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## The Village Mother in Selected Works of Toni Morrison

Taqwaa Falaq Saleem

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# THE VILLAGE MOTHER IN SELECTED WORKS OF TONI MORRISON

by

TAQWAA FALAQ SALEEM

(Under the Direction of David L. Dudley)

## ABSTRACT

This thesis uses *Beloved*, *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, and *Song of Solomon* to discuss Toni Morrison's presentation of women as biological and surrogate mothers and the relationships those mothers have to their children. These mother-child relationships take place in African American "villages" and each chapter displays the relationship between the community (village) and the biological and surrogate mothers. *Beloved* represents the ultimate biological mother and *Song of Solomon* represents the ultimate surrogate mother. *The Bluest Eye* shows negative surrogacy and *Sula* shows the positives and negatives of biological and surrogate motherhood. Considered together, the novels work to form a village and each of the four novels is a vital community member. Collectively, the novels show the strengths and weaknesses of community living. Toni Morrison creates an example of the African American village and the power of motherly influence in a child's life.

INDEX WORDS: Mothers, Children, Mother-child relationships, Surrogate mothers, Toni Morrison, African American village, *Beloved*, *Song of Solomon*, *Sula*, *The Bluest Eye*

THE VILLAGE MOTHER IN SELECTED WORKS OF TONI MORRISON

by

TAQWAA FALAQ SALEEM

B.A., Savannah State University, 2008

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of Georgia Southern University in Partial

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MASTER OF ARTS

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2010

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TAQWAA FALAQ SALEEM

Major Professor: David L. Dudley  
Committee: Joseph Pellegrino  
Caren J. Town

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## DEDICATION

*To the women of my village ... First and foremost, to my Mother and to my Grandmothers, Aunts, Godmothers, Mentors, Sorors, and Friends who made up the village that raised me, believed in me, encouraged me, and prayed for me and with me through this project.*

I love you, I honor you, and I speak your names:

**Momma** ~ Sheri Saleem Scott

**Grandmothers** ~ Shirley Rose Thomas and Helen Margaret Young

### **Aunts**

Linda T. Sutton, Reina R. Thomas, MaSheila Thomas-Davis, Dr. Regina R. Thomas Williams, Carmen T. Leeks, Valencia T. Austin Blount, and Roberta McBride

### **Great Aunts**

Martha Ree Byrd and Pearline Jones

**Bonus Grandmother** ~ Sallie Mitchell Scott

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**Savannah State University Family**

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My sisters in Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc.  
Tannisha, my dearest sister and minus for life.  
Camille, you inspire me, little sister.

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“If the only prayer you ever say in life is thank you, that will be enough.”  
~ Meister Eckhart



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## INTRODUCTION

*I'm not entangled in shaping my work according to other people's views of how I should have done it.*  
-Toni Morrison

Toni Morrison is one of the most renowned writers of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Morrison has written nine novels, including the Pulitzer Prize-winning work *Beloved* and the National Book Critics Circle Award-winning *Song of Solomon*. She won the prestigious Nobel Prize in Literature in 1993, and the Nobel Foundation celebrated her as a writer “who, in novels characterized by visionary force and poetic import, gives life to an essential aspect of American reality” (“Toni Morrison”). Some write for a lifetime and never accomplish the mastery of language and complexity of characters as created by Toni Morrison.

Toni Morrison’s brilliant collection of fiction provides a close look into African American communities. As part of her exploration of human relations, Morrison examines the complexities of motherhood and surrogate motherhood throughout her works. In particular, *Beloved*, *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, and *Song of Solomon* dramatize the lives of biological mothers and how surrogate mother figures help to maintain social stability in the African American “village,” where community members assist in raising children—by obligation or by choice. Community members choose to follow the examples set by others by accepting the call to duty or the obligation to mother the motherless or to reinforce the mothering of another.

### The Village

As Thomas LeClair writes in “The Language Must Not Sweat,” Toni Morrison’s fiction is “village literature, fiction that is really for the village, for the tribe” (26).

Morrison, however, focuses on the particularly American dynamic and influences on the original African village idea. As Vashti Crutcher Lewis writes in her article on *Sula*, Morrison's works are "rooted in an African past in that an ancestor is always present" (91). Community people of African descent have long had to step in to assist in the raising of children or taking care of family matters and have thus helped form what has been called the "village." The community sometimes forms the village when it observes the absence of one or both biological parents, notices a deficiency in a child's biological parenting, develops a desire to enhance the biological parenting, or a combination of these reasons.

The African American village is a variation on the African village system. Christel N. Temple's "Strategies for Cultural Renewal in an American-Based Version of African Globalism" discusses how the "United States is a prime setting for African cultural renewal because it offers a dynamic set of human and technological variables that can link our present to the foundations of our classical African past" (301). African Americans maintain some African traditions because of their usefulness and because those traditions work as a tangible connection to the past. The notion of an extended family dates back to before the forcible separation of the Middle Passage as part of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. Temple offers a geographical reference for the origins of the villages in that "our ancestors [came] from West Africa" where they were captured for slavery (303). Captives were often separated from biological family members. (Temple references Alex Haley's acclaimed film, *Roots*, with characters as examples of the original African villagers that were forced to become part of African American villages.) African Americans learn from accounts of slavery that families who may have

survived the Middle Passage without separation were later separated through slave sales and relocations once they reached America. Slaves would step in to fill the void left by another's missing family member(s), thereby creating a village. The village might well also exist in white communities, but the concept is more widespread and perhaps more acceptable in the African American community. Additionally, even before American Slavery, Africans practiced a village approach to child rearing. Children appreciated more than one mother figure and authority figure outside of their immediate household.

The African American village evolved from the African village, but is not an identical twin to the original village dynamic. Audrey Lawson Brown writes on how an examination of "African-American life-ways concludes they derive mostly from ... post-enslavement innovation" and imitation (173). African Americans added American influences to the African village model. Consisting of members of the immediate biological family as well as the combination of other neighboring families, the African American village takes on a variety of configurations. For multiple reasons, men grew increasingly absent in African American families. Men traded in African slave sales were more mobile than women because "women cared for the children and the elderly" in addition to handling domestic responsibilities (Brown 173). The subsequent absence of African American males resulted from men working long hours away from home, unwed parents, substance abuse, or any combination of reasons. Because men were often missing, women stepped up to take care of the children in the community. Biological and surrogate mothers relied on their own instincts and the support of the village in order to take care of their children.

### The Motherly Presence: Biological and Surrogate

The focus of this work will be on the representation of motherhood in the African American community or “village.” The village is made up of those persons responsible for raising, supporting, counseling, guiding, and loving children as they grow up. Villages vary based on location as well as the identity and function of members, but remain consistent in that village members complement the parental figures outside of a child’s immediate biological family. This project also discusses how Morrison uses surrogate mothers to serve as mother figures who step in to fill a gap when biological mothers are unable to do so. Morrison views the relationship as a variation of the biological mother-child relationship, and sometimes dramatizes how surrogates mothers can have a greater impact upon or a closer relationship with children than their birth mothers.

Andrea O’Reilly comments on how much Toni Morrison values motherhood and the maternal role a woman plays in a child’s life. The first experience and exchange of love between a child and another person is ideally between a biological mother and her child, and “before the child can love herself, she must experience herself being loved and learn that she is indeed valuable, and deserving of affection” (O’Reilly). In *Beloved*, the biological mother-child connections are the strongest relationships in the novel. Pecola misses this type of biological love in *The Bluest Eye* just as Milkman misses the spiritual biological mother-child connection in *Song of Solomon*. In such cases, the community or village surrogate mother figures are essential.

O’Reilly writes that Morrison “emphasizes how essential mothering is for the emotional well-being of children, because it is the mother who first loves the child and

gives that child a loved sense of self” (O’Reilly). *Beloved*, *Sula*, and *Song of Solomon* display the necessity of the village mothers assisting in the upbringing of children. Pecola, the main character in *The Bluest Eye*, lacks a positive biological mother figure, and is further harmed by the destructive and informal teaching of the three prostitutes who act as her surrogate mothers. Whether biological or surrogate, the mother-child bond is powerful and has stirred critical discussion for years.

### Novels Considered

The next four chapters describe the representation of motherhood (biological and surrogate) in four of Toni Morrison’s novels: *Beloved*, *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, and *Song of Solomon*. The chapters are organized based on the content within each novel. *Beloved* and *Song of Solomon* open and close the discussion of novels because those works, respectively, display the strongest mother-child relations being between biological or surrogate mothers and children. *The Bluest Eye* shows negative biological and surrogate mother-child relationships and *Sula* discusses the positives and negatives of both biological and surrogate mother-child relationships.

#### *Beloved*

The first chapter explores the strong biological connection between mother and daughters as well as the surrogate (village) mother’s intervention when the biological mother becomes overwhelmed by her attachment to her children. In this novel, a biological mother wants to and does care for her children. The extreme nature of her care prompts a horrific crime—murder. When the protagonist, Sethe, finds herself overwhelmed, the community women step in to help bring her back to being able to mother and re-establish the order of Sethe’s household.

In interviews, Toni Morrison discusses the type of novel she envisioned *Beloved* would be and how Margaret Garner's infanticide and real-life slave accounts inspired her to write it. Jean Wyatt's article, "Giving Body to the Word: The Maternal Symbolic in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*," details the use of language and voices in the text. She also talks about how the social setting in the novel revolves around community motherhood. Teresa N. Washington's work, "The Mother-Daughter Àje Relationship in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*," comments on how Morrison realizes her writing is often isolated and discusses the unique mother-daughter relationship in *Beloved*. In "'You Just Can't Fly On Off and Leave a Body': The Intercorporeal Breastfeeding Subject of Toni Morrison's Fiction," Edith Frampton's writing on the nursing that takes place within the novel supports the depth and intimacy of the relationship between a mother and child. Helene Moglen's writing in "Redeeming History: Toni Morrison's 'Beloved'" covers how a blending of stories and life experiences creates the novel.

### *The Bluest Eye*

Shifting from the strong mother-child biological connection in *Beloved* to a weaker biological mother-child connection, *The Bluest Eye* shows circumstances where the child protagonist finds a connection with three mother figures who, collectively, work as a type of surrogate or village mother. This novel centers on Pecola Breedlove and her experience with the negative aspects of mothering. Surrogate intervention may be good when the biological mother's parenting is absent or toxic, but *The Bluest Eye* shows that the quality of the surrogate experience must also be carefully evaluated.

Morrison notes that she wrote the novel because it was a story she herself wanted to read. Malin LaVon Walther discusses the perception of beauty in the book as

well as the sexual awkwardness and developing desires of young Pecola in “Out of Sight: Toni Morrison’s Revision of Beauty.” This article’s perspective is useful when arguing that Pecola needs a mother figure to guide her to self-awareness and an understanding of her body. An article by Cynthia Davis, “Self, Society, and Myth in Toni Morrison’s Fiction,” helps further the argument that Pecola would benefit from maternal input so that she does not define herself according to how she is perceived by others. Then, Timothy Powell’s “Toni Morrison: The Struggle to Depict the Black Figure on the White Page” speaks of the importance of distinguishing blackness from the mainstream of whiteness. In her article, “Traumatic Shame: Toni Morrison, Televisual Culture, and the Culture Politics of Emotions,” Kathleen Woodard writes about how the novel’s three prostitutes and surrogate mother figures do not feel shame because of their negative lifestyles. A positive surrogate mother figure would be useful here to encourage a successful life for women outside of prostitution.

### *Sula*

Continuing the exploration of biological and surrogate relations, this novel features the simultaneous working out of biological and surrogate relations. This chapter compares the conventional and the unconventional biological mother-daughter relations between the families of two of the main characters, Nel and Sula. Nel experiences a mostly traditional life, whereas Sula grows up in a more loosely structured family that includes relatives and other community people. In addition, her primary mothering comes from a surrogate. Sula’s unconventional family life that embraces the village provides an increased potential for happiness and balance in the child.



Barbara Lounsberry and Grace Ann Hovet, in “Principles of Perception in Toni Morrison’s *Sula*,” talk about how perception drives actions. This is obvious in the argument that Nel’s mother, Helene Wright perceives herself right in her decisions on how to raise her child and acts on her perceptions while Eva Peace perceives herself as more of an individual and acts on her perceptions. Vashti Crutcher Lewis writes in “African Tradition in Toni Morrison’s *Sula*” that *Sula* is full of African traditions and spiritual linkages. Even though they are raised by two different mothers in two different families, Nel and Sula are able to maintain a connection because of those spiritual ties. Also, Cedric Gael Bryant’s article “The Orderliness of Disorder: Madness and Evil in Toni Morrison’s *Sula*” discusses the display of disorder in the text, which supports the position that the unconventional may be preferred over the conventional.

### *Song of Solomon*

The last novel here differs from the other three novels in that the protagonist is a man. In *Song of Solomon*, the dynamics of the mother-son relationships (biological and surrogate) are explored. Men tend to look to other men as their examples, but the relationship of a mother to her son may be just as valuable as the mother-daughter connection. Milkman, the protagonist, has a biological mother, but she is more interested in herself than in her son. His biological mother is ineffective because she is unable to balance two main components of her mothering: nurturing and encouraging independence. Pilate is Milkman’s aunt and serves as his surrogate mother. Her motherly influence is greater and more positive with her nephew Milkman than with her own biological granddaughter, Hagar. Pilate helps him to make sense of his ancestry and how he becomes the man he is. This novel examines at length both aspects of the

subject treated in this project: biological mother-child relations and surrogate mother-child relations.

The sources used are conversations with Morrison and articles on the representations of community and motherhood in *Song of Solomon*. Susan L. Blake's "Folklore and Community in *Song of Solomon*" helps reinforce the argument of Pilate Dead's importance and value in the village. Gay Wilentz's article "Civilizations Underneath: African Heritage as Cultural Discourse in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*" reinforces the point that Pilate helps ensure that the function of the village and knowledge of family lineage continue beyond Milkman. Additionally, Edith Frampton thoroughly discusses the breastfeeding experience between Milkman and his biological mother which supports the position that nursing is Milkman's best connection to his mother in "'You Just Can't Fly On Off and Leave a Body': The Intercorporeal Breastfeeding Subject of Toni Morrison's Fiction."

## CHAPTER ONE – On *Beloved*

*I will call them my people,  
Which were not my people;  
And her beloved,  
Which was not beloved.  
- Romans 9:25*

Published in 1987, *Beloved* is Toni Morrison's fifth novel. Set in 1873 Cincinnati, Ohio, the novel tells the story of a former slave, Sethe, living with her daughter, Denver. Morrison constructs the story from fragments, featuring a series of flashbacks to twenty years earlier than the present time of the novel. Each flashback adds new insight to the past.

Sethe is sold into slavery at a young age, marries, and becomes mother to several children. When faced with the seemingly unbearable thought of living under the oppression of a new and notoriously brutal master, Sethe decides to join the slaves planning to escape. The slave owners seize Sethe before she has a chance to run and steal her breast milk. Sethe's desperate attempt to escape and her horror of a return to slavery push her to the point that she tries to kill her children rather than return them to a life of captivity. Sethe is successful only in the infanticide of her daughter, Beloved. *Beloved* thus explores a strong yet complex biological connection between mothers and daughters. Also within the novel is the presence of the community surrogates when the biological mother needs help. Sethe and her daughters, the living Denver and the ghost Beloved, offer a stunning portrayal of the relations between mothers and daughters.

Morrison describes the inspiration for the novel in a conversation with Gloria Naylor. She says she was "obsessed by two or three little fragments of stories" that she heard from different places (206). The storyline for the book was inspired by real-life

accounts of the experiences of an 1851 slave woman, Margaret Garner. (In the novel, Sethe is sold to the Garner family as a slave.) Morrison learned of this slave woman's story through newspaper clippings. She says of Garner,

. . . the Abolitionists made a great deal out of her case because she had escaped from Kentucky ... with her four children. She lived in a little neighborhood just outside of Cincinnati and she had killed her children. She succeeded in killing one; she tried to kill two others. She hit them in the head with a shovel and they were wounded but they didn't die. And there was a smaller one that she had at her breast. (Naylor 206-7)

Although horrific, Garner's actions represent a mother desperate to protect her children and provide what she felt was the strongest type of motherhood. (Garner was captured and returned to slavery.)

Morrison's interpretation of Margaret Garner's story inspires the development of Sethe, the female protagonist in this novel. Morrison was moved by the real-life tragedy of Garner and wanted to develop that into a lasting account of one of the horrors of slavery. Garner, in Morrison's eyes, was a fierce mother who believed in protecting her children with all her might.

### Mother-Daughter Relationship

Teresa N. Washington describes the relationship between Sethe and her daughters as featuring a force called "Àje"—a Yoruba word and "concept that describes a spiritual force that is thought to be inherent in African women" (171). "Àje" drives the actions of women of all ethnicities, especially those of African descent, to act based on instinct. There was a connection not just between a mother and her child, but between

a mother and her female child. This is the feeling present in the mother-daughter relationships of Sethe and Beloved and Sethe and Denver. Washington notes how “Àje’s terrestrial source of birth, actualization, and manifestation is the womb” (171). The connection Sethe has to Beloved and Denver began when she was carrying the children. Washington discusses how, like the village, the feeling of Àje started in Africa, survived the Middle Passage, and still exist in African American cultures. There is no room for outside interference in the Àje mother-daughter relationship and others, including fathers, are “relegated to the outside” (173).

The “crime” of infanticide as portrayed in *Beloved* was perpetuated by more real-life slave mothers than just Margaret Garner. Washington’s article details how, because of the Àje force between mothers and their children, women killed their children in effort to send them back to a safe and/or sacred place in order to shelter them from the evils of slavery (175). A mother killing her children is a chilling and horrible thought, but because of the Àje connection between a mother and child, critics like Teresa Washington support the argument that Sethe’s infanticide can be forgiven since the crime was done in the name of the love in a mother-daughter relationship.

### Mother Sethe

One who has lived and survived a life of brutal slavery, Sethe is proud and noble in her convictions. Her freedom was stripped from her at an early age, and she was forced to endure the perils of ownership and slavery. The reader meets Sethe at her “spiteful,” lifeless-colored home at 124 Bluestone Road in Ohio and immediately learns of her devotion to her children and her powerful motherly instincts (Morrison 3). After the death of Sethe’s mother-in-law, Baby Suggs, and the departure of her sons, Howard

and Buglar, Sethe lives with her youngest child, her daughter Denver, but remains haunted by her painful history and the other children who passed through her womb. The house is “full of a baby’s venom” as Sethe lives with the reality that she killed her own infant, Beloved, in effort to save her from slavery (3). Her home is “palsied by the baby’s fury at having its throat cut” (6). Sethe’s decision to kill Beloved lurks in her thoughts and affects her mothering of Denver. When Sethe and Denver find themselves alone in the house, they decide to “end the persecution” they have been feeling and summon the victim of Sethe’s motherly crime (4).

When Sethe is at her most intimate state as a mother, lactating after the birth of a newborn baby, she decides to kill Beloved. Here, the act of nursing, as Edith Frampton points out in her article, and the fact that Sethe is lactating at the time she kills her child, represents “a specific form of resistance to that legacy of oppression” (151). Morrison feels the reader should be aware that a mother killing her child is an act representing her intense love for, and protection of, her child. Sethe murders Beloved because of that immense love and desire to protect her. She puts loving others, particularly her children, ahead of herself. Sethe represents a “woman’s extraordinary capacity for love and sacrifice” according to Jan Furman (69).

Sethe’s instinctual reactions display how she is meant to mother. In her article, “Redeeming History: Toni Morrison’s ‘Beloved,’” Helene Moglen refers to Sethe as an example of “primal mother” in *Beloved* (22). Although the details of Sethe’s relationship to her mother and of her young life before slavery are sketchy, her maternal instincts are obviously strong. For Sethe, “nothing else would be in her mind” except thoughts of

her children and situations concerning her children (Morrison 6). The epitome of warmth and nurturing is Sethe's description of herself nursing her child:

Anybody could smell me long before he saw me. And when he saw me he'd see the drops of it on the front of my dress. Nothing I could do about that. All I knew was I had to get my milk to my baby girl. Nobody was going to nurse her like me. Nobody was going to get it to her fast enough, or take it away when she had enough and didn't know it. Nobody knew that she couldn't pass her air if you held her up on your shoulder, only if she was lying on my knees. Nobody knew that but me and nobody had her milk but me ... The milk would be there and I would be there with it.

(Morrison 19)

Sethe needs no instruction on how to sustain her babies. Characteristic of her naturalness as a mother is nursing. Instincts accompany the lactating that Sethe experiences with the birth of each child so that she knows when and how much to feed a child.

Perhaps the explanation behind Sethe's extraordinarily strong mothering lies in her upbringing. Morrison takes Sethe back to her history by uncovering the fragments of her past as a former slave who was raised by other surrogate mothers. Her mother-in-law Baby Suggs serves as one of those surrogate mother figures for Sethe, since she lives with Sethe's family until her death. The two women may have had a great deal in common, as Baby Suggs' "past had been like her present—intolerable" (4). Sethe yearned to escape slavery in her past and finds trouble living in the present because her thoughts about the horrors her past haunt her. She tries to compensate for the lack of a

biological motherly influence in her life by being such a cautious and protective parent—placing “all of the value of her life in something outside herself”—her children (Naylor 207).

Sethe acts as the ultimate protective mother when she kills Beloved. Because she cannot stand for her children to live a life in slavery as she lived, she thinks killing them will save them from the harsh conditions and overwhelming brutality of slavery. Morrison suggests she is justified in her actions. This is an example of a mother recognizing an approaching unwelcome reality and trying to protect her children from harm. Sethe’s love for Beloved and is for all her children, overwhelmingly powerful, extending deep into the psyches of all involved. Sethe is desperate to mother and control the progression of her child’s life and turns the word “mother” into a verb because she takes extreme action on behalf of her child. The ideal mother, the giver of life, may not be the first figure to come to mind when thinking of someone who might commit murder, particularly the murder of her own children. However, it does make some sense that the ideal mother would want to protect her children at all costs due to her strong love for them. Sethe’s infanticide can even be seen as a heroic act. Jean Wyatt supports that notion, saying that Morrison “reconstructs the acts of maternal heroism as the reproductive feats of the maternal body” (475). Still, children expect to be the beneficiaries of maternal “heroism” through acts of kindness and self-sacrifice, not murder.

Sethe’s mothering demonstrates how a biological mother’s connection to her children is difficult to break. The slave owners sought to interfere with the bond between Sethe and her children by taking her children as slaves. They expected to be



able to have their way, gather their slaves, and not experience the opposition that Sethe shows. Even though the slave masters come to violate Sethe and take from her breasts, they are not powerful enough to take Sethe's young children from her control (Morrison 21). As Wyatt writes, Sethe "defines herself as a maternal body" and lives for her children, dead and alive (474). It's almost as if the umbilical cord never detaches from Sethe and her children, especially with her daughter Beloved. For Sethe, giving birth is an unconditional covenant between mother and child. Sethe's "insistence on her own physical presence and connection to her children" consumes her being (Wyatt 474).

### Daughter Beloved

Perhaps because the Àje bond between mother and child is so strong, Beloved comes back as if to claim her rightful place in the household, a place that was cut away from her when her mother sliced her throat. Sethe's murdered daughter is a case of the dead joining the living. Consequently, there is a cross between the "imaginary and the symbolic" within the novel, for ghosts are usually symbols and not tangible realities (Moglen 18). Sethe finds herself "at the border of the unconscious and the conscious" when she is re-unites with Beloved (18). Her conscious thoughts remind her that her daughter is dead, but her unconscious mind still connects with the baby that she killed.

One day, Sethe and Denver hold hands and invite Beloved to return to their lives, even though her presence has been lurking there in the house for years (Morrison 4). The spirit of Beloved physically appears at the age she would have been had her mother not killed her, but her mental capacity and behavior are those of a child. Beloved allows her mother to see what her physical body would have grown to be, and

Sethe gets the opportunity that many other mothers might have yearned for, the opportunity to see a child after the child's death. However, Beloved's arrival does not heal the "sad" that hovers in the atmosphere of 124 Bluestone Road, and the "red and undulating light" still fills Sethe's gray and white house even after Beloved's return from the grave (10). Beloved's presence is a constant reminder of how she died and who killed her, and life, as Sethe and Denver are accustomed to, changes once Beloved arrives.

Part of the spirit that is Beloved knows that her mother is her murderer. The ghost takes advantage of her mother's guilt by having her spend lavishly on sweets and decorative ribbons and treats, just as a child would coerce a parent. The loving mother attempts to regain lost time with her child. Sethe sees Beloved's emergence as an opportunity to give Beloved the life she could have given her had she not killed her. Sethe spoils Beloved; "anything she wanted she got, and when Sethe ran out of things to give her, Beloved invented desire" (283). She should not have to buy Beloved's affection, but Sethe tries to make up for time lost.

Adjusting to a life with a ghost is a trying task, and Beloved exhausts the household with her presence. She needs and commands attention as a baby might, and her mother wants to oblige her as most mothers would with a young child. Sethe appears to go beyond reason in her catering to Beloved. The atmosphere in the household is one where "Denver is still unable to function in the outside world; Beloved becomes increasingly tyrannical and infantile; and Sethe loses her physical and emotional strength" (33). Sethe and Denver do not imagine when they summon Beloved that she would be as angry because "[w]ho would have thought that a little

baby could harbor so much rage” (5). Beloved’s rage does not help permanently ease the “sad” presence in the house. When the money from splurging on Beloved runs out and when Beloved becomes restless and angry from not being able to get her way, Sethe becomes a mother who cannot satisfy her child, which pains Sethe greatly. Before she kills Beloved, she was able to satisfy her with breast milk. Sethe wants to show with by her actions the death of love she has for her children. Sethe feels her love was expressed through murdering Beloved in the past; in the present, she feels her love for Beloved is expressed through gifts, and eventually through self-sacrifice.

### More Motherhood

To understand Sethe and her motivations, the reader must seek understanding of the act of mothering. Biological and surrogate mothers make large sacrifices for the betterment of their children. The biological mother has a special emotional connection to her child because of the actual carrying and birth of another life—an Àje connection. For Sethe, the sacrifice was her child’s life. Helene Moglen’s article, “Redeeming History: Toni Morrison’s ‘Beloved’” discusses how Morrison produces the lives of Sethe, Denver, Beloved, and Sethe’s lover Paul D. *Beloved* is based on a series of stories within stories throughout history as “Beloved’s story is a story of personal and collective loss: the deprivation of home, abandonment by an enslaved mother, the erasure of a disinherited father, the alienation of her [Sethe’s] body in rape and of her mind in the shattering of a mirror of identity” (Moglen 23). The experiences in stories of the past shape the present and the future for Sethe’s family and alter the mother/daughter relations.

Not only does a mother protect, a mother possesses an ability to connect the present with the past for her children through stories. According to Jean Wyatt, Beloved is more than just Sethe's baby; she has a "collective identity" representing the past and the present (474). Beloved is a present-day reminder of the pains in Sethe's past that still haunt her present. Perhaps Sethe sees in Beloved a present-day representation of their ancestors who died, figuratively or literally, in slavery and perhaps "[Beloved] represents a whole lineage of people obliterated by slavery, beginning with the Africans who died on the Middle Passage, the 'Sixty Million and more' of the novel's epigraph" (474). Figuratively, Beloved has had many mothers throughout history who eventually birthed her mother.

#### Daughter Denver

Young Denver appears lost in the storyline, as most of the focus is either on Beloved or on Sethe's reaction to Beloved. Even before Baby Suggs dies, "there had been no visitors of any sort and certainly no friends," so Sethe and Denver are mostly alone together in their home (Morrison 14). Denver can deal with the isolation on Bluestone Road "as long as her mother did not look away" from her (15). Denver's relationship with her mother has been stained for some time; she calls the feeling within her house "lonely and rebuked" (16). Sethe's motherly efforts to protect and shelter Denver from the reality of their family story keep Denver from cultivating her own personality. Motherhood does not involve just one type of responsibility or frame of mind. Mothers like Sethe try to think ahead and protect their children's feelings and experiences. After Denver discovers that her own mother killed her sister, she goes through a period of muteness as a reaction to this devastating news. Only with silence

does she find it possible to deal with her mother's over-protectiveness and obsession with Beloved.

Denver loves her mother and her "ghost-sister" even if she does not understand the depth of the relationship between Sethe and Beloved. Unfortunately, Denver appears as somewhat of the outsider to the mother/daughter relations before and after Beloved's ghost arrives. Before Beloved arrives, there is always the sense that one part of Sethe's spirit is not with Denver, and after Beloved arrives, the missing piece of her mother's spirit becomes evident, but that part still belongs to Beloved and not to Denver. Philip Page discusses the complexity of Denver's often shadowed character and her feelings towards her family in "Circularity in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*": "Confined by her overprotective mother and her own agoraphobia, she tries to live by means of intimate relationships within the house –with Sethe, with the inanimate ghost, then with Beloved, whom she desperately tries to keep to herself . . ." (32-33). Denver feels as if the key to unlocking the mysterious part of her mother might be through Beloved, and she wants to spend as much time with her sister's ghost as possible.

### Community Surrogates

When Sethe becomes consumed with Beloved's spirit and over-mothers her, the community women, not visible in the story before, must intervene in an effort to restore Sethe's spirit, save her life, and be mother figures to her and Denver. Word traveled through the community informing the women of the turmoil taking place in Sethe's home, and the community women arrive to show their concern. They care because one village family's suffering diminishes the strength of the entire village. Performing a kind of exorcism, the women pray Beloved away, cleansing and purging the past in an effort

to thrust Sethe and Denver into the present and future. The surrogates want Sethe and Denver to experience life without the haunting of Beloved because her living daughter suffers when she's consumed with thoughts of her dead daughter. The collective voice of the women "searched for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound" that would break the spell Beloved had over Sethe's household (Morrison 308). Those community women become Sethe's surrogate mothers by attempting to rid her of the ghost of her dead daughter who is draining the life from her. They try to help release Sethe from the guilt of the infanticide so Beloved, and Sethe, may rest in peace. When the women create just the right "wave of sound," their spirits touch Sethe and "she tremble[s] like the baptized in its wash" (308). This encounter resembles a rebirth for Sethe just as Christians are considered filled with a Godly spirit and reborn after a baptism. Sethe was cleansed like a new Christian is cleansed, and Beloved disappears like a spirit does after exorcism. Without Beloved, Sethe has the opportunity to experience a revitalized and refreshed life.

*Beloved* shows the power in biological and in surrogate mothering. Sethe's biological maternal love is strong enough to withstand murder and years of separation from her child, yet her intense love actually leads her to needing community surrogate mothers. Those village mothers step into Sethe's life to help continue the work of motherhood when she becomes unable to. They reinforce the idea that mothering is essential to the development of children and that when one mother needs help, other mothers assist. Morrison suggests that, in villages, children of any age belong to the community, and surrogate mothers consider their positions valuable and lifelong.

## CHAPTER TWO – On *The Bluest Eye*

*A little black girl yearns for the blue eyes of a little white girl, and the horror at the heart of her yearning is exceeded only by the evil of fulfillment.*  
- *The Bluest Eye* (204)

*The Bluest Eye*, published in 1970, was Toni Morrison's first novel. It's a coming-of-age story about Pecola Breedlove, the daughter of a drunken father and distant mother, a lost girl looking for an identity. *The Bluest Eye* takes place in Ohio, where black community members like the Breedloves focus more on indulging their own vices (alcohol in the case of Pecola's father) than on quality time with their children. Pecola gets no nurturing attention from Mrs. Breedlove, nor does she have a close relationship with her biological mother so, consequently, she must seek mothering from surrogate mother figures in the village of her community. Because of her lack of parental involvement and the societal norm of ignorance or indifference to the perception of beauty, young Pecola believes she is ugly and that beauty exists outside herself. Blue eyes are beautiful to Pecola since the only images of beauty around her come from white people. Were she to possess the beauty of blue eyes, Pecola thinks she would be loved and accepted instead of feeling like an outcast. The reader follows the girl through a series of events that confirm to her the perceived ugliness and awkwardness. *The Bluest Eye* uses Pecola to uncover the truth about a society so wrapped up in trying to make ends meet that it has little time to pay attention to its lonely and vulnerable children.

In a 1977 interview with Jane Bakerman, Toni Morrison says, "I think, all the time that I write, I'm writing about love or its absence" (40). *The Bluest Eye* features the element of missing self-love and missing motherly love. About this novel, Morrison says

that she “was writing about beauty, miracles, and self-images, about the way in which people can hurt each other about whether or not one is beautiful” (40). The criteria for beauty are subjective, and Morrison sends the message that one should not be able to make absolute judgments about the beauty of another. Beauty should be felt within and will then radiate on the outside. Here is where active parents are necessary to help children develop a sense of self-worth independent of the opinions of others.

### Protagonist Pecola

From the beginning of the novel, Pecola Breedlove suffers from lack of attention resulting in a warped self-image. In *Toni Morrison's Fiction*, Jan Furman offers that *The Bluest Eye* provides a “moving examination of Pecola’s life—her unloving childhood, her repudiation by nearly everyone she encounters, and finally the complete disintegration of self” (13). She appears as an outsider to those she grows up around, but the reader gets to know her well. Morrison speaks of how she intends for the reader to feel a great connection with the seemingly motherless Pecola and wants the reader to feel he or she has a secret with Pecola and her inner thoughts and desires:

The intimacy I was aiming for, the intimacy between the reader and the page, could start up immediately because the secret is being shared at best, and eavesdropped upon, at the least. Sudden familiarity or instant intimacy seemed crucial to me then, writing my first novel. I did not want the reader to wonder [about Pecola’s true feelings]. (Furman 13)

The reader does not have to wonder about the inner thoughts of the girl that no one else takes the time to get to know. The reader is also like Pecola’s only friend, the friend Pecola is unable to be to herself.



Pecola Breedlove is introduced during her transition from girlhood to womanhood. She's been sent to live with Frieda and Claudia MacTeer's mother because her father has attempted to burn down their storefront apartment. This is a time when she needs her biological mother most to help comfort and reassure her. Frieda and Claudia's mother does not have the time to pay much extra attention to Pecola and does not step in to be a surrogate mother figure to the young girl. Pecola becomes a community floater looking for love and what she thinks are beauty and acceptance in the form of the bluest eye. She longs for attachment, acceptance, and acknowledgement from those in her community but remains noticeably detached for most of the novel.

#### Pecola and the Family Not Breeding Love

Pecola's biological mother is a far cry from traditional, loving, and nurturing. Mrs. Breedlove believes she herself is ugly and has done nothing to prevent her biological daughter from having the same mindset. Because of her mother's own self-hatred, Pecola buries herself in her "ugly" veil and peeps "out from behind the shroud very seldom, and then only to yearn for the return of her mask" (39). Mrs. Breedlove handles her own ugliness "as an actor does a prop: for the articulation of character, for support of a role she frequently imagined was hers—martyrdom" (39). She allows her ugliness to kill her spirit. Mrs. Breedlove is only the shell of a woman; as a result, she is unable to mother. Pecola's biological mother is obviously lonely and detached—"the only living thing in the Breedloves' house was the coal stove" (37). Mrs. Breedlove has a physical disability—her "one good foot" (39). Her disability symbolizes her inability to firmly plant her daughter in life.

Pecola grows up in the hostile atmosphere of her storefront home. Her parents fight “each other with a darkly brutal formalism that [i]s paralleled only by their lovemaking” (43). Lovemaking and fighting are their only true connections—the family does not “breed love” as their name suggests. Pecola’s brother reacts to his parents’ fighting by frequently running away. Young Pecola experiments “with methods of endurance” as she witnesses her parents’ relationship (43). She needs to see love and peace in her home, but all she sees are hostility and disrespect. Instead of her mother taking time to find interest in her children’s lives, Pecola’s mother is primarily interested in herself. Young Pecola is often left to her own devices, and spending long periods of time in negative self-reflection. If her biological mother were not so obsessed with her own ugliness, Pecola might not feel the need to spend long hours “looking in the mirror, trying to discover the secret of the ugliness, the ugliness that made her ignored or despised at school, by teachers and classmates alike” (45). Pecola needs mothering and finds the closest thing to a maternal connection in the three women who live above the Breedlove family.

#### Three Unlikely Surrogates and the Lessons they Teach their “Daughter”

Pecola feels awkward as she begins menstruation and starts having thoughts about her sexuality. While some girls might discuss bodily changes with their mothers, Pecola does not have such a relationship with her biological mother. Left alone, Pecola ventures to the apartment above her family’s storefront home to visit with three women: Marie, China, and Poland. Pecola Breedlove’s knowledge of sexuality and a woman’s relationship to a man come primarily from these three “mother” figures, who happen to be prostitutes. Pecola’s interaction and engagement with her surrogate mothers seems

beneficial to her well-being, but actually have negative long-term effects. These women represent the negative effects of a surrogate mother and child relationship.

### Surrogate Mother-Daughter Bonding

A looming question in *The Bluest Eye*: “[h]ow do you get someone to love you” (32). Pecola learns from Frieda and Claudia that because she menstruates, she may now have a baby. (Frieda and Claudia are the young daughters of the family with which Pecola stays while her family is displaced due to the fire her father caused.) They inform her that she is biologically ready to mother. She believes that conception only occurs if she finds someone who loves her. The young girls have a better sense of a connection between love and sex than the three prostitutes, Pecola’s surrogates. Love makes the act of sex an intimate experience and not just a physical encounter. Sex for Marie, China, and Poland, however, lacks love and focuses more on that woman’s power over her sexual partners. Pecola has two sets of teachers in her life: the prostitutes and her biological mother. Unfortunately, both of her teachers mislead her.

One of the misleading concepts Pecola receives from her surrogate mothers is the idea that a sexual encounter should be more about business than love. They make no efforts to shelter young Pecola from their lifestyle. The three of them are “as free” with Pecola as they are with themselves (57). Marie introduces the subject of sex to the impressionable Pecola and, like a parent, Poland reinforces the lesson to her surrogate daughter. In Poland’s opinion, a man owes a woman for sex. She tells Pecola of her conversation with her aunt, a mother figure, about the financial responsibility that accompanies sex. Poland recalls how “[her] auntie whipped [her] good that first time when [she] told her [she] didn’t get no money. [She] said ‘Money? For what? He didn’t

owe [her] nothin'.' She said, 'The hell he didn't!'" (55) Instead of receiving a life value that passes through family history by parental storytelling, Pecola gets the negative lesson of sex for money from her surrogate mothers. Before her time spent with the prostitutes, she thinks relationships with men should involve love and not focus primarily on sex for profit. She thinks, from her interaction with Frieda and Claudia, that having a man who "would love" her is what she should desire (Morrison 32). The surrogate mothers treat their bodies like property and pass that thinking on to Pecola. The "motherly" prostitutes sell sex in effort to regain control of an aspect of their lives and make themselves desirable to someone.

Pecola does not believe herself worthy of any type of desire, but she learns from one of her surrogates the warmth of desire, even if only sexual desire. Marie, China, and Poland show their "daughter" Pecola that they play the aggressors in their relationships through control over their sexuality and having interested parties pay to enjoy them instead of requiring love in order to become physically involved. Still, their lives are not all they claim them to be. Cat Moses comments on how the three women are "living in desperate material conditions" with limited authority. They own and control their only bodies (Moses 629). Pecola owns and controls nothing.

Marie, China, and Poland share with Pecola how they devour men and focus on the mechanics of sex so as to shorten the gap between meeting the man and regaining power, getting paid (Morrison 55, 56). Instead of learning the care necessary in choosing a partner, Pecola learns from her surrogates that choosing a partner depends on superficial love and affection from a man being "rich and good-lookin`" and not from inner loveliness (Morrison 53). Her surrogate mothers teach her that during sexual acts,

the man receives the pleasure he desires, perhaps not realizing the lurking game being played and Pecola gleans that her mother figures have power in sex if they charge for the time and effort. Malin LaVon Walther says that “the primary difference between male and female gaze in *The Bluest Eye* lies in its connection to sexual desire” (779). The men seek pleasure from their sexual desire of the prostitutes; the prostitutes seek payment from the men’s sexual desire of them. Instead of focusing on men as potential mates or long-term lovers, the three women of the evening teach Pecola that men are simply an investment.

Mistreating the partners they choose to profit from reflects Marie, China, and Poland’s detachment from the men and reinforces their focus on domination. They use men for temporary enjoyment and continuous financial fulfillment. The trio delights in cheating men and swooping down to suck out all of their energy and money. Pecola observes how these women “hated men, all men, without shame, apology, or discrimination” (Morrison 56). Even in Lorain, Ohio, these women receive a variety of suitors—Black, White, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Poles—and treat them all the same (56). Pecola’s surrogates label all men as “inadequate and weak” before pouncing on them (56). With their men, the women operate as the aggressive predators.

The ladies upstairs misguide Pecola in other ways as well. As Cynthia Davis says in “Self, Society, and Myth in Toni Morrison’s Fiction,” “[m]any Morrison characters try to define themselves through the eyes of others” (325). Marie, China, and Poland know that the community women frown on their decisions to work as prostitutes and boldly display their sexual freedom. They also keenly notice men who may pretend to dislike them but secretly lust after the three. Pecola becomes victim to a practice of

defining herself by the opinions of others. Her surrogate mothers reinforce the negative idea that any definition of self exists externally and not within oneself.

Marie, China, and Poland value their appearance, as opposed to “sloppy, inadequate whores” (Morrison 56). From her surrogates, Pecola concludes that appearance defines the person. “Mother” Poland irons constantly, making sure her garments flow and hug her body in all the right spots. “Mother” China fills her hair with hot curlers and uses the “Nu Nile hair dressing” that women of color use to straighten and style their hair. “Mother” Marie re-positions the bobby pins in her hair to achieve the exact look she wants. Pecola observes how the women spend such time trying to looking nice. A pleasant appearance attracts men, and quality time spent getting ready may increase profits. Heavy make-up creates a new face for each caller and may be altered to reflect the moods of each woman. Make-up also masks the inner inferiorities and potential longings for real love. Bangs, pompadours, and curls matter more to a whore than to a woman who finds other ways of spending time and making money. Her surrogate mothers dress for the men that light their fancy and then fatten their purses. Just as Pecola thinks the blue eyes will make her beautiful and desired, the three prostitutes think the fancy brassieres, glamorous hairstyles, and “Oriental” color represent the epitome of beauty.

Self-centeredness predominates in Pecola’s three surrogates. Marie, China, and Poland realize that they live in a society where the White standard smothers the Black efforts toward equality. In “Toni Morrison: The Struggle to Depict the Black Figure on the White Page,” Timothy Powell discusses how Morrison uses some of her characters to assert some independence from the blanket of whiteness. The prostitutes do not

allow the mainstream whiteness that surrounds them to silence their voices with men. They find power in complete self-absorption in prostitution and pass this thinking to Pecola. The three forge through the chronicles of “pain and dissimulation” and become totally selfish, squeezing out little occasions of pseudo-happiness whenever possible (Powell 749). Pecola gleans this negativity from her surrogates. As Morrison makes plain, Marie, Poland, and China would not discourage Pecola from becoming a prostitute (57). They would urge her to become as self-absorbed and self-centered as the three of them, not typical of good motherly advice. When Pecola asks Marie whether she ever had children with Dewey Prince, she answers in the affirmative but does not want to elaborate on the matter (57). Somewhere her biological children exist or existed, but her self-absorbed personality might have been a major reason for keeping them out of her life. As a mother, Marie is like Mrs. Breedlove—absent. Pecola seems oblivious to the negative lessons she is learning from her mother figures. All she notices is that these women do not “despise her,” as her biological mother and the rest of the village appear to do (Morrison 51).

The community in Lorain, Ohio, thinks of Pecola’s surrogates as selfish and lacking respect. Marie, China, and Poland are scrutinized by their community because “[w]omen look at other women to determine social status and to make comparisons to themselves” (Walther 779). Other women look at the prostitutes and feel better about themselves because, even if they must deal with racism and prejudice from the White mainstream, they feel they are at least better off than the likes of Marie, China, and Poland. Just as Kathleen Woodard points out that the prostitutes do not feel shame in how they conduct their lives and do not view shame as a social emotion (212). These

women firmly believe they live and conduct their business as they must in order to survive, and feel no need to consult others or have their actions reflect the opinions of others. These women “were whores in whores’ clothing, whores who had never been young and had no word for innocence,” and believe they have no other options (Morrison 57).

The three comrade mother figures dislike pretense and are disgusted by “sugar-coated whores” who pretend to live in an upstanding manner but knowingly deceive their husbands (Morrison 56). Although they prefer women who put on no pretenses, they say they respect “good Christian colored women” with spotless reputations and lifestyles, which shows their daughter “Pecola” that they have a lack of respect for themselves (56). Also, although respecting women who never run around, smoke, or drink, they still sleep with the husbands of these women. Marie, China, and Poland must make money by any means necessary and feel an extra “vengeance” towards the husbands of those they respect (56). While having sex, these prostitutes become the women they claim to dislike by pretending to have an interest in their paid suitors but actually feel no emotion except selfishness.

These women dislike those women who fake an existence that does not really exist, but the women simultaneously cater to men who lead double lives. Pecola’s surrogates “abused their visitors,” including Pecola (56). As Pecola sits with them, listens to them, engages with them, runs their errands, and spends the time that goes unspent with her biological mother, she picks up what appear to be valuable lessons on life that turn out to have negative long-term consequences. From these women, Pecola does not learn about baby dolls, hygiene, or social skills. Pecola picks up techniques



on how to mistreat men and take charge over them as Marie, China, and Poland misguide her on the principles of sex and a lack of love in sex. From time spent with the women upstairs Pecola learns self-centeredness, judging others, and living a life of pretense. Unfortunately, she does not learn how to protect herself from a man—her own father. Her surrogate mothers do not nurture Pecola's nature as she deserves.

Community women fill the gap in mothering left by absent biological mothers. Children cannot choose help the mothers to whom they were born, and mothering remains essential even when the biological mothers fall short. Pecola is left hanging by her biological mother so Marie, Poland, and China fill the void. They engage Pecola and restore the vacant position of mother in her life. The disheartening part of Pecola's surrogate mother experience is that those three do not provide anything positive. The cycle of being misled by her biological mother is not broken in her relationship with her surrogate mother figures; it is reinforced. This cycle leads to what appears as Pecola's insanity by the end of the novel, and the lack of positive mothering and an obsession with outer definitions of beauty drive her crazy.

### CHAPTER THREE – On *Sula*

*Terrifying, comic, ribald, and tragic, Sula is a work that overflows with life.*  
- (back cover of the edition)

Toni Morrison's second novel, *Sula*, was originally published in 1973 and centers on an unconventional and mysterious woman named Sula. Set in the Bottom, an all-black area of Medallion, Ohio, the storyline follows the families of two children, Nel and Sula. Nel grows up in a stiff and conventional environment while Sula blossoms in a family with more freedom and fewer restrictions. Despite glaring differences between them, Nel and Sula become friends. The reader learns how the two grow up together and eventually grow apart due to an unfortunate freak accident. The two young women choose adult life paths similar to the style of their respective upbringings; Nel is conventional while Sula is original. Morrison allows the reader to contemplate convention and freedom in order to decide which might be better. Though their active friendship does not withstand the differences of their adult lives, Nel and Sula maintain a spiritual connection.

Both Nel and Sula's mothers play the largest role in shaping their family structure. Morrison asks the reader to examine the usefulness of traditions and also consider the value of the non-traditional. Nel's and Sula's family dynamics differ greatly, but the girls are able to form a strong friendship nonetheless. Black people in the Bottom, especially conformists like Nel's mother, find themselves "preoccupied with earthly things" (Morrison 3, 6). This is the framework for the lives of Nel and Sula.

Morrison speaks about her protagonist in a 1977 interview with Robert Stepto. Sula is a different type of character from the protagonist in Morrison's first novel, *The Bluest Eye*. According to Morrison,

Sula was hard, for me; very difficult to make up that kind of character. Not difficult to think it up, but difficult to describe a woman who could be used as a classic type of evil force. Other people could use her that way. And at the same time I didn't want to make her freakish or repulsive or unattractively . . . . And I wanted to make Nel to be a warm, conventional woman . . . . (Step 12)

Morrison put great thought into how to work Nel and Sula together to make her point on the comparison of good and evil, conformity and freedom. Morrison also suggests in the novel that "that was a little bit of both in each of those two women, and that if they had been one person, I supposed they would have been a rather marvelous person. But each one lacked something that the other one had." (Step 13) Thus, the reader cannot fully understand Nel's character without examining Sula's character, and vice versa.

Jan Furman writes that *Sula* is "a manifesto of freedom" and works well as a "chronicle of a black woman's heroism" (27). By the end of the novel, Sula shows the reader that her rejection of tradition leads to a free and fully explored life. As a young woman, "Sula had an odd way of looking at things" and does not take kindly to blind acceptance of tradition (Morrison 104). Her attitude and her approach stem from a non-traditional upbringing that eschews tradition and embraces the notion of the "village." Where Nel settles in the Bottom, Sula chooses freedom and life outside of the restrictions of her childhood neighborhood.

### Mrs. Conventional: The Wright Mother

Nel is raised by her uptight mother, Helene Wright who thinks her way is, of course, the right way. Helene cannot help but be traditional because of her own upbringing. Born of a “Creole whore,” Helene was raised by her strict and highly religious grandmother, Nel’s great-grandmother (17). Helene Wright’s persona was created long before she knew what was happening, as her grandmother “raised her under the dolesome eyes of a multicolored Virgin Mary”—meaning that Helene was raised with a structured, conservative Catholic viewpoint (17). Helene wants for her daughter the same strict upbringing that she experienced as a child. Helene’s life progression includes following her grandmother’s regulations until she marries at age sixteen and then starts her own middle-class life. Her grandmother attempts to correct possible errors in the raising of Helene’s mother (the “Creole whore”), by “counseling her [Helene] to be constantly on guard for any sign of her mother’s wild blood” (17).

When Helene’s grandmother receives a visit from her grand-nephew, she sees this as an opportunity for an arranged marriage for Helene. Barbara Lounsberry and Grace Ann Hovet explore the dynamics present in Helene’s upbringing. Helene takes heed of her grandmother’s encouragement of marriage and makes it obvious that she “seeks protection from her mother’s disreputable life as a New Orleans prostitute by marrying an outsider and fleeing north with him” (126). Instead of the North being the desired free place for slaves, for her the North was just an extension of Helene’s conventional bondage. By distancing herself from her own mother, Helene thinks she is increasing her chances of becoming a better person and mother, but she is actually reproducing the conditions of her upbringing.

With Helene as a mother, Nel becomes an “obedient and polite” young lady, as no other behavior would have been accepted in the Wright household (Morrison 18). The Wright style of living and raising Nel is deemed the right and only way by Helene Wright. Helene holds herself in high regard and takes her roles as a woman and mother seriously;--her womanly ways blending with her motherly characteristics. Helene is an “impressive woman” who cannot escape becoming judgmental and finding herself regularly in a state of “perpetual query about other people’s manners” (18). Her thought processes were embedded in her as a child, and by the time she becomes a mother herself, she cannot help but think as her grandmother thought. Helene is seemingly obsessed with the “earthly things” that Morrison mentions early in the novel (6).

Although Helene has a dominating personality and is meticulous in her obsessions, Nel still has affection for her mother, the only woman she knows intimately, and enjoys the “bright and blazing light of her mother’s smile” (21). The narrator illustrates the relationship between the mother and daughter:

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: that her skin had dusk in it, that her lashes were substantial but not undignified in their length, that she had taken the broad flat nose of Wiley . . . and his generous lips. (18)

Helene’s primary concern lies in her child’s appearance, just as three surrogate mothers in *The Bluest Eye* celebrate superficial beauty. Helene does not want Nel to be so

beautiful as to distract attention from herself, however. Helene does not appear to spend any time making sure Nel's personality is developed along with her appearance. She wants Nel to appear perfect and set apart. A crafty woman, Helene enjoys "manipulating her daughter and her husband" to create the life Helene thinks Nel deserves (18). This manipulation is a sign that such perceived perfection is inauthentic and should not be accepted as the standard way of living and raising children.

When Nel and Helene travel to see Helene's ailing grandmother, Nel gets a glimpse of the real woman behind her mother's outward conventions. Helene does not often allow her daughter or anyone to see her ruffled, but the train ride to New Orleans and the reunion with her mother, Rochelle, clearly ruffle Helene. They meet with racism on the train, and Helene's own mother frustrates her daughter with her unconventionality. Helene is a different woman traveling to and while in New Orleans, a woman who still understands and translates the Creole dialect for Nel. (She later denies speaking Creole when her daughter asks.) Helene shows heretofore unseen vulnerability to her daughter when she goes back to her roots and the place she called home for sixteen years. Helene could not foresee that her efforts to create a new reality for herself and her daughter so distant from the life in New Orleans would later return to resonate so hauntingly in her spirit. She could not live in the present without acknowledgement of the past. At some point, the present will meet the past, even though Helene has tried her best to erase the past she wants to shield her daughter from. (In *Beloved*, the past returns to live in the present when the ghost of the protagonist's daughter comes back to life.)

Helene envisions a structured life for Nel and leaves little room for her daughter's opinion. Nel, on the other hand, yearns for the glimmer of freedom that she feels from a brief meeting with her grandmother, Rochelle. As Jan Furman writes, "the experience that determines Nel's perspective" is her trip to New Orleans (25). From her grandmother's "gardenia smell," Nel inhales the presence of the unconventional life she feels might be more satisfying than the life her mother provides for her (25). Rochelle and Nel make a connection when Rochelle "suddenly swept around and hugged Nel" (27). That quick action was "tighter and harder than one would have imagined" from a first meeting, but it creates an instant attraction and bond (27). A type of village exists in Nel's family in that Nel has influences from her mother and grandmother, immediate and extended family, running through her. Helene does not want her daughter to be anything like the "much handled" Rochelle and desires for her daughter to act and become more like her when as she ages, conventionally stiff and reserved (27).

Nel envisions a life outside the Bottom, and after her trip to New Orleans, "leaving Medallion would be her goal" (29). Just as she gets this burst of energy to see more than her conventional world created by her mother, Nel befriends Sula. Helene's elitist mentality had always kept the girls apart because Helene felt Sula's mother was "sooty," but masks her prejudice with characteristics of a protective mother (29). Nel and Sula become complementary opposites and show how one person's dream is another person's dread. Sula loves the "oppressive neatness" of Nel's home; Nel loves Sula's comfortable and "woolly house" (29). Sula's family life differs completely from Nel's, and Nel cannot help, especially after visiting New Orleans, but enjoy that difference and want the life she sees in the Peace family.

### Miss Unconventional: The Peace Mother

From the very beginning of the novel, the reader learns of Sula Peace's mystery, a mystery largely resulting from her unconventional background. More peace appears to exist in the mysterious Peace household than in the Wrights'. The people of the Bottom have always wanted to know "what that little girl Sula who grew into a woman in their town was all about" (6). She fascinates Nel and the people of the Bottom. Sula's grandmother does not believe in supporting conformity as Nel's mother does. The vivacious Eva Peace heads her family in ways that mothers like Helene Wright may not approve of, but are ways that work for her loved ones. In the Peace home,

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 dishes left for hours at a time in the sink, and where a one-legged grandmother named Eva handed you goobers from deep inside her pockets and read you a dream. (29)

The Peace home is perfectly imperfect, conventionally unconventional. There are no glaring wrongs in the Peace household. It appears normal. Unlike Helene Wright, Eva Peace does not seek to keep up the false pretense of a traditional life.

Sula's house is as unique as her family structure. Eva Peace lives as the nucleus of her family and is the "creator and sovereign" of her home (30). Her children cling to her because she seems all-knowing and all-powerful. Where Helene Wright over-mothers her child by needing to see and participate in every detail of Nel's life, Eva Peace does not appear to have those same compulsions about mothering. She



exemplifies the image of the wise and confident grandmother and allows space to those she mothers by sitting “in a wagon on the third floor directing the lives of her children, friends, strays, and a constant stream of boarders” (30). She effortlessly functions as a village chief and her mothering comes naturally. Not even the lack of a leg serves as a disability for Eva. On the other hand, the deformity in another biological mother, Mrs. Breedlove, in *The Bluest Eye* restricts her from loving and recognizing her beauty in herself or her daughter. Eva makes no mission to hide her handicap, but most people do not notice and still “had the impression that they were looking up at her, up into the open distances of her eyes, up into the soft black of her nostrils and up at the crest of her chin” (31). She doesn’t need to work hard for respect as a mother figure in the community. The village flocks to her.

Eva does not live the perfect, structured life that Helene strives for. Her husband has left her, so she takes on the role of both parents with her biological children and grandchild, surrogate mother to the adopted Dewey boys, and village mother to the boarders, among others. Furman reminds the reader that Eva has had her share of community responsibilities in the big house “where youth, old age, disease, and insanity kept company” (31). The Peace home is a confluence for a variety of people who all come to get some of Eva’s mothering. They know that in the Peace home they can be fed, sheltered, and comforted.

When Eva’s husband leaves her, she struggles to stay afloat and appreciates the village’s assistance in maintaining some stability for her children. Eva serves as an example to her daughter, Hannah, of how to survive the loss of a mate. Hannah’s husband and Sula’s father dies when Sula is a toddler, and Hannah must adjust to life

without a co-parent. Sula receives the bulk of her parenting from Eva Peace and becomes a “distinctly different” woman because of the village that is within her house, the village headed by her grandmother (Morrison 118). From her village, Sula learns to live and she does so each day by “exploring her own thoughts and emotions, giving them full reign, feeling no obligation to please anybody unless their pleasure pleased her” (118). She is “as willing to feel pain as to give pain, to feel pleasure as to give pleasure, hers was an experimental life . . .” (118). Although Sula’s family appears opposite to Nel’s in regard to conventions and structure, both families incorporate parts of the village structure. When Nel meets her estranged grandmother, the two instantly connect and her grandmother influences her thoughts. Sula lives with her grandmother, her mother, and her extended family. Both Peace women, Sula and her grandmother, are known in their community for being eccentric and carefree. Sula’s household continues the embrace of the village in that three adopted boys and a host of borders live with them. The village reaches beyond blood (or immediate family), as it does in *Beloved* and *The Bluest Eye*. Inside the walls of Sula’s house is the village.

### Comparing Conventions

In *Sula*, Morrison plays with the obvious question: which family structure is better. The answer is somewhat elusive, but Morrison suggests that freedom of exploration leads to a more fulfilling and experienced life. Another African American writer, Gwendolyn Brooks, compares the same such freedom and conventions in two of her poems: “Sadie and Maud” and “a song in the front yard”. In “Sadie and Maud,” Sadie resembles Sula in that “she was one of the livingest chicks / in all the land” who abandoned conventions (7-8). Maud played life safe just like Nel and ends up alone in

the same way. Brooks' "a song in the front yard" speaks of a child, like Nel, who stays in the front yard while at play. Sula would have been like the child in the poem who plays in the "rough and untended" back yard (Brooks 3). Also within "a song in the front yard," is a glimpse at a character like Nel's mother who predicts a bad life for the unconventional child.

Some might argue that the conventions of Nel's life provide a better grounding for a contented and comfortable existence. Others might feel just as strongly that Sula's unconventional life is preferable because of the freedom to decide for oneself what is best. As Lounsberry and Hovet write, Toni Morrison works with pairing in this novel. *Sula's* characters demonstrate "both the variety and futility of human attempts to order and contain experience" (126). Nel's family believes in ordering life according to strict conventions while Sula's family is less inhibited and more daring. There are positives and negatives to both lifestyles.

Sula and Nel both share their greatest connections with their grandmothers. Each is "the only daughter of a mother whose distance leaves the young girls alone with dreams of someone to erase the solitude" (Furman 23). Sula is fortunate to have her grandmother constantly in her life, but she will still venture away from the Bottom to find her own individuality. Nel is unable to grow up with the strong presence of her grandmother, but forms a spiritual bond with her at their first meeting. She wants to learn more about life outside of Medallion and her mother's confines, but finds herself abandoned and alone as a woman. Sula is determined to explore the mysteries in her own mind and in the world beyond her big house. Together, Sula and Nel's characteristics and individual personalities might mesh well to make one person. They

are “perfect complements, one incomplete without the other,” and each recognizes in the other a desire for more than themselves and their reality (23). After assessing the structure of both Nel and Sula’s lives, the less conventional and more expressive village family of Sula is preferable.

## CHAPTER FOUR – On *Song of Solomon*

*She was a natural healer.*  
- *Song of Solomon* (of Pilate)

Toni Morrison's third novel, *Song of Solomon*, is densely packed with missing wealth, desperation, love, and relationships. The story begins with a man committing suicide from the roof of Mercy Hospital where, on the next day, the hospital's first black child is born. The boy's name is Milkman Dead, and he is the novel's protagonist. Milkman is the son of Macon Dead, Jr., and Ruth Foster Dead, who spend most of their energy on thoughts of wealth and how to acquire more. Macon's sister, Pilate, is the polar opposite of her brother. She is eccentric and poor, yet independent and incredibly strong. Milkman's quest for wealth sends him to his aunt in an attempt to find her alleged lost treasures. When he finds nothing at Pilate's, Milkman moves on to journey independently and find his true legacy, his family history. *Song of Solomon* serves as a prime example of one of the great strengths of Morrison's fiction in that it emphasizes the vitality of the village. This novel differs from *Beloved*, *The Bluest Eye*, and *Sula*, however, by emphasizing a mother-son relationship, instead of Morrison's typical mother-daughter relationship.

In a 1980 conversation with Anne Koenen, Morrison told Koenen how "it had to be a man" to drive the action in this novel (75). Morrison wanted to use Milkman as an example of a man who learns "how to surrender, and to dominate" (Koenen 75). Milkman has "everything to learn" when the reader meets him (75). As a young, impressionable child who grows into a curious adolescent, he needs guidance. Emotionally disturbed, Milkman is a self-centered and greedy young man who is able to adjust his way of living only after learning the truth of his family history. His selfish

personality develops into a sense of purpose because he gains knowledge of his ancestry. His great-grandfather, Solomon, escaped slavery and oppression by flying back to Africa, and Milkman escapes his greed and seemingly cold heart by learning about his family history.

Milkman's primary teacher about life is his surrogate mother figure, Aunt Pilate, who prompts Milkman to find his own way. He has to begin as an undesired and annoying character in order for the reader to appreciate his growth at the end of the novel. Milkman's life is an example of the evolution of a man as he learns, lives, and grows. Milkman needs to mature, but he also needs to understand other people. Pilate's purpose is to provide a sense of grounding for Milkman. In Milkman's life, "Pilate is earth" as well as a solid and important part of his existence (75). Eventually, Milkman takes his place as Pilate's surrogate and spiritual son.

#### Milkman's Biological Mother: Ruth Foster Dead

Before being able to understand the mother-son relationships in the novel, the reader should take note of Milkman's origins. Milkman's father Macon tells his son a skewed story and his version of the "truth" about Milkman's biological mother, even after Milkman's initial resistance to the story. Macon wants Milkman to be "a whole man" who knows and can deal with the "whole truth" of his life and background (Morrison 70). Macon shares with Milkman the knowledge of Ruth Foster Dead as a woman and not just as a mother. Macon seeks to degrade his wife in an effort to make himself look better.

When Macon married Milkman's mother, Ruth was sixteen, and Macon was not necessarily in love with her. In 1917, Macon recalls that people did not appear to

“require” love as much as in the novel’s present day (70). Ruth has no time to gain independence because when she left her father’s house, she moved into her husband’s house. Milkman’s parents had a troubled marriage because of Ruth’s strong relationship with her father. She appears to have been more interested in being a daughter to her father than in living as Macon’s wife. Her strongest love connection seems to be with her father. Ruth was fiercely devoted to her father and grew up without her own mother who died in childbirth. Her “steady beam of love was unsettling” to her father and her attachment to her father may have prevented her from truly being able to attach to another man (23).

Ruth Foster Dead is a society woman and daughter of the town’s first black doctor. Her limitations as Milkman’s mother may result from her own lack of mothering. She does, however, have some instinctual motherly behaviors: she does not abort Milkman as advised by her husband, and she nurses her son. Ruth’s nursing lasts well past any acceptable amount of time, however. Her son was “old enough to be bored by the flat taste of mother’s milk,” and he is therefore too old to be nursing (13). Because she was not getting any pleasure from her husband, nursing her son became the sole sort of physical pleasure for her:

In late afternoon, before her husband closed his office and came home, she called her son to her. When he came into the little room she unbuttoned her blouse and smiled. He was too young to be dazzled by her nipples, but he was old enough to be bored by the flat taste of mother’s milk, so he came reluctantly, as to a chore, and lay as he had at least once each day of his life in his mother’s arms, and tried to pull the

thin, faintly sweet milk from her flesh without hurting her with his teeth.

(13)

Nursing beyond infancy exemplifies the unnatural relationship between Milkman and his biological mother. According to Edith Frampton's article, Milkman's "connection to his mother and his broader maternal heritage, according to such an argument, is founded on the embodied interaction of breastfeeding" (150). Nursing is Milkman's only true connection to his biological mother.

Frampton discusses how "Milkman's own nickname bears constant witness to the breastfeeding relationship that he shared with his mother Ruth for four years" (147). He becomes the "milkman" for his mother and helps her relieve herself. In *Beloved*, Sethe views her nursing ability as one of the best characteristics of her being a mother. Her milk helps to sustain her children. On the other hand, Ruth Dead's milk helps to sustain herself. As long as her son is nursing, Ruth gets at least some pleasure from life. Ideally, a mother delights in her child but not when her child is responsible for her physical pleasure. Ruth diminishes the beauty of a mother nursing her child and turns the act into a selfish one. Her fear of life and interacting with other prevents her from being a balanced parent which further proves why Milkman needs his surrogate mother.

#### The Surrogate Mother: Aunt Pilate Dead

Milkman's first meets his surrogate mother, Pilate Dead (his father's estranged sister), when he travels to her home with his best friend, Guitar. She is the woman that his father "had forbidden him to go near," but she holds Milkman "spellbound" immediately (36). (In *Sula*, Nel's mother kept her from meeting her outcast grandmother for most of her life but once the two meet, there is an instant connect



similar to Milkman and Pilate's connection.) Milkman notices her difference from the other women of his household as she at first appears "ugly, dirty, poor, and drunk" (37). He initially thinks of Pilate as just "the queer aunt whom his sixth-grade schoolmates teased him about" (37). In Milkman's adolescent mind, he does not yet grasp the role that Pilate will play in his life as his surrogate mother. Even though Pilate is "unkempt," she is not dirty or dripping with filth (38). Milkman notices a bit of undeniable and unexpected difference in the details of Aunt Pilate: "the whites of her fingernails were like ivory. And unless he knew absolutely nothing, this woman was definitely not drunk. Of course she was anything but pretty, yet he knew he could have watched her all day" (38). Even though he isn't aware of it, Milkman views Pilate as a son might view a mother. He cannot help but to notice the details of her features that surely reflect something about her womanhood and humanity. Cleanliness, sobriety, and a captivating essence—Milkman instantly notices these characteristics in his aunt and future surrogate mother. When Pilate stands, Milkman "all but [gasps]" as he is in awe of her female and motherly presence (38).

Pilate is the polar opposite of Ruth Dead—the two Dead women "[are] so different" as individuals, and therefore also different as mothers (139). Pilate is "black" while Ruth is "lemony;" Pilate is "buck naked under her dress" while Ruth is "corseted" (139). Pilate allows herself the freedom of feeling and expression while Ruth is altogether more conservative. Their differences contribute to the varying influence and involvement each has with Milkman. Considering his biological and surrogate mother, Milkman learns about the differences between the two: "One [was] well read but ill traveled. The other had read only a geography book, but had been from one end of the

country to another. One [was] wholly dependent on money for life, the other indifferent to it" (139). The most obvious difference is that while Ruth focuses more on things and appearances because she is afraid to engage with others, Pilate focuses more on people.

Readers see little of Pilate's inner feelings because Milkman learns of Pilate through her actions. At Pilate and Milkman's first meeting, she shows hospitality and offers Milkman and Guitar an egg to eat and welcomes them to drink. The egg symbolizes the female reproductive system and new life. Pilate "never had a visitor to whom she did not offer food before one word of conversation" (149). She tells the young boys stories as a mother would, spending quality, focused time with them. Pilate mesmerizes Milkman, and he wants to have as much time with her as possible. He finds comfort in her home, and "her pebbly voice, the sun, and the narcotic wine smell weakened both the boys, and they sat in a pleasant semi-stupor, listening to her go on and on . . ." (40).

Pilate possesses the best of motherly qualities. She provides reassurance to those she mothers as "she knew there was nothing to fear" in life (149). Her fearlessness allows her to do what "was considered among black people the height of rudeness" at the time: she stares (149). Pilate is unafraid to look another directly in his eyes and seek meaning behind the facial expressions. As a mother figure, she exemplifies manners because "she never made an impolite observation" (149). She is "a natural healer," and her strength may be seen throughout the community because "among quarreling drunks and fighting women she could hold her own, and sometimes mediated a peace that lasted a good bit longer than it should have because it was

administered by someone not like them” (150). Although Pilate Dead is clearly different from most other people, she is not the distasteful village outcast her brother and countless others believe her to be. Pilate Dead is among the best of the village mothers because of the traits that seem to come naturally to her. Milkman grows to know that Pilate’s presence in his life will quickly become significant.

Susan L. Blake comments on Pilate’s important place in the community. The beauty of Pilate’s position is that she “represents the spirit of community inherent in the folk consciousness” (78). She is observant and gains insight through experience and merely by watching the experiences of the others that try to distance themselves from her. Motherly expertise is gained this way, over time and through experience. Pilate becomes not only a mother but a “magical” guide for her nephew-son, Milkman. Her inviting and open nature is unmatched in Milkman’s life (Blake 80).

Pilate’s house provides a welcoming atmosphere for Milkman and Guitar. She tells the boys stories that showcase her love and compassion. Like a mother, she enjoys their company and fills the time with memories of her life as a younger woman. Pilate wastes no time accepting Milkman into her family life. When her granddaughter, Hagar, returns from chores, Pilate introduces Milkman as Hagar’s brother and not her cousin. In the village point of view, there is no recognizable division between brother and cousin, as they all possess the same blood line. When corrected for the mistake, Pilate questions the “difference in the way you act toward” a cousin as compared to a brother (44). She feels there should be no difference and that family should “treat them both the same” (44). Pilate cherishes extended family members as closely as she does her immediate family.

Milkman may want to resist the connection he feels with Pilate initially, but he cannot escape how she captivates him and makes him not want to leave her home. Milkman notices and is attracted to the “piny-winy” smell of Pilate is “narcotic” (40). Like the effect of a narcotic, the smell makes Pilate’s presence alluring and addictive. (*Sula* features a similar mother figure with a captivating smell when Nel’s grandmother smells of gardenias.) From infancy, children easily identify and distinguish their mothers from other individuals by their distinct smell. Milkman experiences this aromatic connection with his surrogate mother figure.

Milkman is also drawn to Pilate by the concern for the individual person that he finds in her home. Milkman learns that Pilate values communication and has “a deep concern for and about human relationships” (149). Brenda Marshall, in “The Gospel According to Pilate,” says that, with Pilate, “the most eccentric character is the most dignified” (486). Pilate shows her “son” Milkman that a person can still love others and have personal freedom. When Pilate’s biological daughter, Reba, thinks that her child, Hagar, has experienced hunger from lack of food, it is Pilate who sees through her grandchild’s words. The wise and concerned Pilate is able to discern that her grandchild has not actually been hungry from lack of food. Milkman cannot help but notice the love and maternal instinct in Pilate’s accusing household. Pilate, Reba, and Hagar “hummed together in perfect harmony” as an indication that the love of motherhood strengthens their bond to one another (49). In his initial meeting at Surrogate Mother/Aunt Pilate’s, “Milkman could hardly breathe. When he thought he was going to faint from the weight of what he was feeling, “he risked a glance at his

friend and saw the setting sun gilding Guitars eyes, putting into shadow a slow smile of recognition” (49). Almost immediately, Pilate becomes Milkman’s surrogate mother.

Pilate also plays a major role in helping Milkman shape his family history. Mothers are a connection to the past, and as Milkman’s mother figure, Pilate answers the call to duty. Gay Wilentz gives Pilate credit for participating in “the function of the African American woman in passing on stories to future generations” (63). Pilate shares stories with Milkman even in their initial meeting. She fills the role as his female ancestor and connects Milkman to his heritage. Macon instructs his son to “look at Pilate” if ever he doubts that the family is “from Africa” (54). African American community, or village, members, like Pilate, raise children to acknowledge and celebrate their ancestry. Pilate Dead is “unmistakably Morrison’s preferred storyteller” within the novel because of her role as premiere mother figure (54). Unqualified love pours from her stories. Without some understanding of the past, the present is baffling and the future may be frightening. Pilate is Milkman’s lifeline to the past; she nurtures him in the present and, hopefully, in the future.

The fact that Pilate does not have a navel should be viewed as an enhancement of her natural motherly appeal and not as a freakish feature. What was her obvious defect, “frightening and exotic as it was, was also a theatrical failure,” because there was nothing overtly grotesque about Pilate as most people wanted to believe (148). The navel holds the umbilical cord and connects the mother to the baby during pregnancy. After the umbilical cord is cut, the navel is a visual reminder of the baby’s birth and experience inside the mother. Pilate’s own mother died in childbirth, which could explain why Pilate has no navel. Her mother-daughter connection ends before it

has a chance to begin, so there is no need for the navel as a reminder of Pilate's mother. Pilate has no biological motherly influence on her upbringing, so the reader may deduce that Pilate is the supreme representation of a natural mother, a self-sustaining mother. Not having a navel, Pilate could be a Christ-figure with a supernatural birth—the saving grace for Milkman. She mothers by instinct and experience. She is able to be compassionate and intuitive to her biological daughter and granddaughter while simultaneously being able to welcome extended family like Milkman into her motherly embrace.

Pilate has a “navel connection” with Milkman's birth, however. She helps to facilitate his conception, which connects Pilate to her nephew-son even before he is born. Milkman's biological mother, Ruth, tells the story of how her sister-in-law “brought her son to life in the first place” (131). In saying this, Milkman's biological mother acknowledges the village contribution to her son's birth. In actuality, Pilate's love potion in a “greenish-gray powder” serves as an aphrodisiac for Ruth and Macon, Jr. (131). Her delicate “use of conjure in Milkman's conception” is useful in helping to “carry on the family” (Blake 78). Pilate helps create that certain “something” to help Ruth and Macon, Jr. stay together and “reinstate” their intimacy and bond with one another by helping them conceive (131). The village helps the couple to increase their family because an outsider helps to ignite their love and attraction to one another so that they can procreate. Again, Pilate works her role as the community mother, helping to start and maintain families.

What's in a name is also important to the construction of Pilate. Readers of the New Testament of the Bible recognize all the uses of biblical names within the novel.

The title of the book is of course a Book of the Bible. Pilate is also the name of the Roman dignitary who orders the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, the “Christ-killing Pilate,” Pontius Pilate (Morrison 19). The biblical Pilate may not have had the grace and love of Morrison’s Pilate, but they both possess a certain command over those around them. Pilate’s name is chosen by her father as just a “group of letters that seemed to him strong and handsome” (18).

Her name hints at Pilate becoming the strong surrogate and biological mother. When total strangers first meet Pilate and do not want to leave her home because of she captivates them, this is noteworthy strength and power. The name Pilate is also a homonym for the word “pilot,” meaning a person qualified to lead or steer a vessel or fly a plane. Pilate is the leader of Milkman’s journey back through his heritage. Her maternal instinct affords her the ability to know when guidance and steering is needed with Milkman.

### Maturing Milkman

Milkman is initially an egotistical, selfish young man. His personality reflects his materialistic father and emotionally stunted biological mother. Although he is able to appear comfortable in the social settings of his class and is always surrounded by others, he feels alone. Not only is he physically different, with one short leg; he is socially and emotionally awkward, too. As a child, he is outcast from the other children and frequently taunted because of his differences. Milkman’s eventual smug attitude serves as his defense mechanism. His arrogant exterior helps to protect his fragile interior.

Pilate will help him move from youth to adulthood and take responsibility for his maturation. Milkman needs the connection that Pilate offers to family or ancestry. Pilate senses Milkman's difference from the rest of the community perhaps because she is also different from the mainstream. They are mirror opposites of one another: people try to keep a distance from Pilate, but once they meet her they want to know more about her; people want to know Milkman because of his social stature, but once they meet him they are turned off by his personality. Milkman receives the benefit of the family's unconditional love in spite of his flaws. Unfortunately, Milkman's selfishness prevents him from returning the love of his family, including that of his surrogate mother, Pilate.

The only compassion that Milkman may be able to squeeze out of the reader is because of his family history. The men of his family suffer through generations of slavery and bondage and that family curse trickles down to Milkman. Pilate is the only family member able to recreate family history with the strength of her memory and her willingness to embrace her history so that the oppressive past does not take over the present. She may have been the only one to understand the past enough to not allow her present to be full of hatred and selfishness. Milkman can learn from Pilate that being able to liberate oneself from the expectations of others or of an entire family is where true freedom is achieved.



## CONCLUSION

*Everything I've ever done, in the writing world, has been to expand articulation, rather than to close it.*  
-Toni Morrison

All of the novels discussed in the preceding chapters offer different representations of the biological mother and the surrogate mother within the African American village. Considered collectively, the four novels are, in a sense, their own village. Morrison gives each novel a specific personality while also allowing some individual characters to mimic one another. Morrison's reader observes in *Beloved*, *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, and *Song of Solomon* that mothers and their children have a deep connection, a connection that helps develop the personality of the mother and child.

Mothers are driven by their maternal instincts (or lack thereof), while children learn of themselves and experience their first real relationship (or lack of relationship) with their mothers. When biological mothers are unable to mother, or decide not to, the village provides for the children. Surrogate mother figures, members of the African American village, step in to fill the gap in mothering left by absent biological mothers. Surrogates may be extended family members of the children needing mothering or may be biologically unrelated to the children. Where biological mothers have the benefit of a physical bond, surrogate mother figures must form a spiritual bond with their children.

### *Beloved*

Sethe's biological connection is apparent of the strongest amongst the biological mothers shown in these four novels. Her children control her thoughts and actions. Sethe's extreme maternal instincts lead her to murder. She attempts to murder several of her children and successfully kills one daughter in order to protect her from the

brutality of slavery. This decision haunts Sethe and affects her life for years after. The ghost of her dead child returns and wreaks havoc on Sethe's sanity, distancing her from her living biological daughter. Surrogate mother figures from the African American village must intervene in Sethe's household to help bring her back to being able to mother her living child.

*Beloved* displays a strong biological mother-child relationship, but *The Bluest Eye* focuses on how young Pecola Breedlove suffers from not having a strong and healthy biological mother-daughter relationship. Pecola's biological mother, Mrs. Breedlove, is so caught up in her own ugliness and self-hate that she is unable to activate her maternal instincts. Pecola picks up the same toxic body image issues as her mother. Because Pecola yearns for acceptance and acknowledgment, she gravitates to the three prostitutes that live above her family's storefront apartment. These women become her surrogate mother figures and are the negative representation of the village because of their profession. The best part of Pecola's exchange with her surrogate mothers is that, at least with them, she is acknowledged as they talk with and listen to her as mothers should.

*Sula* showcases the biological and surrogate mother simultaneously. The conventional mother in the story is the biological mother, Nel's mother Helene. Her opposite is the unconventional biological mother and surrogate mother figure, Sula's grandmother Eva Peace. Nel experiences the confines of tradition while Sula enjoys the freedom of individuality in her life. Nel's mother has shut her daughter off from the village in her efforts to project perfection, and Sula's mother has created a household that embraces the village in her efforts to raise multiple family generations and

unrelated community members. Morrison exposes the reader to both conventional and unconventional families to allow her reader to decide which mode of life might be preferred. Freedom of exploration and individuality, the lack of convention, appear as characteristics of the mindsets of those leading more fulfilled lives.

Differing from the other four novels, *Song of Solomon* features a storyline with a male protagonist, Milkman Dead. The mother-son relationship is just as beneficial as the mother-daughter relationships. Milkman has a biological mother, but their relationship is more about the mother's satisfaction, personal interests, and fear of life than about the growth and development of the son. Because of the spiritual distance between Milkman and his biological mother, he needs the help of the village. His aunt, Pilate Dead, becomes his surrogate mother figure. Her unconditional love and individualistic style attract Milkman. She is able to have a more lasting impact on her nephew-surrogate son than on her own biological daughter. This novel exemplifies the strengths and weaknesses of both sides of the maternal relations: the biological mother-child and surrogate mother-child relationships.

Situations similar to those in *Song of Solomon* occur in the other three novels discussed in this project. In *Beloved*, the reader notices a different form of nursing from what appears in *Song of Solomon*, for Sethe is actively lactating when she kills her baby. Morrison wants to emphasize the importance of the connection mothers have with their children when they are nursing. *Sula's* Helene resembles Ruth Foster Dead since they are both obsessed with the superficiality of appearances.

Toni Morrison's novels embrace and highlight the strength of women and their maternal relationships. Critics note that Morrison's work also emphasizes the strength

of community and the African American village. The African American village is not as much specifically defined as it is lived in, experienced, and understood by those familiar with the notion. The definition of the village is relative to the circumstances present, as displayed in each of the four novels in the project, but the existence of the African American village is unmistakable. Toni Morrison's literature is brilliant fictional accounting of the African American village, the village mothers and surrogate mothers, and the children that have their being within. The village serves a purpose in the upbringing of children. The village raises the biological and surrogate mothers that children need.

Considering the four novels as a village, each book is an individual village member and plays a specific role. *Beloved* is the village mother because of the intense biological mother-child relationship and the presence of the community surrogate mothers. The ideal village mother knows and/or understands the strength in being a biological mother but also accepts the role of community surrogates. *Beloved* is a complete novel because it shows the importance of biological and surrogate mothers. *The Bluest Eye* is the weak biological mother because the shortcomings of Pecola's biological mother drive her to negative surrogate mothers and leave her a misguided child. The weak or absent biological mother needs positive reinforcement so that her children do not suffer as Pecola suffers. *Sula* is the blended family. Nel and Sula's lives are noticeably different but work together to prove that there is more than one way to raise children. A mother must decide what she feels is best for her child as the mothers do in *Sula*. Finally, *Song of Solomon* represents the surrogate mother. Pilate dead epitomizes the role of a mother figure who steps in the gaps a biological mother

leaves and helps raise and enrich the child. She is Milkman's lifeline. Collectively, the novels show the strengths and weaknesses of community living. Toni Morrison creates an example of the African American village and the power of motherly influence in a child's life.

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