior to the onset of winter. "When he left in November, Eva had $1.65, five eggs, three beets and no idea of what or how to feel." It is from this situation that Eva must devise a means of providing for her children and herself. Eva will find it difficult to rise above her impoverished state due to
economic and social forces. Her status as a Black woman will permit her to find only menial jobs paying low wages.

The theme of poverty resulting from the low wages accorded menial jobs is picked up again with the Breedloves in The Bluest Eye, also by Toni Morrison. Pauline, the mother, is employed as a housekeeper for a white family. It is her job that finances the major part of the family’s living expenses. Their lack of financial resources has forced them to move into a storefront. There Cholly, Pauline, Tommy, and Pecola are "fester the together in the debris of a realtor's whim. They slipped in and out of the box of peeling gray, making no stir in the neighborhood, no sound in the labor force, and no wave in the mayor's office." They all slept in one bedroom heated by a coal stove in the middle of the room. The house had no bath facilities. As further evidence of their poverty, Mrs. Breedlove doesn’t even own a gown, but sleeps in an old dress. The family’s economic situation prevents them from enjoying a comfortable position in society.

Though Black families often fail to achieve a comfortable niche in society due to financial reasons, Robert Staples states in The Black Woman in America that "...the woman is likely to contribute the larger share of the income and to assume the larger share of the family responsibility." Black mothers are keenly aware of the economic problems of their families. They suffer most from these problems and they strive hardest to alleviate them.
Footnotes for Introduction

1Daryl C. Dance, "Black Eve or Madonna? A Study of the Anti-
therical Views of the Mother in Black American Literature," in
Perspectives on Afro-American Women, eds. Willis B. Johnson and

Footnotes for Chapter 1

1Carolyn P. Gerald, "The Negro Woman in American Literature," in
Keeping the Faith: Writings by Contemporary Black American Women,
p. 32.

2Carolyn Shaw Bell. The Economics of the Ghetto (Pegasus: Western

3Ibid., p. 119.

4Lester C. Thurow, Poverty and Discrimination (Washington: The

5Pat Crutchfield Exum, "Introduction" in Keeping the Faith:
Writings by Contemporary Black American Women, ed. Pat Crutchfield Exum

6William L. Henderson and Larry C. Ledebru, Economic Depravity:
Problems and Strategies for Black America (New York: The Free Press,

7Alice Walker, The Third Life of Orange Copeland (New York:

8Henderson and Ledebru, Economic Depravity: Problems and
Strategies for Black America, p. 3.


15. Ibid., p. 91.

16. Ibid., p. 106.


The Black Mother and White Racism

There is no denying that white racism is an intricate part of American culture. Robert Staples points out in *The Black Woman in America* that "in all endeavors, the Black woman must face the forces of white racism."¹ For centuries Black females have had to develop means of coping with racial oppression. "What has come to be popularly referred to as institutional racism has exerted the strongest impact upon all facets of the Black woman's life."² This is particularly true of Black mothers who have had to spend their days in the homes of white women taking care of their children and fighting off advances from their husbands. Even the Black females who were fortunate enough to escape domestic employment were not safe from exposure to white racism. Since exposure was inevitable, some means of coping had to be devised.

For Helene in Toni Morrison's *Sula*, coping meant wearing a mask and smiling at blatant displays of racism. The following incident occurs as Helene and her daughter Nel are en route to New Orleans:

As they opened the door marked COLORED Only, they saw a white conductor coming toward them. It was a chilly day but a light sheen of sweat glistened on the woman's face as she and the little girl struggled to hold the door open, hang on to their luggage and enter all at once.
The conductor let his eyes travel over the pale yellow woman and then stuck his little finger into his ear, jiggling it free of wax. "What you think you

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doin', gal?" Helene looked up at him. So soon. So soon. She hadn't even begun the trip back. Back to her grandmother's house in the city where the red shutters glowed, and already she had been called "gal." All the old vulnerabilities, all the old fears of being somehow flawed gathered in her stomach and made her hands tremble. She had heard only that one word; it had dangled above her wide brimmed hat, which had slipped, in her exertion, from its carefully leveled placement and was now tilted in a bit of a jaunt over her eye. Thinking he wanted her tickets, she quickly dropped both the cowhide suitcase and the straw one in order to search for them in her purse. An eagerness to please and an apology for living met in her voice. "I have them. Right here somewhere, sir..." The conductor looked at the bit of wax his fingernail had retrieved. "What was you doin' in that coach wondering?" Helene licked her lips. "Oh...I..." Her glance moved from the white man's face to the passengers seated behind him.... "We made a mistake, Sir. You see, there wasn't no sign. We just got in the wrong car, that's all. Sir." "We don't know no mistakes on this train. Now git your butt on in there." He stood there staring at her until she realized that he wanted her to move aside.... Then, for no earthly reason, at least no reason that anybody could understand, certainly no reason that Nel understood then or later, she smiled. Like a street pup that was its tail at the very doorjamb of the butcher shop he has been kicked away from only moments before, Helene smiled. Smiled dizzingly and coquettishly at the salmon-colored face of the conductor.3

This incident left a permanent impression on the mind of her daughter,

Nel. Nel's feelings are expressed thusly:

It was on that train, shuffling toward Cincinnati, that she resolved to be on guard-always. She wanted to make certain that no man ever looked at her that way. That no midnight eyes or
marbled flesh would ever accost her
and turn her into jelly."

She definitely disapproves of the way that her mother handles the
situation. It is her wish that she will have a better defense against
the racist attitudes of whites than her mother has been equipped with.
Unlike Helene, the black mother of today "teaches her child pride in
his race and culture and defiance toward white racism."

The train scene also brings into focus other aspects of racism.
One of these aspects is the accommodations that were installed for
white use only and the absence of such facilities for Blacks. If Helene
and Nel had been white, there would have been bathroom facilities for
them in the stationhouses. The blackness of their skin forced them to
relieve themselves in fields of high grass. It is dual standards based
on race such as this one that necessitate additional strength and
fortitude on the part of the Black mother. It is this same mother's
child who has to chart an elaborate course home from school because
the shorter route offers an obstacle in the form of white boys who
"occasionally entertained themselves in the afternoon by harassing
black schoolchildren."

In spite of Nel's childhood wish to escape racism, the matter
comes home to her again when her husband is unable to find work because
he is Black. The inability is based on what Robert Staples terms
"racist employment barriers." "It was after he stood in lines for six
days running and saw the gang boss pick out thin-armed white boys from
the Virginia hills and the bull-necked Greeks and Italians and heard
over and over, 'Nothing else today. Come back tomorrow,' that he got
the message." As a result of Black men receiving messages like this one, greater responsibility for family support is forced upon the Black female and the Black mother.

Alice Walker's *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* treats racism as it appears in and affects the lives of Mem and Brownfield Copeland. Mem's awareness of the fact that a beautiful Black woman was a prime target for the advances of white men forced her to disguise her beauty. In the words of Brownfield, "You should have seen her when she was young and pretty and turning heads, putting on veils and acting like a cripple or something when white men was around." Whereas Mem resisted the advances of white males, Margaret conceded to their impression of her as a readily available bed partner. It is stated that she found relief in the arms of "the man who drove the truck and who turned her husband to stone." The turning to stone is a summation of her husband's cold unresponsiveness when in the presence of white men.

The sexual stereotyping was not the only racist attitude that Margaret had to deal with. Since she was a sharecropper, she had to accept her son's being sent to work rather than to school at the age of six because Shipley, the foreman, "believed with a mixture of awe and contempt that Blacks developed earlier than whites, especially in the biceps." It is Shipley's white skin that entitles him to the enjoyment of Margaret's body and her son's labor.

Brownfield's encounter with the mother of three children during his escape from Shipley brings the reader to the full realization of the power of white racism. The absence of a male figure in the
household is due in part to white racism. Sometimes the male figure deserts the family or economic problems force him to leave. This woman’s husband has been murdered. According to the woman, “The other one of they daddies was my last husband, by common law, but he dead too now, shot by the old man he was working for for taking the chitlins out of a hog they kill.”10 By implication his employer was white.

In addition to having to shoulder the burden of providing for her family, Mem also had to tolerate insults from Brownfield based on his belief in white superiority. “He liked to sling the perfection of white women at her because color was something she could not change and as his own colored skin annoyed him he meant for her to humble her.”11 Despite all of Brownfield’s efforts Mem never lost her Black awareness or developed any shame about being Black. Her attitude is nicely conveyed in her response to white Captain Davis’s attempt to look out for them by trading them like a string of horses to his son J.L.. Mem tells Brownfield, "You just tell that old white bastard-Stop your ears children!-that we can make our own arrangements. We might be poor and black but we ain’t dumb."12

The Black mother’s subjection to white racism is again made clear through Mem’s efforts to get medical attention for her daughter Daphne. The following account is given:

Mem had taken Daphne to the clinic, but the nurse said she didn’t see anything wrong with her, except that she was nervous. Mem had said that she knew the child was nervous and wanted the nurse to tell her what to do about it, but the nurse was busy talking to another nurse
about changing her hair color, and both nurses ignored Mem, who was standing there exasperated, holding a quivering Daphne by the hand.13

Mem’s efforts are fruitless simply because she is Black. She deals with similar white racism on a day-to-day basis when she is employed by a woman who refers to her as "Mem, my colored girl."

Toni Morrison’s The Bluest Eye focuses some attention on racism as it creeps up in situations where Blacks are consumers of products sold by whites. The lack of regard for fairness on the part of whites is captured in the following scene:

The sofa, for example. It had been purchased new, but the fabric had split straight across the back by the time it was delivered. The store would not take the responsibility...

"Looks here, buddy. It was okay when I put it on the truck. The store can't do anything about it once it's on the truck..." Listerine and Lucky Strike breath.

"But I don't want no tore couch if'n its bought new."

Pleading eyes and tightened testicles.

"Tough shit, buddy. Your tough shit..." You could hate a sofa, of course—that is, if you could hate a sofa. But it didn't matter. You still had to get together $4.80 a month. If you had to pay $4.80 a month for a sofa that started off split, no good, and humiliating—you couldn't take any joy in owning it.14

The Breedloves have their hands tied by a system based on white supremacy, so Pauline, the wife and mother, is faced with placing the split sofa in a peeling grey storefront and by some extraordinary means-making the place seem like a home.

Another point of focus for Morrison is the racism to which Black children are subjected. Parents are "incapable of shielding their children from the racism and violence of the outside world."15
Pecola Breedlove's encounter with the storekeeper captures this aspect:

At some fixed point in time and space he senses that he need not waste the effort of a glance. He does not see her because for him there is nothing to see. How can a fifty-two-year-old white immigrant storekeeper with the taste of potatoes and beer in his mouth, his mind honed on the doe-eyed Virgin Mary, his sensibilities blunted by a permanent awareness of loss, see a little black girl? Nothing in his life even suggested that the feat was possible, not to say desirable or necessary. She looks up at him and sees the vacuum where curiosity ought to lodge. And something more. The total absence of human recognition—the glazed separateness. She does not know what keeps his glance suspended, perhaps because he is grown, or a man, and she a little girl. But she has seen interest, disgust, even anger in grown male eyes. Yet this vacuum is not new to her. It has an edge; somewhere in the bottom lid is the distaste. She has seen it lurking in the eyes of all white people. So. The distaste must be for her, her blackness. All things in her are flux and anticipation. But her blackness is static and dread. And it is the blackness that accounts for, that creates, the vacuum edged with distaste in white eyes.16

The scene culminates with the money exchanging hands:

She holds the money toward him. He hesitates, not wanting to touch her hand. She does not know how to move the finger of her right hand from the display counter or how to get the coins out of her left hand. Finally he reaches over and takes the pennies from her hand. His nails graze her damp palm.17

As Toni Morrison has so aptly indicated, the storekeeper's aversion to the child is based solely on the color of her skin.

It has been emphasized that "a key problem in growing up Black is the problem of racism. . . . Whereas a child was accustomed to his mother being called Mrs. in her own neighborhood, he heard a white clerk downtown call her by her first name."18 A similar incident is presented in The Bluest Eye. It is even more pointed here because the person addressing the mother is a child. Claudia relates the incident thusly:
"Where's Polly?" she asked. The familiar violence rose in me. Her calling Mrs. Breedlove Polly, when even Pecola called her mother Mrs. Breedlove, seemed reason enough to scratch her.  

Claudia's hostile attitude towards the blonde, blue-eyed child is a reflection of the hostilities that Blacks feel towards whites when their human worth and respect is denied due to their skin color.  

White racism even extends into the area of medicine, a topic illustrated on page five. Because of racist stereotyping black mothers are denied the attention and respect bestowed upon white mothers. Pauline Breedlove recounts the hospital incident prior to the birth of Pecola:

The old one (doctor) was learning the young ones about babies. Showing them how to do. When he got to me he said now these here women you don't have any trouble with. They deliver right away and with no pain. Just like horses. The young ones smiled a little. They looked at my stomach and between my legs. They never said nothing to me. Only one looked at me. Looked at my face, I mean. I looked right back at him. He dropped his eyes and turned red. He knew, I reckon, that maybe I wasn't no horse foaling. But them others. They didn't know. They went on. I need them talking to them white women: 'How you feel? Gonna have twins?' Just shucking them, of course, but nice talk. Nice friendly talk. I got edgy, and when them pains got harder, I was glad. Glad to have something else to think about. I meant something awful. The pains wasn't as bad as I let on, but I had to let them people know that having a baby was more than a bowel movement. I hurt just like them white women. Just 'cause I wasn't hooping and hollering before didn't mean I wasn't feeling pain. What'd they think? That just 'cause I knew how to have a baby with no fuss that my behind wasn't pulling and aching like theirs?  

The racism that controls every other aspect of the Black mother's life and her relationship with her family even dictates whether or not she is capable of feeling pain.
It is interesting to note that Black mothers' assessment of their condition gives first consideration to their relationships with the racist whites. The following summation is given:

   Edging into life from the back door. Becoming. Everybody in the world was in a position to give them orders. White women said, "Do this." White children said, "Give me that." White men said, "Come here." ... But they took all of that and re-created it in their own image. 21

As demonstrated by the encounters mentioned in this chapter, the Black mother is in direct and constant contact with white racism. "The ability to utilize her existing resources and yet maintain a forthright determination to struggle against the racist society in whatever overt and subtle ways necessary is one of her major attributes." 22
Footnotes for Chapter 2


7 Ibid., p. 71.


9 Ibid., p. 20.

10 Ibid., p. 30.

11 Ibid., p. 58.

12 Ibid., p. 86.

13 Ibid., p. 119.


17 Ibid., p. 43.

18 Staples, *The Black Woman In America*, p. 156.


20 Ibid., p. 99.

21 Ibid., p. 109.

The Mother Accepting Abuse From Her Spouse

Violence is very prevalent in the Black community. "One unfortunate effect of living in a racist society is the development of a tendency of Blacks to kill Blacks."¹ According to Lynn Curtis in *Violence, Race and Culture*, one of the most frequent settings for assaults by poor Blacks is the family.² "The Black woman is one of America's greatest heroines. The cruelty of the Black man to his wife and family is one of the great tragedies. It has mutilated the spirit and body of the black family and of most black mothers."³ Mem in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* is a prime example of the mother who has been mutilated in spirit and body. Grange, her father-in-law, states that "looking at Mem after eight years with Brownfield was like seeing some old many aunt of the girl Brownfield had married."⁴ Brownfield directly destroys his family through his abusive acts. "In fact, it would have been better for Mem and her children if Brownfield had left them. They would not have had to suffer the insults, beatings and death that he calculatedly plans for them."⁵ Brownfield's cruelty is captured in the following passage:

Brownfield beat his once lovely wife now, regularly, because it made him feel, briefly, good. Every Saturday night he beat her, trying to pin the blame for his failure on her by imprinting it on her face; and she, inevitably, repaid him by becoming a haggard automaton witch, beside whom even Josie looked well-preserved.⁶

Alice Walker offers the following explanation for Brownfield's inhumane treatment of Mem:

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It was his rage at himself, and his life and his world that made him beat her for an imaginary attraction she aroused in other men, crackers, although she was no party to any of it. His rage and his anger and his frustration ruled. His rage could and did blame everything, everything on her. And she accepted all his burdens along with her own and dealt with them from her own greater heart and greater knowledge.

Mem seems resigned to the manner in which Brownfield abuses her. She does not let this resignation prevent her from being the ideal wife and mother. She constantly reaches out to Brownfield with kindness and love and is just as constantly repaid for her efforts with a kick in the head, or side, or a slap across the mouth. The following is an account of one of Brownfield’s Saturday night rages:

Saturday night found Brownfield, as usual, liberally prepared for his weekly fight with Mem. He stumbled home full of whiskey, cursing at the top of his voice. Mem lay with her face to the wall pretending to be asleep.

"You think you better than me," he cried. "Don’t you? DON’T YOU! You ugly pig!" He reached beneath the bed-clothes to grab her stiffly resistant shoulder.

"You woke up and look at me when I talk to you!" he said, slurring the words, tending close enough to kiss her with his foul whiskey-soaked mouth....Mem said nothing, lay so silent it was as if she were not breathing or thinking or even being, but her tired eyes rested directly on him with the tense heated waiting that many years of Saturday-night beatings had brought.

"I’m sick and tired of this mess," she said, rising abruptly, waiting for the first blow to head or side or breast. "Shit!" she said, flinging the covers back, looking frail as a wire in her shabby nightgown.

"I’m sick of you!"

No sooner had the words fallen out in a little explosive heap than Brownfield’s big elephant-hide flat hit her square in the mouth.

"Don’t you interrupt me when I’m doing the talking, Bitch!" he said, shaking her until blood dribbled from her stinging lips. The one blow had reduced her to nothing; she just hung there from his hands until he finished giving her half-a-dozen slaps, then she fell down limp like she always did.
Sleep was Mem's only escape from her dreary world and Brownfield interrupts that peace in order to further impress upon her the dismal condition of her situation. In addition to being mean and brutal, Brownfield is insecure in his role as head of the household.

"For years in this country there was no one for black men to vent their rage on except black women. And for years black women accepted that rage--even regarded that acceptance as their unpleasant duty." Mem speaks of this acceptance when she reaches the point where she decides that it is no longer her duty:

"To think I let you drag me round from one corncrib to another just cause I didn't want to hurt your feelings," she said softly, almost in amazement. "And just think how many times I done got my head beat by you just so you could feel a little bit like a man, Brownfield Copeland." She squinted her eyes almost shut staring at him. "And just think how much like an old no-count dog you done treated me for nine years." ..."Woman ugly as you ought to call a man Mister, you been telling me since you beat the ugly into me!" his wife said, and moaned.10

Mem's bitterness is unquestionably justified but she does not succeed in changing the situation. Brownfield continues to abuse her as soon as he regains control of the domestic situation.

Robert Staples states in The Black Woman in America that "in the lower classes...the threat of physical abuse is a form of control exercised by the male over the female." Brownfield resorted to such threats only in those rare instances when he did not feel up to executing them. One such rare instance occurs during a discussion of their move into town. Mem is discussing her dreams for her children and the way in which the move to town will be instrumental in realizing those dreams. Brownfield, who is determined to move his family into another rural shack,
tells her, "You better git all that foolishness out your head before I knock it out!" This was one of his milder threats. He threatens her with a knife and later with a shotgun. The latter threat is executed on Christmas Eve. Mem has been doing domestic work in town since Brownfield has been fired from his job for excessive drinking. Brownfield is on one of his drunken rampages and the children have sought shelter in a henhouse in order to protect themselves from his abuse. Daphne, the eldest child, has gone to warn her mother. "Now she told them, with her voice shaking, that she was going to walk to town to try to head Mem off. She said maybe she could keep her from coming home while Brownfield was drunk."12 Daphne misses Mem on the highway because her boss had driven her home. The following account is given of the murder:

They (the two younger children) stared at her as she passed, hardly breathing as the light on the porch clicked on and the long shadow of Brownfield lurched out onto the porch waving his shotgun. Mem looked up at the porch and called a greeting. It was a cheerful greeting, although she sounded tired, tired and out of breath. Brownfield began to curse and came and stood on the steps until Mem got within the circle of light. Then he aimed the gun with drunken accuracy right into her face and fired.13

Brownfield's abuse of Mem culminates in her murder. He destroys a woman whose only mistake was her devotion to him. As a result of his destructiveness, his three children are left homeless. Daphne, the eldest child, who suffered tremendous abuse from Brownfield, ends up in a mental hospital; Ornette lived up to Brownfield's expectations and became the tramp that he always said she would be; and Ruth, strangely enough, goes to live with her grandfather, Grange.

Brownfield should have had a particular aversion to violence due to the treatment that he and his mother received at the hands of Grange.
"Late Saturday night Grange would come home lurching drunk, threatening to kill his wife and Brownfield, stumbling and shooting off his shotgun. He threatened Margaret and she ran and hid with Brownfield huddled at her feet." Grange does not confine the abuse of his wife to the home. Margaret gives Brownfield the following account of one of their public displays:

"Your daddy and me had another fight," she said, sinking down on the bed. "Oh, we had us a rip-rowing, knock-down, drag-out fight. With that fat yellow bitch of his calling the punches." She was very matter of fact. They had been fighting this way for years. Rather than profiting from his father's mistake, Brownfield grew up to be a worse wife abuser than Grange.

Lynn Curtis states in Violence, Race and Culture that "alcohol can serve as a catalyst to conflict...and one mate may verbally or physically provoke the other." A drunken husband is more inclined to be physically violent against his wife." Teni Morrison deals with this problem in Sula. BoyBoy, Eva's husband, was inclined to abuse her. It is stated that "he did whatever he could that he liked, and he liked womanizing best, drinking second, and abusing Eva third." There could very probably be a direct relationship between his drinking and the abuse of his wife. Excessive drinking on the part of Grange and Brownfield Copeland in The Third Life of Grange Copeland served as provocation for the abuse of their wives.

"There are many black male-female conflicts that are a result of the psychological problems generated by their racist victimization. Under the burden of racist oppression, the victims often turn their frustrations, their wrath, toward each other rather than toward their
oppressor. Being constantly confronted with problems of survival, Blacks become more psychologically abusive to their spouses than they might be under other circumstances. In *The Bluest Eye* Toni Morrison continues to deal with the abusive spouse but she presents a different view of physical abuse on the part of the male. With Pauline and Cholly Breedlove the abuse is a mutual affair. Unlike Mom in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* who suffered beatings without any struggle, Pauline Breedlove participates in the violence rather than subjugating herself to it. According to her, "Cholly commenced to getting meaner and meaner and wanted to fight me all of the time. I give him as good as I got. Had to. Look like working for that woman and fighting Cholly was all I did. Tiresome." Pauline seems to be using the fights with Cholly as a means of releasing the tensions and frustrations that result from her job as a housekeeper. Toni Morrison expresses the situation beautifully:

The tiny, undistinguished days that Mrs. Breedlove lived were identified, grouped, and classed by these quarrels. They gave substance to the minutes and hours otherwise dim and unrecalled. They relieved the terrorsomeness of poverty, gave grist to the dead rooms. In these violent breaks in routine that were themselves routine, she could display the style and imagination of what she believed to be her own true self. To deprive her of these fights was to deprive her of all the zest and reasonableness of life. Cholly, by his habitual drunkenness and omnipresence, provided them both with the material they needed to make their lives tolerable.

The fights and accompanying abuse have become so important to Pauline Breedlove that she sometimes initiates them. Unlike the previous situation wherein the male threatened the female with violence, Pauline tells Cholly, "Don't try me this morning, man. You say one more word
and I'll split you open!" Cholly knows that with the slightest bit of provocation, Pauline will follow through with her threat. The following overall view is given of their fights:

Cholly and Mrs. Breedlove fought each other with a darkly brutal formalism that was paralleled only by their lovemaking. Tactfully they had agreed not to kill each other. "He fought her the way a coward fights a man—with fists, the palms of his hands, and teeth. She, in turn, fought back in a purely feminine way—with frying pans and pokers, and occasionally a flatiron would sail toward his head. They did not talk, groan, or curse during these beatings. There was only the muted sound of falling things, and flesh on unsuspired flesh."

An actual battle scene is recorded as follows:

She ran into the bedroom with a dishpan full of cold water and threw it in Cholly's face. He sat up, choking and spitting. Naked and ashen, he leaped from the bed, and with a flying tackle, grabbed his wife around the waist, and they hit the floor. Cholly picked her up and knocked her down with the back of his hand. She fell in a sitting position, her back supported by Sammy's bed frame. She had not let go of the dishpan, and began to hit at Cholly's thighs and groin with it. He put his foot in her chest, and she dropped the pan. Dropping to his knee, he struck her several times in the face, and she might have succumbed early had he not hit his hand against the metal bed frame when his wife ducked. Mrs. Breedlove took advantage of this momentary suspension of blows and slipped out of his reach....Mrs. Breedlove having snatched up the round, flat stove lid, ran tip-toe to Cholly as he was pulling himself up from his knees and struck him two blows, knocking his right back into the senselessness out of which she had provoked him. Panting, she threw a quilt over him and let him lie.

Society has made life so miserable for Pauline that she finds solace in the mutual abuse in which she and Cholly engage.
Economic frustrations, alcohol, and personal failure are some of the reasons for the Black male's violent treatment of his spouse. The Black woman's willingness to accept this abusive treatment is based on her understanding of his situation.
Footnotes for Chapter 3


7. Ibid., pp. 90-91.


11. Walker, The Third Life of Grange Copeland, p. 120.

12. Ibid., pp. 121-122.

13. Ibid., p. 12.

14. Ibid., p. 16.

15. Curtis, Violence, Race, and Culture, p. 58.


17. Morrison, Sula, p. 27.


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The Negative Characteristics of Black Mothers

The Black mother's classification as a mere mortal serves as assurance that like all other mortals, she lacks perfection. In order to present a complete picture of the Black mother, Ms. Walker and Ms. Morrison touch upon her character flaws. First consideration is given to the mothers who show no inclination for the role. Their attitude is captured in an excerpt from a poem by Kay Lindsey:

I'm not one of those who believes
That an act of valor, for a woman
Need take place inside her.

My womb is packed in mothballs
And I hear that winter will be mild.¹

Rochelle, Helene's mother in Sula, is one mother lacking maternal inclination. She gave Helene to her mother, Cecile, who reared the child. Rochelle never saw the child again until the grandmother died. The meeting between them at least two decades later generates less of a positive response than a meeting between strangers. There is no indication that they will ever see each other again.

Rochelle recognized her distaste for motherhood and placed her child in the hands of someone who would care for it. In The Bluest Eye Cholly's mother "wrapped him in two blankets and one newspaper and placed him on a junk heap by the railroad"² at the tender age of four days old. He was rescued and reared by his Great Aunt Jimmy. After Cholly's mother abandoned him, he never saw or heard from her again.
permanently. Pauline's negligence towards her children destroys them both.

An indifference towards motherhood coupled with self-indulgence account for Betty's negligence in *Sula*. Toni Morrison writes, "her name was Betty but she was called Teapot's Mamma because being his mamma was precisely her major failure." Betty spent her time drinking and keeping company with the men of the pool hall while Teapot fended for himself. She shows no interest in motherhood until she suspects that Sula pushed her son down the steps. After that incident, she "immersed herself in a role she had shown no inclination for: motherhood....She became the most devoted mother: sober, clean and industrious." Her protective attitude lasted only as long as she believed that Sula posed a threat to her son. After Sula's death she returned to her negligent ways.

The negligence that Margaret exhibits in *The Third Life of Orange Copeland* is born of economic necessity. She loves her son, Brownfield, but the family's monetary situation dictates that she must seek employment outside the home. Margaret does not have any relatives with whom to leave the child and her budget does not allow a salary for a baby sitter, so she has to leave Brownfield at home alone during the day. It is this period of being home alone during which the child is neglected. Margaret does everything that she can to insure his comfort when she returns from her job. Hers is a situation in which she is forced to choose between the lesser of two evils. Her choice at least guarantees that a portion of her child's needs will be met.
Economic necessity is also partly responsible for the existence of the promiscuous mother. "Impoverished women of all races have historically played the role of prostitute." In The Third Life of Orange Copeland, Josie has been drawn into the profession as a means of supporting her child. She was evicted from her home at the age of sixteen immediately after giving birth to Lorene. From then on she "did her job with gusto that denied shame, and demanded her money with an authority that squelched all pity. And from these old men, her father's friends, Josie obtained the wherewithal to dress herself well, and to eat well, and to own the Dew Drop Inn." She reared her daughter in the Dew Drop Inn and as a result of that kind of environment coupled with the burden of two children, Lorene too turned to prostitution as a means of supporting her children. For both of these mothers prostitution was just another item in a long list of sacrifices that mothers will make in order to properly provide for their children.

There also exists the Black mother for whom promiscuity provides an outlet for emotional rather than financial gains. Margaret in The Third Life of Orange Copeland "found relief from her cares in the arms of her fellow bait-pullers and church members, or with the man who drove the truck." She sought this relief because her life with Orange was an unsatisfactory one. With the other men she could enjoy sex without the hassles that accompanied being with Orange.

Margaret did have the privilege of choosing whether to sleep with her husband, Orange, or one of her lovers. Sula's Hannah had no choice because her husband was amongst the departed. After his death "Hannah
simply refused to live without the attentions of a man...mostly the husbands of her friends and neighbors. She felt no remorse because all she took from these men was sex. Her interest did not involve any jealousy or possessiveness: "Hannah rubbed no edges, made no demands, made the man feel as though he were complete and wonderful just as he was—he didn't need fixing—and so he relaxed and swooned in the Hannah-light that shone on him simply because he was. In spite of the many reasons for promiscuity, society still frowns upon it as a negative trait in women in general and mothers in particular.

The Black mother who encourages her child to reject his Blackness and adopt white attitudes projects as much of a negative image as the indifferent, negligent, and promiscuous mother. She is crippling her child by taking away part of his identity. Geraldine in The Bluest Eye falls into this category. She suffers from the white identification syndrome prevalent in the black middle and upper middle classes and transmits this attitude to her son, Junior. The begins by encouraging him to play with white kids, never "niggers." Geraldine proceeds to drive the message home thus:

She had explained to him the difference between colored people and niggers. There were easily identifiable. Colored people were neat and quiet; niggers were dirty and loud. He belonged to the former group: he wore white shirts and blue trousers; his hair was cut as close to his scalp as possible to avoid any suggestion of wool, the part was etched into his hair by the barber. In winter his mother put Jergens Lotion on his face to keep the skin from becoming ashen. Even though he was light-skinned, it was possible to ash. The line between colored and nigger was not always clear; subtle and telcital signs threatened to erode it, and the watch had to be constant.
Geraldine has not come to grips with her own blackness. As a result she is rearing her son for a lifetime of disappointment. He will be unable to identify with the Black world and the white world will reject him.

Consideration must also be given to the Black mother whose suffering extends beyond the point of endurance and culminates in her death and/or the death of her child. Neither murder nor suicide is recognized as a positive response to the role of motherhood. Margaret in The Third Life of Grange Copeland is guilty of both misdeeds. She decided that life no longer held any value for her after Grange left her. She knew that her baby would not have anyone to take care of it after she committed suicide so she murdered him as an act of mercy. Her role as wife and mother had become more than she could bear.

History recognizes the fact that slave mothers sometimes killed their children to avoid rearing them as slaves. Eva murdered her son Plum because he had become a slave to drugs. He was her only son and to her she had given the best of everything that she could give. Plum was part of the reason that she had sacrificed her leg. To see him wasting away before her eyes was more than she could bear. The following explanation for murdering him elicits respect for her strength and courage rather than condemnation of her deed. She says:

"He gave me such a time. Such a time. Look like he didn't even want to be born. But he come on out. Boys is hard to bear. You wouldn't know that but they is. It was such a carryin' on to get him born and to keep him alive. Just to keep his little heart beating and his little old lung cleared and look like when he came back from that war he wanted to
git back in. After all that carryin' on, just gettin' him out and keepin' him alive, he wanted to crawl back in my womb and well...I ain't got the room no more even if he could do it...I had room enough in my heart, but not in my womb, got no more. I birthed him once. I couldn't do it again...I done everything I could to make him leave me and go on and live and be a man but he wouldn't and I had to keep him out so I just thought of a way he could die like a man not all scrunched up inside my womb, but like a man. ...But I held him close first. Real close. Sweet Plum. My baby boy." 

Eva's love for her son and her interest in his well being seem ample justification for her deed. It has often been said that loving people may mean loving them enough to give them up. Eva loved Plum enough to give him over to what she hoped would be a better world for him.

Within the limited scope of the three novels examined it is revealed that the Black mother, like all other mothers, is not a perfect creature. The character flaws presented in this chapter in no way undermine the basic affection that she feels for her children. Even the most negligent mother will respond when her child is faced with danger. The men in the lives of the promiscuous mother do not divert her attention from her children. The mother who seeks to instill white values in her child truly believes that she is doing it for his own good and the mothers who murder their children are making the supreme sacrifice of love. Granted, the Black mother is not an angel, but neither is she a devil. Since the three novels examined cannot possibly provide a complete and permanent characterization of the Black mother, other authors like Ms. Walker and Ms. Morrison will continue to examine the qualities that make her such a complex figure.
Footnotes for Chapter 4


5Morrison, Sula, p. 98.

6Ibid., p. 99.

7Staples, The Black Woman in America, p. 94.

8Walker, The Third Life of Grange Copeland, p. 41.

9Ibid., p. 20.

10Morrison, Sula, p. 36.

11Ibid., p. 37.


14Morrison, Sula, pp. 61-62.
The Black Mother's Relationship With Her Children

The Black mother's dedication to providing for and protecting her children can be traced back to her African heritage. Historical evidence indicates that "Black women in Africa had an unbreakable bond with their children."¹ Two factors serving to reinforce this bond were polygamy and the matrilineal system. Due to the father's attention being diverted by the children of the other wives, each mother was responsible for the care and well being of her own children. For this reason the children were regarded as the property of the mother and their ancestry was traced in a matrilineal manner. "The universal testimony of travelers and missionaries was that the African mother's love for her children was unsurpassed in any part of the world."² Their testimony is not an indication that the other mothers of the world did not love their children, but an affirmation that the depth of the mother-child relationship in Africa coupled with the primitive lifestyle made the African mother's love much more evident. She could be observed making provisions for her children and placing their needs above her own. The mother's love for her children was one of the factors that remained constant when she was torn from her native land and subjected to the harshness of slavery. Many of the mothers had been separated from their children prior to their voyage to this continent, while others had to undergo the horror of watching their children being sold on the

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auction block. The mother's lot during slavery was an unfortunate one. Her position of servitude gave the master primary authority over the children with secondary authority allocated to her and an absence of authority for the father. "The mother-centered family with its emphasis on the primacy of the mother-child relation and only tenuous ties to a man, then, is the legacy of adaptation worked out by Negroes during slavery." The Black mother of the slave era devoted as much time as possible to her offspring before the child was taken from her and sold for the master's financial gain. The amount of time that she could devote was limited because she also had the responsibility of taking care of the master's children. The white mistress recognized the Black woman's maternal instinct and quickly converted that instinct to her own advantage by placing her children under the care of a Black "mammy." Maya Angelou avows that:

There is a kind of strength that is almost frightening in Black women. It's as if a steel rod runs right through the head down to the feet. And I believe that we have to thank Black women not only for keeping the Black family alive, but (also) the white family.... Because Black women have nursed a nation of strangers. For hundreds of years, they literally nursed babies at their breasts who they knew, when they grew up, would rape their daughters and kill their sons. Her avowal serves as an indication of the depth of the maternal instinct in Black women. Though she has reared children other than her own, "it has been within the family that much of her strength has developed because it was here that she was forced to accept obligations and responsibilities for not only the care and protection of her own life, but for that of her offspring as well." Her acceptance of these obligations and her willingness to fulfill them is responsible for the affectional
ties that exist between her and her children. The bond between Black mothers and their children is so intensely recognized that it is often a focal point for works of fiction. Both Alice Walker in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* and Toni Morrison in *Sula* and *The Bluest Eye* devote attention to the mother-child relationship as a very important facet of Black family life.

Robert Staples, author of *The Black Woman in America*, says of Black women that "many of them have found their gratification in their children. To attack motherhood would be to strike at the heart of their reason for living."6 This joy in having a child is due in part to the lack of opportunity afforded Black women to have a meaningful place in white American society. They have to rely on their families for an affirmation of their worth. For many, this affirmation of self worth stems from their ability to create a new life. A Black mother is recorded as saying that, "To me, having a baby inside me is the only time I'm really alive. I know I can make something, do something, no matter what color my skin is, and what names people call me."7 There is also the inner hope that that child will be able to enjoy a better position in life than she has been able to enjoy. Such is the case with Men in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*. Brownfield has made her life such a hell that she only exists for her children, in hope that their lives will be better. It is for their sake that she continues to live with Brownfield, who is a sharecropper. The only benefits from his job are a roof over their heads and an allocated patch of ground for a garden. She thus has the satisfaction of knowing that her children will be sheltered, though substandardly, and that the vegetables from the
garden will lessen their hunger. Men's dedication prompts Alice Walker to note that "she slogged along, ploddingly, like a cow herself for the sake of her children." Brownfield are responsible for her plodding condition. Brownfield mistreated her and the children to the extent that she began to hate him. He received her hatred with annoyance. "He was annoyed when she despised him because out of her hatred she fought back, with words, never with blows, and always for the children." Brownfield regards her dedication to the children with scorn. He is jealous of their relationship and accuses Men of trying to turn them against him. She refuses to be intimidated by his accusation and continues to provide for her children to the best of her ability. The length to which she goes to protect the future of her children is revealed during the conflict centering around the family's wish to move into town. "Men fights for her children in the matter of the house and exacts submission from Brownfield at gunpoint." For Men, all future hope revolves around the move to town. This move will mean a good job for her, a house with modern facilities for her children, and better clothing for them. The children will also enjoy an advantage where their education is concerned. Men is finally aware of a situation in which she can offer her children more in terms of material and emotional benefits and she fully intends to take advantage of it. During the brief time that she has Brownfield under her control, she emphasizes the fact that her first dedication is to her children and that his presence in the new home will be insignificant. Men tells him, "He and my children is moving to town to the house I signed that lease on. We is moving in with you or without you."
Her resort to violence was a plan devised only to insure the welfare of her children. Brownfield has been insistent upon moving to another farm. Mem, desirous of a better situation for her children, has resisted the move. Further evidence of her maternal concern is contained in the following speech to Brownfield:

"Let me tell you something, man," Mem said evenly, though breathing hard. "I have worked hard all my life, first trying to be something and then just trying to be. It's over for me now, but if you think I won't work harder than ever before to support these children you ain't only mean and evil and lazy as the devil, you're a fool!"12

She is willing to work harder than ever because Black mothers have always faithfully met their maternal responsibilities.13 Sometimes meeting their responsibility seemed to be more than the human body could endure. Mem discovered how much endurance was required of the Black mother when Brownfield moved her and the children back into a windowless shack half full of wet hay. This move was initiated at a time when she was at her lowest point of resistance due to an attack of influenza. Her love for her children and her intestinal fortitude prompt her to make the following comment:

"Brownfield, I'm sick," said Mem, "but I ain't going to ask you for mercy and I ain't going to die and leave my children. Even in this weather you brought me out in I ain't going to catch pneumonia. I'm going to git well again, and git work again, and when I do I'm going to leave you."14

Mem's prediction for a return to health was realized but Brownfield murdered her before she could execute the second half of her plan.

Making provisions for the necessities of life for the children was not Mem's only responsibility. It was also left to her to protect them
from their father's brutality. Mem tried hard to control him when he beat them. She always said, "Brownfield, you ought not to carry on this a-way. You know you won't be able to look yourself in the face when you gets old and the children done gone." Her appeal to him is of a psychological nature rather than a threat to resort to his way of handling matters through physical violence. Mem made one violent threat but, regretfully, she failed to carry it out. She told Brownfield, "You tetch a hair on one of my children's heads and I'm going to crucify you-stick a blade in you, just like they did the Lawd; if it was good enough for him it's good enough for you." This threat serves as further evidence that Mem's primary concern was for her children and that she became most protective in situations where their well being was threatened. Mem continued to work and provide for her children until the time of her death, proving that the relationship between mother and child is "the primary and essential social bond around which the family develops." The deterioration of Mem's family is first recognized by Grange, who comments to Ruth, Mem's youngest child, that "there ain't no trouble like losing your ma." The community position on the value of the mother-child relationship is reflected in the attitude of Ruth's classmates. "Mothers, she learned very soon, were a premium commodity among her classmates, many of whom had never known a father and if they had could no longer even remember him." The depth of the response to losing one's mother serves as a documentation of the theory that the mother-child relationship is the backbone of the Black family.
Toni Morrison's *Sula* presents the mother-child relationship in a situation where the father is no longer at home. The absence of the father makes the mother's "acceptance of the idea that she will care for and support her children" more pronounced. Eva's dedication to her children took precedence over all the other elements of her life. She did not even reserve a moment to resent her husband for leaving her with the children. Her situation is recorded as follows:

The children needed her; she needed money, and needed to get on with her life. But the demands of feeding three children were so acute she had to postpone her anger for two years until she had both the time and the energy for it. She was confused and desperately hungry.

Eva had no way of alleviating her hunger because the children were too young to be left alone while she worked in the valley. Her only recourse was dependence on her neighbors for assistance. It was unquestionable that "she would have to scrounge around and beg through the winter, until her baby was at least nine months old, then she could plant and maybe hire herself out to valley farms to weed or sow or feed stock until something steadier came along at harvest time."

Eva's pride coupled with the suffering of her children forced her to take more drastic measures. After thinking the matter over carefully, "two days later she left all of her children with Mrs. Suggs, saying she would be back the next day. Eighteen months later she swept down from a wagon with two crutches, a new black pocketbook, and one leg."

It was rumored that Eva lost her leg by sticking it under a train to collect the insurance money. Whatever the fate of her leg, Eva's return was marked by prosperity. Her first act was to reclaim her children; and immediately thereafter she made provisions for a new dwelling for them. Eva's
dedication to protecting her children remained constant through their adult lives. Having already sacrificed her leg to insure proper care for her children, Eva risked her life to save her daughter from death. The following account is given:

She rolled up to the window and it was then she saw Hannah burning. The flames from the yard fire were licking the blue cotton dress, making her dance. Eva knew there was time for nothing in this world other than the time it took to get there and cover her daughter's body with her own. She lifted her heavy frame up on her good leg, and with fists and arms smashed the windowpanes. Using her stump as a support on the window sill, her good leg as a lever, she threw herself out of the window. Out and bleeding she clawed the air trying to aim her body toward the flaming, dancing figure. She missed and came crashing down some twelve feet from Hannah's smoke. Stunned but still conscious, Eva dragged herself toward herfirstborn, but Hannah, her senses lost, went flying out of the yard gesturing and bobbing like a sprung jack-in-the-box.

Only a maternal tie could prompt a woman to attempt such a daring and unselfish rescue.

Eva's love for children and the desire to protect and provide for them extended beyond the ones to which she gave birth. "Among the tenants in that big old house were the children Eva took in. Operating on a private scheme of preference and prejudice, 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 who came to play checkers or read the Courier, or write her number." Three of these founding children remained in Eva's home long after Sula had her committed to a home for the elderly.
Sula also affords an opportunity to examine the mother-child relationship in a situation wherein poverty is not a dominant factor. Previously satisfaction of material needs has been viewed as a primary test for determining the extent of the mother's dedication. With Helene Wright dedication to the child's social enlightenment is examined. Helene hopes that her daughter will completely escape the family background she is still evading. Helene's mother was a prostitute and she feels that this indiscretion will cast a shadow on the child. For this reason her love for her child is coupled with repressive social guidance. The situation is described as follows:

Her daughter was more comfort and purpose than she had ever hoped to find in this life. She rose grandly to the occasion of motherhood-grateful, deep down in her heart, that the child had not inherited the great beauty that was hers...Under Helene's hand the girl became obedient and polite. Any little enthusiasm that little Nel showed were calmed by the mother until she drove her daughter's imagination underground.25

The effect of Helene's dedication to Nel is questionable but it is undeniable that that dedication existed.

Another aspect of the mother-child relationship is presented in Sula. In the case of Eva and Helene, Toni Morrison concentrates on the mother executing her responsibilities to her children. With Nel she concentrates on the benefits that the mother receives along with the responsibility. For Nel motherhood filled the void left by her husband:

It didn't take long, after Jude left, for her to see what the future would be. She had looked at her children and knew in her heart that that would be all. That they were all she would ever know of love. But 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.26
Her realization of the importance of her children's love makes her provisions for them and her desire to protect them even more pointed.

In regard to the strength of maternal instinct, The Bluest Eye presents a situation reminiscent of Eva's position in Sula. When Mrs. MacTeer, the mother of Claudia and Frieda, agrees to take Pecola Breedlove into her home temporarily, Claudia relates that "mama had told us two days earlier that a 'case' was coming—a girl who had no place to go. The county had placed her in our house for a few days until they could decide what to do, or more precisely, until the family was reunited." Mrs. MacTeer's willingness to take Pecola into her home indicates that she, like Eva, has enough warmth in her heart to share with a child other than her own. She is a very loving and conscientious woman. Her daughter, Claudia, recalls an instance of her dedication and affection, and related that "In the night when my coughing was dry and tough, feet padded into the room, hands repinned the flannel, readjusted the quilt, and rested a moment on my forehead." Mrs. MacTeer's kindness also serves to make her intolerant of the negligence exemplified by the Breedloves. She speaks of the Breedloves' negligence in the following manner:

"Ain't nobody even peeped in here to see whether that child has a loaf of bread. Look like they would just peep in to see whether I had a loaf of bread to give her. But now. That thought don't cross they mind. That old trifling Cholly been out of jail two whole days and ain't been here yet to see if his own child was 'live or dead. She could be dead for all he know. And that mama neither. What kind of something is that."
Mrs. MacTear firmly believes that mothers should assume responsibility for their children and provide for them as adequately as possible.

In addition to loving and providing for her children, a mother tends to exert an influence over them. This influence results in the formation of the child's values. Andrew Billingsley asserts that "it is within the intimate circle of the family that the child develops his personality, intelligence, aspiration, and, indeed, his moral character." Margaret in The Third Life of Orange Copeland manages to generate in her son Brownfield one of the few positive responses that he feels throughout the novel. He surveys her condition and reveals his feelings:

He was sad for her and felt bitterly small. How could he ever bear to lose her, to his father or to death or to age? How would he ever survive without her pliant strength and the floating fragrance of her body was sweet and inviting and delicate, yet full of the concretely comforting odors of cooking and soap and milk. Perhaps Brownfield's realization that his mother's pliant strength was insufficient for her survival contributed to the despair that he suffered throughout his life. Lacking his mother's courage to terminate life swiftly, he prolonged his existence and in so doing proved to be a detrimental influence on all the people with whom he was closely associated. It is noteworthy that all of his memories of his mother were favorable.

Mem's relationship with her children is one of the most inspirational in all of the novels. She seemed aware of the needs of her children and tried to fulfill those needs to the best of her ability. For the sake of the children she tried to remain pleasant in the face of Brownfield's
verbal attacks and submissive in the face of his physical attacks. Men always had time to share her children's dreams. Her continuing interest in their education proved that she had high aspirations for them. The culture of poverty combined with the crippling effects of being married to Brownfield severely limited the positive influences that Men could exert on her children. In spite of these limitations Men gives validation to the idea that "as the most important socializing agent, the Black mother most insure that the child receives material and emotional support and that he is encouraged to learn the educational and job skills necessary for success in the world." Alice Walker intimates that Ruth, Men's youngest child, will be successful in life. Her success will result from Grange's cultivation of the values that Men has instilled in her.

In The Third Life of Grange Copeland, Josie exemplifies the mother who has a negative influence on her child and who transmits negative values. She is a prostitute and it has been through the financial gains from her profession that she has supported her daughter, Lorene. Their relationship is based on rivalry. Brownfield reveals:

Sometimes he felt he was the link they used to prove themselves mother and daughter. Otherwise they might have been strangers. They existed for the simple pleasure of flirting with each other's men, and then of fighting it out in the street in front of the lounge, where every man in the district soon learned that if you wanted a piece of pussy you had only to make up to one of them to have the other fall in your lap.

The absence of a warm relationship and mutual respect in addition to the atmosphere of the Dew Drop Inn made it almost impossible for Lorene to turn out any differently. The only hope for her is that she will be
a better mother to her two sons than Josie has been to her.

A similar type of mother influence is presented in *Sula* through the relationships between Eva, Hannah, and Sula. Robert Staples maintains that a woman's "whole feminine role may be shaped by her mother's attitude toward men."34 The actions of the three generations of Peace women lend support to his theory. The novel states, "It was manlove that Eva bequeathed to her daughters... The Peace women simply loved maleness, for its own sake."35 Hannah received Eva's legacy and passed it on to her daughter, Sula. Unlike Josie and Lorene, there never existed a sign of rivalry among these women. Their attraction to the opposite sex produced no ill effects except in the case of Sula. She lacked the respect that Hannah had for prior relationships in the lives of the men with whom she was intimate. Sula returned to Madallion after a ten year absence and alienated the affection of her best friend Nel's husband. It's at this point that the Peace legacy becomes contemptuous.

The most positive account of mother influence and value transmission in *Sula* comes from Ajax. His mother is not a developed character in the novel. We see her through his eyes. He reveals that:

Other than his mother, who sat in her shack with six younger sons working roots, he had never met an interesting woman in his life. His kindness to them in general was not due to a ritual of seduction (he had no need for it) but rather to the habit he acquired in dealing with his mother, she inspired thoughtfulness and generosity in all her sons.... This woman Ajax loved, and after her--airplanes. There was nothing in between.36

His attraction to Sula is based on his belief that she has something in common with his mother. Ajax's mother is the perfect example of the
simplistic and profound influence that a mother can exert upon her children.

Of equal importance with the influence that the mother exerts on the child is the contribution that she makes toward generating a home atmosphere that is conducive to the positive development of the mother-child relationship. Billingsley believes that this should be "the kind of atmosphere which generates a sense of belonging, self-worth, self-awareness, and dignity." In The Third Life of Grange Copeland Mem attempts to present this kind of atmosphere for her children by first giving consideration to the physical condition of the home. Though her house was little more than a shack, she dedicated many hours to keeping it as clean as possible. She also made attempts to decorate it by pasting pictures from magazines on the walls and placing jars of colored leaves on the tables. Mem also cuts logs to make steps for the house and planted flower seeds in the yard. She is aware, however, that it will take more than these physical repairs to make her house a home.

Eight of the stipulations in her ten point plan presented to Brownfield prior to the move to town will contribute to a better home atmosphere for her children. She advises Brownfield to terminate his drinking, profanity, unmanly behavior and his inclination towards violence. For almost three years Mem manages to maintain a home atmosphere in which the children are able to feel secure, worthwhile and dignified.

The atmosphere in the MacTeer household in The Flueggt Eye is colored by the moods of Mrs. MacTeer. Though she loved her children very dearly, she was sometimes inclined to release her frustrations through lengthy, indirect arguments. Once she had aired all of her
grievances, she would start singing and sing for the remainder of the day. Her children looked forward to her singing moods. Claudia tells us that:

She would sing about hard times, bad times, and somebody-love-gone-and-left me times...Misty colored by the greens and blues in my mother's voice took all of the grief out of the words and left me with a conviction that pain was not only endurable, it was sweet.38

The mother's singing prompted the children to think of her experiences and the experiences that the future held for them.

The atmosphere in the Breedlove household is void of any of the warmth that the Mclaws experience. The only contributions that Pauline made were of a violent nature. She would initiate violent conflicts with Cholly. Her children lived in constant fear that one day they would kill each other. Her son Tommy responded to the atmosphere by running away from home whenever possible, and her daughter Pecola sought relief by entreating God to make her disappear. Theirs is a case in which the mother's lack of concern for the proper atmosphere produced detrimental results.

Sula affords an opportunity to compare the reactions of Nel and Sula to their respective households and to note their preference for the home in which they did not live. Ms. Morrison writes:

Nel, who regarded the oppressive neatness of her home with dread, felt comfortable in it with Sula, who loved it and would sit on the red-velvet sofa for ten to twenty minutes at a time—still as dawn. As for Nel she preferred Sula's woolly house, where a pot of something was always cooking on the stove; where the mother, Hannah, never scolded or gave directions; where all sorts of people dropped in; where newspapers were stacked in the hallway, and dirty
The difference in the home atmosphere for the two girls had a profound influence on their later lives. Nal was more restrictive in her thoughts and actions than Sula. Their reactions lend support to Stanley Guttman's theory in \textit{Black Psyche} that "personality develops to a large extent, in the intimate setting of the family. It is shaped both subtly and not-so-subtly by parents' treatment of the child and by the general tone of family relations."\textsuperscript{40} The home atmosphere created by the mothers in \textit{The Third Life of Grange Copeland}, \textit{Sula}, and \textit{The Bluest Eye} undoubtedly had an influence on the personalities of their children.

In viewing the mother-child relationship it is important to take into account the child's response to the mother's love. Many children question the mother's ability to provide companionship and generate and propagate the various forms of love.\textsuperscript{41} Hannah questions whether or not Eva loved them and asks her if she ever played with them. Eva responds:

"Play? Wasn't nobody playin' in 1895. Just cause you got it good now you think it was always this good? 1895 was a killer, girl. Things was bad. Niggers was dying like flies....You want me to tickle you under the jaw and forgot 'bout them soreos in your mouth? Pearl was shittin' worms and I was supposed to play rang-around-the-rosie? ....Soon as I got one day done here comes a night. With you all coughin' and me watchin' so TB wouldn't take you off and if you was sleepin' quiet I thought, O Lord, they dead and put my hand over your mouth to feel if the breath was comin' what you talkin' 'bout did I love you girl I stayed alive for you can't you get that through your thick head or what is that between your ears, heifer?"\textsuperscript{42}
It is ironical that Hannah should be the one to question her mother's love. She manages to destroy all of Sula's confidence in parental love with one remark. Sula overheard her say that she loved her because she was her child but she did not like her. After that incident Sula never had faith in any one else.

The primary focus of most literature concerning the Black mother-child relationship is the contribution that the mothers make to shaping the character of their sons. "Ozier and Cobb, in their clinical analysis, emphasize that Black mothers frequently are punitive and cruel, especially in their relationships with their sons." The sensitive reader recognizes the seeming cruelty on the part of the mother as a means of sheltering her son from the frustrations that await him in a white oriented society. Her actions in reality reflect "a kind of love—the deepest and strongest kind—the kind that must require a mother to hide her natural emotions and punish her child to save him; the kind that allows her to see the horrors that await her child in the Northern ghettos and the Southern race belts and still face that difficult task of teaching him to survive in them." This is the kind of love that Eva felt for Plum. Pauline Breedlove works along these same lines with Tommy but she fails to exhibit enough warmth to assure him that underneath all her protective precautions, she still loves him. As a result, he runs away from home constantly.

There also exists in literature the positive picture of the Black mother bringing salvation to her son. Langston Hughes' "Mother to Son" is a reflection of this positive image. It states:
Well, Son, I'll tell you:
Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.
It's had tacks in it,
And splinters,
And boards torn up,
And places with no carpet on the floor—
Bare.
But all the time
I've been a-climbin' on,
And reaching landin's,
And turning corners,
And sometimes going in the dark
Where there ain't been no light.
So, boy, don't you turn back.
Don't you let them set you down on the steps
'Cause you finds it's kinder hard.
Don't you fall now—
For I'm still goin', honey,
I'm still climbin',
And life for me ain't been no crystal stair.45

Such is the advice that Geraldine in The Bluest Eye will give to her Junior and the advice that Mom would have given to her son if he had lived. Hughes' "Mother to Son" captures the attitude of generations of Black mothers who have attempted to prepare their sons for the hardships of life and instill in them the belief that they could make it if they tried.

The mother-child relationship is one of the most complex in all areas of family relationships. It is wholly taken for granted that the Black mother will assume total responsibility for her children. In addition to providing for their creature comforts and projecting the proper kind of home atmosphere, it is also the mother's responsibility to serve as the emotional center of the family. Motherhood means serving as doctor, minister, teacher, and friend to her children. It is a role requiring much love and dedication. The dedication of mothers like Mom, Eva, Helene, and Mrs. MacTeer make it easy to understand how 'Black
mothers for generations have raised their children effectively in spite of many hardships they had to endure.46 For these women, motherhood serves as the core of their raison d'etre.
Footnotes for Chapter Five

1Staples, *The Black Woman in America*, p. 128.


9Ibid.


12Ibid., p. 87.


15Ibid., p. 96.


18Ibid., p. 188.


21Ibid.
22Ibid., p. 20.
23Ibid., pp. 65-66.
24Ibid., p. 32.
25Ibid., pp. 15-16.
26Ibid., p. 42.
29Ibid., p. 23.
35Morrison, *Sula*, p. 35.

Conclusion

To a black woman the birth of a child represents the apex of her life. Motherhood is an indication of maturity and the fulfillment of one's function as a woman.¹ For the Black mother, motherhood also means the acceptance of responsibility for that new life. The acceptance of this responsibility will necessitate sacrifice, understanding, and above all, a lot of love.

The portrait of the Black mother as painted by Alice Walker in The Third Life of Grange Copeland and Toni Morrison in Sula and The Bluest Eye captures many of the qualities that make her such a complex figure and a beloved individual.

Since a child must be supported, attention has to be given to the economic situation. Black mothers have to contribute a great deal to the support of their children. Their husbands are oftentimes trapped by the economic oppression that white society imposes on Black families. Black males find it very difficult to secure employment. Those who are employed are paid less for their services than their white counterparts. Menial jobs are more plentiful for the Black female so most Black mothers are working mothers. Their position as working mothers has a direct influence on their overall image. Some working mothers are too exhausted from their work to be congenial with their families at the end of the day. Such is the case with Pauline Breedlove in The Bluest Eye. Others are able to fulfill their duties as wives and mothers in spite of their employment. Margaret and Mon in The Third

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Life of Orange Copeland fall into this category. Though working not respond differently at the end of their work day, they maintain the hope that one day they can leave the homes of white employers and reign supreme in their own homes. In 1912, W. E. B. Du Bois voiced such a hope in "The Black Mother". He states, "In the midst of immense difficulties, surrounded by caste, and hemmed in by restricted economic opportunity, let the colored mother of today build her own statue, and let it be the Four walls of her own unsullied home." Until the time when she can make this transition, the Black Mother still feels the sting of economic oppression and does everything in her power to alleviate the problem.

In addition to economic problems, the Black mother is also faced with rearing her child in a society overflowing with white racism. She meets and deals with this racism on a daily basis and also prepares her child to deal with it. It is this difference in preparation that affects the image of the Black mother. Mothers like Sula's Helene who close their eyes to racism and pretend that it does not exist project a negative image. Geraldine in The Bluest Eye represents those Black mothers who seek to overcome racism by adopting as many white manners and ideologies as possible. She is blind to the realities of American society. If she were not blind, she would recognize that her adoption of white beliefs in order to be accepted is an exercise in futility. There are other mothers like Mem in The Third Life of Orange Copeland. She recognizes the fact that white racism exists and that there is no feasible way of overcoming it. She is forced to try to accept racism as
just another of life's bad aspects and to teach her children this acceptance. This is a burden that the majority of the non-Black mothers do not have to overcome. The Black mother's lot is a harsh one, and the manner in which she seeks to overcome it can only be regarded with the utmost admiration and respect.

Not all of the factors adversely affecting Black mothers can be attributed to external forces. Domestic problems rank high on the list of obstacles to the successful rearing of their children. Black men become frustrated with their position in society and relieve that frustration by becoming abusive to their wives and children. The Black mother accepts this abuse along with the other complicating factors in her life. This acceptance is truly a dedication that soars above and beyond the call of duty. Though the outsider may regard her acceptance of this abuse as insensitivity rather than an indication of loyalty, the Black mother understands the underlying reasons for her husband's attitude. It is difficult for a man to be constantly degraded without believing that he is less than a man. Granted, abusing his wife is not the ideal way to regain confidence in his manhood, but it does seem to fulfill a psychological need for the Black male. For this reason the Black mother accepts his abuse.

Individual personality traits also have a way of hampering the progress of Black mothers. Some find the struggle too strenuous and resort to giving their children away. This was the case with Rochelle in Sula and Cholly's mother in The Bluest Eye. Others fail to give them the proper attention and care. Pauline Breedlove and Betty fall
into this category. Lack of love is seldom responsible for these conditions. It is lack of opportunity to participate in the mainstream of society that forces the Black mother into these situations.

The Black mother's role is not always one of giving. She gets in the receiving line in terms of the affection that exists in the relationship between her and her children. Eva, Mem, Nel and Mrs. MacTeer serve as excellent examples. It is a clear case of love begetting love. Ms. Walker and Ms. Morrison give considerable attention to the mother-child relationship, the dearest of all relationships. It is in her role as mother that the Black woman bears most proudly. In fiction as well as in reality, Black mothers were the backbone of yesterday and they will be the leaning posts of tomorrow. Daryl Dance states:

Indeed as we look back over the history of the Black American mother, we see that she emerges as a strong black bridge that we all crossed over on, a figure of courage, strength, and endurance unmatched in the annals of world history. She is unquestionably a Madonna, both in the context of being a savior and in terms of giving birth and sustenance to positive growth and advancement among her people. It is she who has given birth to a new race; it is she who has played a major role in bringing a race from slavery and submission to manhood and assertiveness. It is largely because of her that we can look back on the past with pride and look forward to the future with courage.

It is these virtues of the Black mother that make her idolized by her children and immortalized in poetry and song. I feel it is safe to say that "whatever the future of motherhood in this society, Black women have left their imprint on the history of maternal role performance throughout the world." In their role as authors Alice Walker and Toni Morrison have captured the images and contributions of Black mothers in their fiction.
Footnotes in the Conclusion

3 Daryl Dance, "Black Eve or Madonna", in Perspectives on Afro-American Women, p. 110.
4 Staples, The Black Woman in America, p. 158.
Selected Bibliography


