

SEXUALITY IN TONI MORRISON'S WORKS

by

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INTRODUCTION

Sexuality is of course linked to the very biology of human beings. Sexuality pervades people's lives, on all levels of society. There have, of course, been numerous studies of, and hence massive disagreements about, the biological aspect of sexuality and sexual preferences in humans, as well as of sexual deviance of different kinds. There are many studies that inquire into whether the many and diverse expressions of sexuality are the results of biology or of social construction, and the answers tend to reflect the viewpoints of the authors of such studies. Discussions about sexuality generally reflect the beliefs and attitudes of the time in which they take place, and what is, at the time, considered morally right or wrong. Moreover, they generally mirror the positions of religious and political institutions in society. Most scientists today, however, seem to regard sexuality both as a social construct and a biological phenomenon. Sexual behaviour can therefore also be seen as a result of how society and culture help shape individuals in a society.

We have always been influenced by the norms and conventions of the society in which we live, and the gender conventions bequeathed to us by our ancestors, relatives and immediate environment are no exception. The predominant gender conventions over the last few centuries, which must be said to reflect an uneven balance of power between the sexes, are suffused into the minds of all members of society. One has to be both blind and deaf not to understand what impact for example gender conventions conveyed through the media have on people, which illustrates how, in fact, sexuality – linked to the same gender conventions – has become a commodity sold to the masses. What is more serious is how the media's presentation of men's and women's sexuality and roles in society adds to the preservation of these questionable ideas and practices, thus becoming a strong determining factor in the development of the moral codes of individuals.

The complexity and the enigma of human sexuality have always been a subject in literature. Sexuality has at all times been used to entice the readers of literature by way of feelings of, among other things, love, lust, oppression and suppression. Whether writers have portrayed sexuality in their characters as a means of simply selling more books (as for instance in drugstore romances), or to enlighten and educate their readers, the topic never seems to go out of fashion. Nevertheless, when sexuality serves as a central theme in popular as well as

serious literature, it is often used as a means of commenting on the conditions in a society. As sexuality is frequently linked to the behavioural codes of a culture, writing about sexual manners becomes part of the authors' ethical and philosophical inquiry.

The African American novelist Toni Morrison is a writer deeply concerned with issues such as race, gender, and sexuality. A Nobel laureate, she is one of the most prominent writers of fiction in contemporary America:

The numerous accolades and awards honoring Morrison for her literature testify to her importance as one of the most prolific and talented writers of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. (Raynor and Butler, 175)

Her groundbreaking novels inquire into the conditions of a people that has been, or is, as a group as well as individuals, subjected to different types of oppression. Whether this oppression is related to race, gender, class, freedom, politics or subjects closely connected to these, all her narratives are close examinations of the conditions of the oppressed. Having become acquainted with Morrison's literature and thus, in part, with African American history, I developed a profound interest in trying to get a deeper understanding of her fiction. What is more, Morrison's use of sexual behaviour to depict individuals and their social struggles and conflicts contributed to my genuine interest in her writing. My investigation therefore focuses on how Morrison uses sexuality to show what is "wrong" with society. I also think it is interesting to observe how her characters' attitudes and background are revealed through their sexual behaviour, which illustrates how sexuality is a result of social and cultural construction.

In all of Toni Morrison's novels there is an undercurrent of sexuality that colours and gives power to her characters and their relationships. In most of Morrison's novels sexuality serves as an explicit theme and recurring motif. The themes that sexuality in her writing in particular serves to elucidate are those of gender, oppression, love, class and race. In my reading, I will predominantly look at her portrayal of sexuality and gender, sexuality and love, and sexuality and oppression, and discuss how her characters' sexual behaviour becomes an expression of power.

Morrison addresses issues related to sex in a distinct manner, and her focal point is often girls and young women who are placed at the bottom of the African American society. She writes about aspects of black life connected to race, gender and class, as well as the importance of

the ancestors in the community, and portrays ordinary black girls, women and men. At the same time she frequently uses sexuality as a means of making her character portrayals more intensely personal. Morrison writes about historical and social matters, but the individual being is always the centre of attention. She uses different narrative structures and techniques to reveal the personal and the emotional aspects of her characters' lives, but even their most private dimensions, such as their sexual behaviour, are always connected to larger social issues. Also, by choosing the lives of African Americans as the main subject of her literary discourse, she lifts the black man and woman out of the "literary darkness", thus breaking with earlier authors' stereotypical portrayal of African Americans:

Critical responses to Morrison's work focus on her audience, stylistic technique, and major themes, and explore the role she plays as a precursor to new voices in American literature, especially African American women's literature . . . (Raynor and Butler, 175)

Morrison's narratives, which portray the ordinary life of African Americans, speak about topics related to sex and sexuality in a way that may seem indecent, and she sometimes crosses the lines of sexual taboos. She intriguingly writes about aspects of sexuality in a manner which breaks with the perception of sex as something filthy and immoral, and illuminates these aspects of human life without being swayed by the more conventional norms of human behaviour. Dealing with the erotic and even perverted aspects of sexuality, she simply reports what happens, not passing judgements directly, but relating what takes place in a manner that leaves it to the reader to do the reasoning and the judging. However, in their investigations of different topics, Morrison's narratives clearly demonstrate how sexuality is used as a means of domination in human interrelations.

As sexuality is a recurring motif in Toni Morrison's works, the many different manifestations of sexual behaviour serve as important means of characterization and help develop her themes of love, gender and oppression. These themes will become my main focus when analyzing her novels, even though they may be difficult to keep apart from her other thematic concerns, such as race and class, as they are so closely related:

Clearly, sexism and racism are systems of societal and psychological restrictions that have critically affected the lives of African-American women. Since sex and race have been so interrelated in the history of America, it is not surprising that when black women published novels, they necessarily reflected that relationship. (Sumana, 62)

The manifestations of sexuality in Morrison's novels may be seen as a result of the characters' internal and external conflicts in African American communities, which are rooted in the sociohistorical environment in which the characters live. It is clear that racism and sexism serve to reinforce each other in African American life, even today. To use Morrison's own words: ". . . racism is as healthy today as it was during the enlightenment" (Morrison, 1993:63). It is obvious that racism is closely interweaved with issues of gender and sexuality in Morrison's fictional world, but the subject of my thesis will primarily involve an examination of how sexuality in her novels expresses itself in relation to love, gender roles and subjugation.

My study of the significance of sexuality in Morrison's work will focus primarily on three of her novels, namely *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Sula* (1973) and *Love* (2003). In my view, these works of fiction illustrate with particular poignancy how Morrison makes use of the motif of sexuality to dramatize particular moral and social themes. I have here chosen to focus on Morrison's two earliest works as well as one of her latest ones, *Love*, because they all deal with aspects of sexuality related to gender, oppression, and love. Whereas sexuality is a central motif in all of her works, it is particularly profoundly related to gender in *Sula*, and to sexual abuse in *The Bluest Eye* and *Love*. The topic of abuse-related sexual behaviour is treated somewhat differently in the latter two novels, but both works relate stories of young girls whose lives are destroyed by the abuse of older men who belong to the girls' immediate environment. These two narratives thus serve as examples of sexual oppression within the black community. Although my focal point in the case of *Love* is quite naturally the theme of love, the novel presents, as my analysis will reveal, a peculiarly twisted and oppressive version of love.

There are of course a number of examples of sexual abuse and oppression to be drawn from Morrison's other works too, like the abuse of Sethe in *Beloved* (1987). However, the oppression of Sethe serves to illustrate the systematic oppression through slavery carried out by the white members of society. Since a consideration of this would have opened up for an approach to sexuality and oppression linked to the institution of slavery, I have limited my study to portrayals of contemporary life, such as those of *The Bluest Eye* and *Love*. Morrison's remarkable last novel *A Mercy* (2008) also deals with love and oppression, but is again an historically grounded text. *A Mercy* is a narrative which, among other embedded stories, tells the story of an enslaved mother who, in order to save her daughter from being

sexually abused by their slave master, gives up her child to another white slaveholder whom she views as less likely to sexually molest her daughter. (Interesting comparisons may also be drawn between this mother's sacrificial act to Sethe's act of killing her child in an attempt to save her.) *A Mercy* is a prime example of how Morrison portrays sexuality and oppression, but the theme in that narrative serves to illustrate a mother's sacrificial love for her child, in contrast to the thwarted "mother-love" which is the subject of the contemporary novels I have chosen to investigate.

There are a number of reasons as to why I have chosen *Sula* as my main primary source when discussing the relationship between sexuality and gender. The novel links these issues to adolescence and portrays how two young girls and close friends, despite belonging to the same community, come to, on account of their very different backgrounds, live very different lives when becoming adults. The familial backgrounds of the two girls, Nel and Sula are founded on very different moral codes, one following the conventional gender roles of the community, and the other not. The two girls, whose close friendship is ruined when sexuality intrudes into their lives, suffer a similar experience of loss of friendship as the two girls Heed and Christine in *Love*. This comparison of close friendships broken up by sexuality in the two novels makes for a more consistent argumentation in my analysis. Gender would similarly have been an interesting topic to relate to Son and Jade's relationship in Morrison's *Tar Baby* (1981), but their complex sexual relationship, even if it is, in part, of an oppressive nature, involves a sense of equality between the two lovers which makes it less pertinent for the main theses that this study pursues. In Morrison's *Paradise* (1997), gender conventions are also involved in the portrayal of the women who live secluded in "the convent", but here sexuality cannot be directly related to the narrative like in the case of *Sula* – where there is a strong focus on individual experience; consequently I have chosen not to use *Paradise* in this study.

As stated earlier, the investigation of my theses will for the most part evolve around the relations between sexuality and love, gender, and oppression, and how these interconnections mark the characters and their social environment. I will also seek to disclose how a thwarted sexuality may serve as the agent of sex roles that ruin the characters' lives. Furthermore, I aim to demonstrate how Morrison uses sexuality as a means of illustrating how a sick culture breeds sick individuals, and how a patriarchal and sexist society, like the societies in *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula* and *Love*, will determine the development of its members and the trajectory of the relationships between them.

My analysis of *Sula* in Chapter 2 will specifically aim to show how a sexist society and an unequal balance between the sexes in the community help ruin the main characters' life, as well as the friendship between the two girls when they turn into women. It will also set out to reveal how divergent sexual codes will split the members of a close-knit community, and how the ones who deviate and discard the norms of what is considered correct behaviour will become outcasts. The chapter will also discuss how, in *Sula*, Morrison uses the characters' sexual behaviour to illustrate how individuals and relationships are damaged by society's conventional gender codes, no matter whether they are followed or resisted.

Chapter 3 examines how Morrison, in *The Bluest Eye*, her very first novel, uses the oppressors' perverted sexuality to portray the gender-role subjugation on a number of different levels, and here she portrays the oppressors as well as the oppressed. In this novel she specifically reveals how the oppressors are characters who, earlier in their lives, have themselves been subjected to abuse. The oppressors' sexuality thus serves as a symptom of the sick environment that these characters have been subjected to. First and foremost, however, my analysis will try to show how oppressive and perverted sexual behaviour causes irreparable damage to its victims and even destroys them, especially when the victims are children – the most vulnerable members of society.

The analysis of *Love* in Chapter 4 focuses on how its characters' lives and relationships become ruined when exposed to the degenerate sexuality and twisted love of the patriarch in their community. The analysis here will particularly explore how the main characters, especially when children, are deprived of healthy parental figures, and become exposed to an adult's sick sexuality, which cripples them and makes them unable to relate to sexuality and

love when becoming adults themselves. In this chapter I will also discuss how the narrative illustrates the complexity of the relations between sexuality and love, how this complexity affects the victims' ability of forming healthy, loving relationships later in their lives, and how a patriarchal society hampers the healthy development of young girls and women.

CHAPTER 1. SOME THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

In my thesis I want to explore Morrison's portrayal of sexuality as a means of power in human relations, particularly in the thematic contexts of gender, oppression and love, as reflected in her novels *Sula*, *The Bluest Eye* and *Love* respectively. Morrison's writing is intellectually challenging both when it comes to form and structure. A close analyses reveals, however, that it aims to question and discuss society's norms, as well as – on a number of levels – individuals' behaviour. The aspect of social criticism is thus important in her fiction, revealed both in terms of plot and characterization. Her characters are as complex as her plots. Revealing the full story only in bits and pieces and avoiding chronological order, the structure of her narratives reflects the complexity of the real world and the people in it. Her narratives also clearly aim to criticize society. She reveals how human behaviour is, in part, socially and culturally constructed. The theoretical perspectives and approaches most relevant in order to understand Morrison's fiction are in my opinion consequently those that apply history and culture as a means of understanding and explaining literary texts.

New Historicist Criticism may for instance help shed light on Morrison's writing as it looks at a work's discourse as something which is strongly linked to the society in which the author has created it. The gender codes in *Sula*, the oppressive environment in *The Bluest Eye*, and the complexity of sexuality and love in *Love* can all be recognized as aspects of society of the twentieth century, not only familiar to the author, but also to the reader. The reader too, is strongly linked to society – its ideology and belief systems – and will understand a work of literature accordingly. As “the American version of ‘cultural studies’” (Griffith, 179) the New Historicism shows: “Its sympathy for disadvantaged – ‘marginalized’ – peoples . . .” (179). Morrison clearly demonstrates in her literature a sympathy for marginalized people through her portrayal of the most vulnerable members of society such as the children and the women in her fiction. She also clearly draws parallels between the oppression of blacks in America and the oppression within the black communities.

The use of a social and cultural approach when analyzing Morrison is thus helpful, as her writing portrays behaviour as a social and cultural construct. As Griffith puts it,

In an anthropological sense, “culture” is the total way of life of a particular society – its language, economy . . . a collection of codes that everyone in a society shares and allows them to communicate . . . (179-180)

The colloquial language that for example Morrison applies in her discourse is an example of how she draws on different aspects of black culture, which help make her stories representative of the time and place in which the stories are set. She also uses, as part of her discourse, intertextual references, such as nursery rhymes, historical references from the civil rights era, and iconic figures like Shirley Temple, which help place her characters in a specific environment and at a particular time: “. . . Morrison uses particular textual strategies to claim discursive authority . . .” (Ryan, 152). The culture and society of the Cosey’s are for example illustrated through Heed’s language, which reveals her to be an intruder and an outsider in the family, as both her spoken language and her writing skills are poor. Morrison lets the young Christine ridicule Heed’s use of language when wanting to set herself above her former friend. “People with power – social, economic . . . use discourse to manipulate other people and maintain their own power” (Griffith, 180). Other examples of how codes of behaviour are used to reveal differences in class and power in Morrison’s fiction are, Helene Wright’s social conduct in *Sula*, which serves to separate herself and her daughter from the common blacks in the Bottom, as well as Geraldine’s assertion of superiority in her meeting with Pecola in *The Blues Eye*. As Griffith notes:

Power elites can be persons within a society – wealthy persons, politicians, white people, males . . . Thus, some people are “marginalized” and made vulnerable to exploitation. (180-181)

Racism, patriarchy and sexism are part of the ideology in the societies that Morrison portrays. By telling the stories of young girls’ exposure to sexual harassment and how this affects them, and by showing how marginalized people in *The Bluest Eye* like the poor Breedlove’s, along with the prostitutes, are made vulnerable by the norms of society, Morrison’s writing explains human behaviour as something which is result of – and marked by – social and cultural constructs. As Raynor and Butler points out, critics examine how Morrison “. . . illustrates the destructive nature of patriarchy both within the mainstream American society and African American communities. Morrison’s novels serve as ‘historical’ narratives by showing the inextricable links between gender, race, and class” (178).

When talking about *Love*, Susana Vega-Gonzales points out that “. . . Morrison imbues her new novel with spirituality, which is harmoniously intertwined with those socio-historical

concerns the author deals with” (277). In particular, Morrison’s works may be argued to “. . . give voice to the voiceless and record a history of a people, especially those she refers to as ‘ordinary people,’ who have been ignored or purposely forgotten” (Raynor and Butler, 177). Although Morrison’s writing is fictional, its concern with forgotten individuals can also be discussed in terms of being, in part, historical and even biographical. In their book about Toni Morrison, Samuels and Hudson-Weems explain how she draws on experiences and memories from her own childhood and uses these as sources of inspiration in her writing. Drawing on her own family’s story, as well as recorded historical incidents (such as the story of Sethe in *Beloved* being a re-creation of the true story of Margaret Garner) Morrison’s stories become more credible. “Like everyone else, authors are ‘subjects’ manufactured by culture. A culture ‘writes’ an author who, in turn, transcribes cultural codes and discourses into literary texts” (Griffith, 181). To New Historicists, literature should consequently be read as a result of the time in which it is produced:

. . . new historicists . . . believe that literature must be studied within a cultural context . . . second, new historicists focus on literature as cultural text. . . Third, . . . scrutinize the relationship of literature to the power structures of society. . . . aspire to diminish the injustices of race, class and gender. (Griffith, 182)

When investigating Morrison’s literature, one has to see her novels as cultural texts that examine aspects of power structures that surround people of a community. “Her narratives invite readers to construct meaning from what they read” (Raynor and Butler, 176). By using her authorial presence, Morrison clearly aims to educate her readers, and by scrutinizing how certain expressions of power, in the form of destructive sexual behaviour, can destroy people, she contributes to shed light on some of society’s injustice, particularly those related to race, class and gender.

In the analysis of women writers, gender studies also provide useful perspectives on issues related to the social construction of what is feminine and masculine:

Whereas *sex* is the biological difference between males and females, *gender* is the cultural difference. . . . Western culture . . . has ruled that certain kinds of behaviour are “abnormal” and “unnatural” for females to practice . . . (Griffith, 191)

Consequently the study of gender in a particular society must look to its culture for answers: “Since gender is a cultural construct, it is said to be malleable in a way that biology may not be” (Barker, 289). Ideas around gender may be altered or controlled by forces or influences in

society, whereas biology may not. Gender studies question notions of how men and women relate to one another, as ideas of gender have been constructed to bolster and promote male hegemony, it is for instance important for gender studies to criticise the attributes ascribed to the sexes:

Men are commonly held to be more ‘naturally’ domineering, hierarchically oriented and power-hungry, while women are seen as nurturing, child rearing and domestically inclined. (Barker, 283-284)

Morrison’s writing is profoundly concerned with the ways in which ideas of the feminine and the masculine are constructed in society. In her portrayal of Bill Coosey for example, she elucidates the more complex and damaging aspects of masculine and patriarchal societies, and how these societies destroy the relationship not only between men and women, but between women themselves.

In Morrison’s fiction, sexuality is inextricably part of the social construction of gender. In *Sula*, for instance, women are portrayed either in terms of being concentrated around the home and the family, such as Nel and Helene, who see sexuality as part of marriage, or as women who, such as the Peace women, deviate from the conventional norms: Eva the desexed matriarch, Hannah the promiscuous woman who fail to form healthy relationships with men or give her daughter the love she needs, and finally Sula who refuses to act like a ‘good’ woman and who sleeps around, not wanting to settle down and have babies. Morrison uses sexuality as part of the characterization of these women figures; in her fiction sexual behaviour serves as an indicator and an expression of gender codes. In other of Morrison’s narratives, gender is linked to oppression to elucidate the role of the oppressive males who use their sexuality as a means to suppress their victims. What is interesting is how Morrison manages to portray these individuals as complex human beings as well, not simply as male monsters, as their sexual behaviour would suggest. The sexual scenes in her narratives thus become part of the larger portrayal of her characters that the reader will be able to relate to. Morrison wants the reader to use his or her own sexuality to identify and become part of them. As the author says in “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation.”:

To describe sexual scenes in such a way that they are not clinical, not even explicit – so that the reader brings in his own sexuality to the scene and thereby participates in it in a very personal way. And owns it. (Morrison: 1984, 200)

As Raynor and Butler point out, Morrison’s depiction of black women’s sexuality is often unconventional:

Many critics explore how Morrison challenges prevailing stereotypes of African American women, especially in the women-centered novels like *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, *Beloved*, *Paradise*, and *Love*. (179)

Raynor and Butler go on to explain how Morrison aims to deconstruct the stereotypes of black female characters by portraying them as “comfortable with their bodies and sexuality”(180). An example of this is how the prostitutes in *The Bluest Eye*, despite being regarded among the lowest of the low in the community, are in the novel portrayed as confident and strong characters. This deconstruction of stereotypes can also be read in the general portrayal of Celestial in *Love*, and, in *Sula* (164), in the narrator’s celebration of the prostitutes of the past.

Gender and sexuality are not, however, merely something private in Morrison’s fiction; they have a cultural and political significance. Morrison’s comments on her own works mark her social and political commitment. As a social and literary critic of her own as well as of other’s writing, she has become an important voice in the contemporary literary world. The theoretical perspectives of my investigation of Morrison’s writing will consequently, and naturally, be, at least in part, coloured by Morrison’s own words. In Justine Tally’s book about Toni Morrison she discusses in her introduction “All necks are on the line” how Morrison herself in her seminal essay, “Unspeakable Things Unspoken: the Afro-American Presence in American Literature,” (1989) states that:

What we do as writers and critics is not just important, it is crucial; it is not just informative, it is formative; it is not just interesting, it profoundly shapes the perception of the world as we, and others, come to “know” it. (Tally, 1)

In Morrison’s view authors themselves are responsible for the way in which literature presents the world. Literature is formative, which is to say that it creates an understanding of the world in the minds of its readers and may thus effect their outlook. Morrison also criticises earlier literature in this essay for having written *about* African Americans, often as seen from a white male point of view, not assuming that African Americans would “write back”. But Morrison’s portrayal of African American life is more than a “writing back”; it aims to understand it, as it is lived: “Writing is, *after* all, act of language, its practice. But *first* of all it is an effort of the will to discover” (Morrison: 1989, 20). According to Judylyn S. Ryan, Morrison also asserts that the invocation in literature of a socio-political agenda is not in conflict with its aesthetic worth (Ryan, 151). Thus, Morrison effaces the dividing lines between the artistic aspects of literature and its social and political criticism: “By challenging the boundaries between artist

and critic, Morrison creates a legitimate place in critical literary discourse for her own voice” (McBride, 163). As Raynor and Butler also argue, “Morrison’s novels read as if the narrator is speaking directly to the reader, evoking response” (176), suggesting that Morrison uses the narrator’s voice as cultural commentary. In Cheryl A. Wall’s article about the role of Toni Morrison as an editor and teacher, she claims how her work at Random House “. . . helped to define two decades of African American literary history” (Wall, 139).

Furthermore, when Morrison talks about how African Americans are portrayed in literature in general, she uses the term “Africanism” as “a term for designating the unspeakable in discourses about class, sexuality, issues of power and domination . . .” (Wallinger, 115).

Not only does Morrison address the reader directly in her attempt to relate the individual experience of history as seen through the eyes of African American females, she has also in her discourse created a language where “the unspeakable” is put into words. “She rather wants textual encounters to be encounters of minds . . .” (Ludwig, 133), which may create dialogue between narrator and reader. Ludwig also discusses how Morrison, referring to her speech “The Dancing Mind”, sees how ideas in literature, when read, represents more than a simple exchange: “She knows that ideas are not a matter of mere neutral *exchange value* (‘coins’) but always belong to the person whose ideology they reflect” (133). Thus Morrison “makes clear that there is a political responsibility in the encounter of the reader and writer in the text, i.e., in ‘the life of the book world’” (Ludwig, 134). As Morrison says in “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation”:

If anything I do, in the way of writing novels (or whatever I write) isn’t about the village or the community or about you, then it is not about anything. I am not interested in indulging myself in some private, closed exercise of imagination that fulfils only the obligation of my personal dreams – which is to say yes, the work must be political. (Morrison: 1984, 202)

Morrison’s writing clearly has an agenda. She addresses issues related to social and political aspects of society in general and of the African American community in particular. Her stories portray how oppression of different kinds affect the individual being, and in doing so she portrays society and raises questions. Morrison does not condone oppression, in its multiple manifestations, whether it is within the society at large or whether it is within the African American community. She blames not only the individual oppressor, but society and the community which seem to condone oppressive behaviour, as well as women themselves for

allowing it to happen. Like the narrator L in *Love*, who argues that women contribute to their own degradation when opening up their legs to public display, Morrison addresses her anger not only at males but also at the female population.

It is important to point out, however, that Morrison's social criticism has a constructive and, as it were, regenerative function:

The opportunity to analytically unmake and remake the past is an unfailing ideology in Morrison's fiction. The past including past works – not the future – is treated as unfinished and continuously unfolding. By revisiting specific themes, techniques, and textual strategies, Morrison positions her characters, her readers, and the society-as-readers to discover that the (recurring) past is a reservoir from which the future can be drawn and redrawn in more expansive and enabling ways. (Ryan, 160)

In my work I will do a close reading of *Sula*, *The Bluest Eye* and *Love* in order to present a critical inquiry and discussion of how sexuality can be viewed as an expression of power related to gender, oppression, and love. My inquiry will naturally consider what Morrison herself, along with other literary critics, have said about her fiction. In my view – which I believe to be Morrison's as well – sexual behaviour is an integral part of human behaviour, and consequently I will read sexuality and its expressions as cultural and social constructs. Morrison's narratives portray sexual behaviour as created by societal conditions, which also encompasses deviant behaviour. The many deviant expressions of sexuality that Morrison portrays include violent and even sadistic behaviour like rape, incest and pedophilia, and her inquiries into such dark aspects of human behaviour help disclose the many ways in which sexuality is an expression of abuse of power.

CHAPTER 2. SEXUALITY AND GENDER IN *SULA*

The order in a society is not God-given, but created by the people in it, often through generations, which is evident in Morrison's portrayal of the uneven balance of power between men and women in her fiction. Gender is clearly a dominant theme in all of Toni Morrison's novels, and shapes her characters' conflicts. The unequal balance of power between men and women in her characters' social environment is predominant in all her works, and as this imbalance is internalized, it becomes part of the psychological conflicts her characters experience. Sexuality is an important arena on which these conflicts are played out, both as a result and as symbolic expression of social ills and inequities.

In *Sula* (1973) the many different manifestations of sexuality serve as important means of characterization and help develop themes linked to gender. Morrison uses different aspects of sexuality to show the influence of the social environment on the characters' minds, emotions and actions. The way sexuality is portrayed in the different relationships between the characters in *Sula* suggests a clear and direct link to the gender roles in the society in which the novel is set. Morrison uses her characters' sexual behaviour to illustrate how the unequal balance between the genders may create conflicts, dysfunctional relationships and damaged individuals. A sick sexuality may thus serve as a symbolic expression for the sick society in *Sula*.

In *Sula* all the main characters are women. We follow the main character Sula from her early teens in the year 1921 to her death in 1940, from being a lonely little girl to someone who due to her promiscuous behaviour has at the time of her death become the object of hatred and superstition in the Bottom (the black, segregated part of the town of Medallion where Sula lives). Sexuality proves to be an issue also in Sula's friendship to Nel, a friendship which Sula in the end ruins by sleeping with Nel's husband. The main character Sula is not, however, introduced by Morrison until 1922, after the character Shadrack is presented in 1919, and Sula's best friend Nel in 1920. It is evident that Morrison uses this way of opening to characterize the environment in which Sula grows up, and which has shaped Sula's character, personality and sexuality.

Shadrack, a veteran from World War I, is the first character we get to know. He plays an important role in the novel both as the founder of National Suicide Day and as a character associated with Sula: “In contrast to other male characters, Shadrack does participate in the community, albeit from a distance” (Gillespie and Kubitschek, 66). Sexuality is an issue also in the portrayal of Shadrack:

Blasted and permanently astonished by the events of 1917, he had returned to Medallion handsome but ravaged, and even the most fastidious people in the town sometimes caught themselves dreaming of what he must have been like a few years back before he went off to war. A young man of twenty, his head full of nothing and his mouth recalling the taste of lipstick . . . (*Sula*, 7; all subsequent references to this novel will only be given as page numbers in the running text)

Having Shadrack described in the first paragraph like this, suggests how his participation in the war has emasculated him. Having become permanently damaged by the war, Shadrack is just a faint shadow of his once beautiful self, and he is never to fully recover from his experiences. (During the course of the novel he only improves enough to feel lonely.) This is illustrated by his becoming an outsider and a freak in the community – a monster walking around with his penis hanging out, shouting obscenities and scaring women and children. Shadrack’s thwarted sexuality, his inability to act like a man, may be seen as a symbol of how a degenerate society has destroyed him. Morrison underlines how his character and very identity have become damaged when she describes how he, when in hospital, tries to pull off his hands and fling off his fingers, and how he is calmed when his hands are tied with a straitjacket. His fear of his own hands and fingers may symbolize his aversion to the killing he has participated in. Another passage portraying Shadrack’s loss of himself is interesting:

Twenty-two years old, weak, hot, frightened, not daring to acknowledge the fact that he didn’t even know who or what he was . . . with no past, no language, no tribe . . . no soiled underwear and nothing, nothing to do . . . (12)

The passage attempts to explain how Shadrack has turned into a freak with no self and no one to relate to, which may foreshadow his life in the Bottom, as a man with no ties to anyone is perceived as a danger to society. Morrison applies a similar kind of portrayal of Sula as a grown woman later in the novel (115), and of Son when introduced in the novel *Tar Baby* (1981), giving information about a character by stating what he or she does *not* possess. Mary Shelley used similar wording in her portrayal of the monster in *Frankenstein* (1818), and when Morrison uses this type of technique to portray a freakish character, this is clearly an allusion to Mary Shelley’s famous “man-made” monster. Morrison in fact names Shelley’s *Frankenstein* as a great literary work in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary*

Imagination. (1992: 4), thus making the comparison between Shelley's monster and Morrison's "monsters" likely – those in *Sula* as well as those in *The Bluest Eye* and *Love*.

Another emasculated male character in *Sula* is Plum. This is Sula's uncle, also a war veteran, who has become a heroin addict. Eva, Sula's grandmother, seeing how his addiction has reduced him into this helpless creature, a baby, decides to set fire to him, and in this manner she kills him. Both Plum and Shadrack have been destroyed by an outside force in society – war. This is clearly an example of how being forced to participate in a war has affected the mind of these characters which in turn disables them from taking on the roles as proper men in the society. So, when Plum's fate is left to Eva, or when she takes charge of his fate, she decides to end his life. Later when Sula's mother Hannah asks Eva why she killed Plum she tries to explain her action to her daughter:

“He give me such a time. . . . he wanted to crawl back in my womb and well . . . I ain't got the room no more . . . Being helpless and thinking baby thoughts . . . and messing up his pants again . . . He was growed, a big old thing. . . . I done everything I could to make him leave me and go on and live and be a man but he wouldn't and I had to keep him out so I just thought of a way he could die like a man not all scrunched up inside my womb, but like a man.” (71-72)

Plum has retarded and lost his sexual adult self. As Demetrakopoulos note, “Like the town's mad prophet, Shadrack, Plum loses his masculine impetus, his initiative, in the white man's army. Shadrack returns mad; Plum comes home a drug addict” (56). Having succumbed to drugs as a result of being in the war Plum is not able to pursue life as a grown man. His loss of his healthy self reflects a degraded society and what it did to him. To Eva, Plum is not a man, and she reasons that if he cannot live like a man, then she has to help him at least to die like one. In this manner we get to know Eva Peace, one of the main characters in the novel and “The creator and sovereign of this enormous house . . . ” (30). When having been left by BoyBoy to manage on her own with three small children, Eva's struggle to stay alive forces her to leave her children with a neighbour for some time. When returning to her children, she has the economic capacity to build a house on 7 Carpenter Road, in which among others Eva, Hannah and Sula live. Eva does what a husband, had she had one, should have done; provided shelter and food on the table for the family. It is not clear how Eva manages to get hold of the money she brings home, but there is a suggestion that she sacrifices her foot by sticking it under a train and then receiving insurance money for it. However, it is clear that Eva is taking on a man's role, providing for her family, and even though she does not have sexual relations with anybody, she is flirting with her male visitors:

With the exception of BoyBoy, those Peace women loved all men. It was manlove that Eva bequeathed to her daughters. Probably, people said, there were no men in the house, no men to run it. But actually that was not true. The Peace women simply loved maleness, for its own sake. Eva, as old as she was, . . . had a regular flock of gentlemen callers, and although she did not participate in the act of love, there was a good deal of teasing and pecking and laughter. (41)

This passage seems to celebrate the Peace women's love of men, as both Eva and Hannah, the role models to Sula, clearly have a need for male company. Eva greatly enjoys the company of her male visitors, but fails to hand down to Hannah and Sula any model for a healthy relationship. Besides bequeathing this kind of "manlove" to her daughters, Eva also bequeaths ". . . a capacity for emotional distance that allows for the creation of a female self" (Gillespie and Kubitschek, 76). Having been left by BoyBoy, Eva does not commit to any man. As pointed out, Eva does not take a lover, but still uses her feminine sexuality to control her flock of gentlemen callers: "Eva returns to her virgin state after BoyBoy leaves; men remain amusing toys to her" (Demetrakopoulos, 55). Her daughter Hannah, Sula's mother, however, enjoys frequent sex with any man who comes to visit the house – even the newlywed husbands who have rented a room in the Peace house for their honeymoon. Hannah seems to be addicted to casual sex, and what Eva actually bequeaths to Hannah, who in turn passes this on to Sula, is a thwarted love of men, leaving both her daughter and granddaughter incapable of committing themselves to any healthy relationships. Hannah and Sula thus come into conflict with the society in the Bottom; their promiscuity are perceived as a threat to marital harmony in the town. Hannah's behaviour is perhaps engendered by Eva's lack of love for her children when small, which in turn is reflected in Hannah's neglect of Sula. Hannah's priorities have to do with sex:

Hannah simply refused to live without the attentions of a man, and after Rekus' death had a steady sequence of lovers, mostly the husbands and friends of neighbors. Her flirting was sweet . . . she rippled with sex . . . she made men aware of her behind, her slim ankles, the dew-smooth skin and the incredible length of neck. (42)

Although promiscuous, Hannah is portrayed as a woman who is sexually confident and in charge of herself. The character portrayal of Hannah is quite ambiguous. On the one hand, she assumes the role of a sexual object; on the other hand she is still in charge of her own actions, as if she herself is the sexual predator inviting the men to want her and enjoying the pleasure casual sex gives her. In this crowded house she would take her lover down to the basement or into the pantry, but rarely to her bedroom:

. . . not because Sula slept in the room with her but because her love mate's tendency to fall asleep afterward and Hannah was fastidious about whom she slept with. She would fuck practically anything, but sleeping with someone implied for her a measure of trust and a definite commitment. So she ended up a daylight lover . . . Seeing her step so easily into the pantry and emerge looking precisely as she did when she entered, only happier, taught Sula that sex was pleasant and frequent, but otherwise unremarkable. (43-44)

This description of Hannah's behaviour may be seen as a foreshadowing of what Sula will turn out like. Sula clearly takes after her mother in being promiscuous, but like her mother she also lacks important social skills and understanding of what is considered proper conduct, as illustrated by her indiscriminate choice of men later, as well as not letting men invade her personal territory. Thus Sula's legacy from her mother, as Rubenstein points out, is sexual licentiousness: "Hannah is literally an easy 'piece,' thriving on sexual satisfaction because it is the most potent affirmation of her being" (132). Hannah's conduct, however, is not despised by the men in the Bottom that are her male lovers, as she is not jealous nor wanting a relationship: ". . . her extraordinary beauty and funky elegance of manner, made them defend her and protect her from any vitriol that newcomers or their wives might spill" (44-45). The reason for this loyalty is that Hannah does not demand anything from them; her aim is simply to get some touching every day. Still, she is in conflict with the traditional norms and values in society due to her lack of emotional engagement. Neither is she regarded well by the prostitutes, as she affects the competition for men by having sex for pleasure and not money.

It is in this environment that Sula grows up, which has a devastating effect on her and her later relationships with men. When Sula and Nel become friends, they become inseparable, but with their very different homes, upbringing and mothers, they choose different lives when entering adulthood. With Nel's strict and orderly house, and a mother whose only goal is to see her daughter properly wed, Sula's house is a relief to Nel. Nel's mother, Helene, being the daughter of a Creole prostitute in New Orleans, has a background of sexual promiscuity too, but instead of doing as her mother, she flees from it: "Helene projects and channels fear of her own mother's 'outlaw' sexuality into a controlling repression of Nel's sexuality" (Demetrakopoulos, 53). Helene has moved as far away from her background as possible, and in the Bottom she takes on a role so conventional and proper that her daughter is unable to deal with sexuality other than as an appendage of marriage. Helene has also taken the position as one of the pillars in the Bottom, going to church regularly, and she has tried for years to keep Nel from becoming friends with Sula on account of Hannah's reputation. Having

managed to prevent any contact between Nel and her own mother, Rochelle, on account of her being a prostitute, Helene certainly does not want Nel to have anything to do with Hannah.

Nonetheless, Nel and Sula seek each other out. “They were solitary little girls whose loneliness was so profound it intoxicated them . . .” (51). Morrison depicts a relationship between two little girls whose isolation binds them together. They also have their first experience of sexual agitation together when being harassed by Ajax, when they at the age of twelve are passing the Time and Half Pool Hall in the Bottom:

The old men looked at their stalklike legs . . . they moved their lips as though to stir up the taste of young sweat on tight skin. Pig meat. . . . His name was Ajax, a twenty year old pool haunt of sinister beauty. Graceful and economical in every movement, he held a place of envy with men of all ages for his magnificently foul mouth. . . . So, when he said “pig meat” as Nel and Sula passed, they guarded their eyes lest someone see their delight. . . . Years later their own eyes would glaze as they cupped their chins in remembrance of the inchworm smiles . . . The cream-colored trousers marking with a mere seam the place where the mystery curled. Those smooth vanilla crotches invited them; those lemon-yellow gabardines beckoned to them. (50)

Nel and Sula’s first encounter with sexuality is an ambivalent mixture of fear and pleasure – the fear of sexual harassment and at the same time the delight of being the objects of sexual interest. Sathyaraj and Neelakantan compare this episode in which Nel and Sula are subjected to the male “gaze” to Sandler’s fantasies about Junior in *Love*, and suggests that it represents: “. . . certain stereotypical social attitudes . . . perpetuating the gendered dichotomies of human society” (Sathyaraj and Neelakantan, 3). For men in the Bottom to sexually harass two young girls in this manner is obviously part of the gender conventions of the Bottom, the men admiring Ajax for his foul mouth, and Nel and Sula secretly reacting to this approach with pleasure. After all, this is the only male interest and attention the girls receive in their young lives – Sula’s father being dead and Nel’s simply being absent. Now, given Nel and Sula’s very different upbringing, one would think that Nel should perhaps have responded differently to the harassment, but they both seem to enjoy it. This suggests that it is not just the men in the community that act as expected when growing into adulthood, but that the girls and women also act according to gender conventions, experiencing a fearful pleasure at being regarded as sexual objects:

The new theme they were now discovering was men. So they met regularly, without even planning it, to walk down the road to Edna Finch’s Mellow House, even though it was too cool for ice cream. (55-56)

In this way, the two young girls start to explore their sexuality, making themselves accessible to the comments and stares from the men. The narrator here also describes the beautiful boys in the Bottom, perhaps to illustrate how Sula has inherited the manlove expressed in *7 Carpenter Road*, or to distinguish between the potentiality, in people's adolescence, of a full sensual life and its perversion in adulthood:

The beautiful, beautiful boys who dotted the landscape like jewels, split the air with their shouts in the field, and thickened the river with their shining wet backs. Even their footsteps left a smell of smoke behind. (56)

This passage celebrates the joy, zest and sensuality as well as the innocence that are associated with youth, especially of the boys and young men. Figuratively comparing the boys to jewels and the wake of their footsteps to smoke suggests that their presence is very precious and full of life and impatient energy. The celebration of the young, able men in the community that have not been destroyed by society yet, stands in stark contrast to the portrayal of Shadrack and Plum, who on account of their war experiences have lost their health, their natural sensuality, and their attractiveness.

The girls' sexual awakening culminates during the summer of the beautiful boys, the summer they turn twelve, where in a fit of restlessness they throw themselves on the ground digging holes into the earth:

Underneath their dresses flesh tightened and shivered in the high coolness, their small breasts just now beginning to create some pleasant discomfort when they were lying on their stomachs. . . . Nel found a thick twig and, with her thumbnail, pulled away its bark until it was stripped to a smooth, creamy innocence. Sula looked about and found one too. When both twigs were undressed . . . she grew impatient and poked her twig rhythmically and intensely into the earth . . . Together they worked until the two holes were one and the same. (58)

Their physical and sensual experience of flesh tightening and shivering, and their small breasts creating discomfort and pleasure at the same time, illustrates how the two girls are starting to become aware of their sexuality. Sharing this experience with each other further illustrates how close the two girls are, no words being passed between them, yet they both seem to know what the other thinks and what this "game" is about. Further, figurative language such as "tightened and shivered", "stripped", "a smooth creamy innocence", "undressed", "poked" and "rhythmically and intense" has strong sexual overtones. When Nel's twig breaks, they stop their "grass-play" and seem disgusted with themselves as they throw whatever debris and rubbish they can find, into the hole and cover it with grass as if

nothing has happened. Acting out a lust which is created by their adolescent sexual awakening and by Ajax and the men outside Reba's Grill seems to have left them with a disgust with themselves. The figurative implications of this disgust may be related to their experience of being harassed by the men, but it can also serve as a foreshadowing of the degeneration of sex that comes with growing up, with the adulthood of both Sula and Nel. However, destroying the hole they have made together may also be read as ". . . the future burial of their relationship" (Suranyi, 21). In any case, the incident marks a clear shift in their relationship as they are about to enter the adult world – and consequently turning into sexual beings.

But before entering the grass-play with Nel, Sula accidentally overhears Hannah talking with her friends about whether they love their children or not. Her mother's remark about her loving, but not liking, her own daughter, upsets Sula. As Sula must have seen her mother's pleasant face after having had sex with so many different men, whom she obviously likes but not loves, Sula is obviously hurt by her mother's statement. To make matters even worse, they meet Chicken Little, and after teasing him Sula picks him up, swings him around, and letting go of him, sees him sail into the river, accidentally drowning him. A short time after, she meets Shadrack in his small cabin, who is yet another male whom the young Sula perceives as a threat:

The terrible Shad who walked about with his penis hanging out, who peed in front of ladies and girl-children . . . She had not heard his coming and now he was looking at her. . . . His fingers, barely touching the wood, were arranged in a graceful arc. . . . He was smiling, a great smile, heavy with lust and time to come. (61-62)

There is an interesting duality in this passage; on the one hand it describes Shadrack with his penis hanging out and a smile heavy with lust, and on the other, the grace of his fingers. There is a state of tranquillity around Shadrack in this passage, a sense of serenity and beauty, which stands in sharp contrast to how he at the army hospital tried to fling off his fingers in despair. Now he is calm and tries to comfort Sula by saying "always", as if to ensure her of permanency. To Sula, this meeting creates further confusion, as she has just experienced the accident and life's impermanency with Chicken Little, and all she wants to know is whether Shadrack has seen the drowning or not. The symbolic significance of this passage is further accentuated by the combination of lust and death, each being a symbol of the other. In addition the lust connected to death may also be a foreshadowing of Sula's own death: after her sexual "encounter" of the grass-play, death follows.

Jude Greene is also an interesting representative of the male sex in *Sula*. The reader gets to know him through the narrator's flashbacks in the chapter of 1927 when he and Nel are celebrating their marriage:

This wedding offered a special attraction, for the bridegroom was a handsome, well-liked man – the tenor of Mount Zion's Men's Quartet, who had an enviable reputation among the girls and a comfortable one among men. (80)

Morrison paints a picture of a nice young man whose attentions draw Nel away from Sula. Nel enjoys the newfound identity this man creates in her, but it is also clear that she loses the close relationship she has with Sula, as Sula is about to disappear from Nel's life. The narrator's accentuation of Jude's excellent reputation suggests he is different from the men who harass the girls by the Time and Half Pool Hall:

. . . this new feeling of being needed by someone who saw her singly. She didn't even know she had a neck until Jude remarked on it, or that her smile was anything but the spreading of her lips until he saw it as a small miracle. (84)

At the same time, however, the narrator reveals the real reason behind this marriage: the conflict that Jude experiences when not being able to get real work. The fact that the company will rather hire thin-armed white boys than the young, strong black men to build the New River Road is an obvious result of racism:

The men like Jude who could do real work. Jude himself longed more than anybody else to be taken. Not just for the good money, more for the work itself. He wanted to swing the pick . . . His arms ached for something heavier than trays, for something dirtier than peelings . . . he wanted the camaraderie of the road men: the lunch buckets, the hollering, the body movements that in the end produced something real . . . So it was rage, rage and a determination to take on a man's role anyhow that made him press Nel about settling down. . . . He chose the girl who had always been kind, who had never seemed hell-bent to marry, who made the whole venture seem like his idea, his conquest. (81-83)

Neither Nel nor Jude has aimed to get married in the first place, and they are obviously not marrying for passionate love. The only time in fact that there is a hint of sexual desire is when at the ceremony they are both thinking about their wedding night. Jude clearly resorts to marrying Nel in an attempt to comfort himself and have his pain soothed when failing to get real men's work. This is an example of how the conflict between the blacks and whites in the society affects Jude; it becomes the very reason for the relationship and marriage between him and Nel. Their relationship is thus an example and a result of both racism and traditional gender roles in society. Nel is a victim of something similar: "Nel's indifference to his hints

about marriage disappeared altogether when she discovered his pain” (83). She too is an embodiment of the gender roles in society, illustrated by Ajax’s comment: “That ‘all they want, man, is they own misery. Ax em to die for you and they yours for life.’” (83) Another passage also illustrates well the expectations about marriage that society creates in young girls:

When Nel, an only child, sat on the back porch surrounded by the high silence of her mother’s incredibly orderly house, feeling the neatness pointing at her back, she studied the poplars and fell easily into a picture of herself lying on a flowered bed, tangled in her own hair, waiting for some fiery prince. He approached but never quite arrived. (51)

Nel gives in to Jude pressuring her to marry him, even though he may not be the “fiery prince” she has been waiting for. She is after all flattered that Jude has chosen her, and she is eager to comfort him, with the result that they marry for the wrong reasons. And in turn the marriage destroys Nel’s life, because despite Jude’s promises of life-long love, that “he would shelter her, love her, grow old with her” (83), he, in the end, betrays her for Sula.

When Sula has sex with Jude some time after her arrival back in the Bottom, Nel’s life is shattered. Nel and Sula are finally back together again after many years, and although the rest of the people in the Bottom do not appreciate Sula’s arrival, having been warned of her arrival by the plague of robins, which they see as an ill omen, Nel is clearly happier when Sula is back. Together they laugh and remember old times. Rubenstein (131) points to how both women have suffered from the other’s absence, both having a “limited vision” without the other. Nel compares Sula’s return to getting an eye back. Despite many years without contact, their friendship seems stronger than the relationship between Nel and Jude, and seems to even affect Nel’s feelings for Jude:

Even Nel’s love for Jude, which over the years had spun a steady gray web around her heart, became a bright and easy affection, a playfulness that was reflected in their lovemaking. (95)

Unable to sense the danger of having Sula visit Nel and Jude’s home, Nel becomes devastated when finding her best friend and her husband having sex together in their bedroom:

But they had been down on all fours naked, not touching except their lips right down there on the floor . . . on all fours like (uh huh, go on, say it) like dogs. Nibbling at each other . . . (105)

In this passage Morrison uses figurative language like “on all fours”, “naked” and “like dogs” to illustrate the primitive drive in their sexuality. It is as if Sula cannot help herself, perhaps due to her upbringing of being used to her mother’s easy sexual ways, and Jude is just there. The way Sula responds to Nel afterwards reveals that her behaviour is not unlike that of her mother before her, and this destructive behaviour does not even spare Sula’s closest friend. As Sula does not see sex as anything special, and does not understand the consequences of her actions, she is therefore unable to foresee the reaction from Nel. Sula is certainly unable to relate sex to love. A good example of this is when Sula talks to Jude about how everybody loves black men:

I mean, everything in the world loves you: White men love you. They spend so much time worrying about your penis they forget their own. The only thing they want to do is to cut off a nigger’s privates. And if that ain’t love and respect I don’t know what is. And white women? They chase you all to every corner of the earth, feel for you under every bed. I knew a white woman wouldn’t leave the house after 6 o’clock for fear one of you would snatch her. Now ain’t that love? They think rape as soon’s they see you, and if they don’t get the rape they looking for, they scream it anyway . . . Even little children – white and black, boys and girls – spend all their childhood eating their hearts out ‘cause they think you don’t love them. (103-104)

The complexity of this extremely ironic passage illustrates Sula’s mixed-up view of love, which she relates to sexuality, gender and race. To her, love is envy, destruction, molestation, fear and longing. She links love to “rape” and “penis” and “privates”. Sula sees people’s relations to each other, especially across racial lines, as indistinguishable from fear and aggression, which characterize power struggles, thus, Sula’s view of love is as thwarted as her attitude to sexuality, and both destroy the relationship between her and Nel.

Jude responds to Sula’s ironic comments by thinking that Sula “. . . stirred a man’s mind maybe, but not his body” (104). Having Sula share her thoughts of men with him nevertheless makes Jude intrigued by her:

Sula’s humorous rejoinder that the whole world is obsessed with his privates makes Jude aware of a viewpoint other than his own and moves him toward self-recognition as Nel’s coddling can never do. (Gillespie and Kubitschek, 73)

Sula has something which Nel does not have, a mind of her own. She comes forth as strong, well-articulated and self-reliant, not the typical housewife staying at home minding children like Nel is doing. She even makes Jude laugh. Perhaps it is this unconventional behaviour which intrigues Jude to have sex with her, despite his comments on not being physically

attracted to her. As pointed out, the wound that Sula inflicts upon Nel when she has sex with Jude, is something which Sula is unable to comprehend. Nel, who sees sex as something belonging to marriage, feels she is all at once robbed of both love and sex - in addition to her friendship with Sula. To Nel sex is something which has to take place within the conventions of society, and she fears the extreme loneliness, also the physical one, when Jude leaves:

And what am I supposed to do with these old thighs now . . . with never nobody settling down between my legs even if I sew up those old pillow cases and rinse down the porch and feed my children and beat the rugs and haul the coal up out of the bin even then nobody, O Jesus I could be a mule or plow the furrows with my hands if need be or hold these rickety walls up with my back if need be if I knew that somewhere in this world in the pocket of some night I could open my legs to some cowboy lean hips but you are trying to tell me no and O my sweet Jesus what kind of cross is that? (111)

This emphasizes how Nel links her own sexuality to her household chores and to marriage as an institution, instead of seeing it as an expression of an individual's healthy longing and desires, which underlines her adoption of the norms of gender in the society. Not being able to separate her individual sexual needs from society's norms leaves Nel too with a thwarted sexuality. The passage illustrates how Nel is devastated by the loss of her husband, equating her life without a husband with a life without sex. The husbands – the men in the society like Jude and BoyBoy – have the power to leave and to get new lovers (we only know that Jude stays with Sula for a short time), whereas the women who take lovers are seen as loose if they do. This clearly underlines the double morality inherent in gender conventions in the society at large. Nel wears her misery like a cloak, and not being able to rid herself of it she remains a victim of her husband and her best friend's betrayal. As Gillespie and Kubitschek argue, "Repression devours Nel's energy, but Morrison's portrayal, while sympathetic, neither excuses nor evades Nel's motivation, which is cowardice. (74) Nel is thus suffused with self-pity and pride in enduring her destiny as the wronged wife. Whether she is a coward or not for not taking action in improving her situation, she *does* act according to her upbringing and what is expected of her, namely upholding her role as the good mother despite her constant struggle to provide an income for the family. When "stealing" Jude away from Nel, Sula not only destroys her relationship with Nel, but she contributes to the growing distance between herself and the conventional people in the Bottom. Everybody despises Sula, and as time goes by, new rumours about her are added and the community's disdain for her increases. The first thing Sula does when coming back to the Bottom is to put Eva in an old people's home after a fight she has with her grandmother about her not getting married and having babies:

“I don’t want to make somebody else. I want to make myself.”
“Selfish. Ain’t no woman got no business floatin’ around without no man.”
“You did.”
“Not by choice.”
“Mamma did.”
“Not by choice, I said.” (92)

Their fight illustrates how Eva, her own grandmother, does not realize how her granddaughter’s background has helped shape her personality – which Sula actually tries to explain. As a consequence of her upbringing, Sula is as independent and “manly” like both Hannah and Eva, and Sula’s relationship to men is the very result of the actions of her mother. Suranyi argues that Sula “. . . rebels against the role she is assigned to take within the black community. Consequently she becomes a transgressor and an outlaw, just like Shadrack” (20). Christian (247) makes a similar comment on Sula’s refusal to conform to the community’s standards for women, but focuses on how her rejection of motherhood predicated on her desire to avoid being “. . . cut off from the possibilities of life” (247). It is fair to assume here that it is both Sula’s background as well as her wish for independence that make her refuse to adopt the norms of gender in society, but her decision of not wanting to settle down and have a family, instead of just sleeping around, nevertheless makes her a pariah in the community. It can also be claimed that Sula watching Eva setting fire to Plum has made a lasting and devastating imprint on her personality:

“Which God? The one watched you burn Plum?”
“Don’t talk to me about no burning. You watched your own mamma. You crazy roach! You the one should have been burnt!”
“Hellfire don’t need lightning and it’s already burning in you . . .”
“Whatever’s burning in me is mine!”
“Amen!”
“And I’ll split this town in two and everything in it before I’ll let you put it out!”
(93)

Sula is clearly a result of her mother and grandmother’s actions and all that she has witnessed. The connotations of the fire which is burning in Sula is literally her childhood memories, what she has seen; the burning of both her mother and her uncle, although her mother’s was an accident, but the fire may also serve as a foreshadowing of what is yet to come; that she will split the town in two with her “hellfire”. When Sula puts Eva out, and has sex with Jude, she all at once breaks with her family, her best friend and childhood companion, as well as the social codes regarding morality and gender. The rumour that she sleeps with white men is further example of how she is violating the norms of society, and, whether true or untrue, this

accusation from the men of the Bottom has damaged her forever: “. . . the dirt that could never be washed away” (112). When Sula refuses both to fit into and adapt to the codes of gender in the Bottom, her treatment of the men triggers the anger of the women:

And the fury she created in the women of the town was incredible – for she would lay their husbands once and then no more. Hannah had been a nuisance, but she was complimenting the women, in a way, by wanting their husbands. Sula was trying them out and discarding them without any excuse the men could swallow. (115)

Sula is using the men in a manner in which men traditionally have been using women, but which only men could get away with. The community sees her as “. . . far more dangerous than someone like Shadrack because she actively threatens the defenses against moral and social transgression that lie hidden in the souls of most people” (Rubenstein, 149). Therefore any prospects of her leading a healthy life in the community is permanently destroyed, leaving her an outcast and a pariah. Sula’s numerous encounters with different lovers illustrate how her sexuality is crippled and thwarted: She “. . . challenges her community’s definition of a woman, and since that definition is intrinsic to their philosophy of life, they turn her into a witch” (Christian, 247). By Sula’s adoption of a behaviour deviant from that of good women, she becomes a danger to their community. It is interesting to observe the portrayal of Sula here, by way of a wording that calls to mind the description of Shadrack in the beginning of the novel, thus drawing a parallel between the two: “She was completely free of ambition, with no affection for money, property or things, no greed, no desire to command attention or compliments – no ego” (119).

There is also an interesting comment linking Shadrack and Sula when Shadrack tips his hat to Sula and refrains from cussing her, whereupon the observers conclude that they are both devils, that they are somehow connected. Sula is thus regarded just as much an outcast in the Bottom as Shadrack is; Shadrack’s turning into a freak and an outcast is a result of having been exposed to war in a degenerate society. Similarly, Sula has no consistency in her personality and has developed into a freak and an outcast due to her warped family background and a rigid society of gender conventions. Her profligate behaviour can be traced in her many failed relationships to men, partly in her relationship with Ajax, and finally in her relationship with Nel. As she does not possess any of the human capacities required for settling down, her life lacks direction and purpose and becomes purely fortuitous. However, she tries to connect with men she meets, but fails to experience the affection she is seeking:

The men who took her to one or another of those places had merged into one large personality: The same language of love, the same entertainments of love, the same cooling of love. Whenever she introduced her private thoughts into their rubbings or goings, they hooded their eyes. They taught her nothing but love tricks, shared nothing but worry, gave nothing but money. She had been looking all along for a friend, and it took her a while to discover that a lover was not a comrade and could never be – for a woman. (120-121)

Sula obviously tries to establish some kind of tenderness, but does not succeed. Through her many sexual encounters she learns that lovemaking may be joyful and wicked, but she resents those who see the act of love as something beautiful. Sula discovers that she does not find a companion in her male lover, but merely sex, which accentuates her own separateness. Nor does she understand why the men do not want to share her thoughts. When not being able to relate to her lovers, she ends up going to bed with men as often as possible, as her mother has done before her, but in contrast to her mother, Sula finds only misery and sorrow: “There, in the center of that silence was not eternity but the death of time and a loneliness so profound the word itself had no meaning” (123).

Morrison presents a similar characterization of Sula and Nel before they get to know each other as children: “. . . whose loneliness was so profound . . .” (51), thus illustrating how the two of them, without the other, feel profoundly alone, as well as underlining how entirely thrown back on herself Sula is without any companionship, not even with her once best friend. When Sula tries to connect with the men she has sex with she feels fretful and restive until she is left to revel in her own solitude:

She waiting impatiently for him to turn away and settle into a wet skim of satisfaction and light disgust, leaving her to the postcoital privateness in which she met herself, welcomed herself, and joined herself in matchless harmony. (123)

Sula’s failure to experience harmony with anybody but herself, emphasises how violated her psyche really is; not only is she lacking in social graces but she does not know how to properly relate to somebody on a personal level. Her inability to share the most intimate sexual relation with somebody is striking; she cannot wait for her lover to turn away so she can be alone with her feelings. As Duvall puts it, “The postcoital moment serves as a renunciation of men and affords her a momentary sense of completeness that she had previously experienced only with Nel” (59). The way in which Sula denies herself the intimacy of men resembles her mother’s refusal to bond to a man in a real relationship, and

may be viewed as a failure on her mother's part. It is clear that Sula's lack of a caring father figure and a loving mother is the very reason for her emotionally damaged life.

It is also important to examine Sula's relationship to Ajax and how it influences her, especially since it takes a different turn than her previous encounters with men. It is interesting to observe when she meets Ajax, how she acts in the exact same way she has seen her mother before her welcoming men:

Sula watched him – or rather the rhythm in his throat – with growing interest. . . . She took the bottle with one hand and his wrist with the other and pulled him into the pantry. There was no need to go there, for not a soul was in the house, but the gesture came to Hannah's daughter naturally. . . . She stood wide-legged against the wall and pulled from his track-lean hips all the pleasure her thighs could hold. (124-125)

This passage leaves no doubt as to why Sula acts the way she does. So if Hannah's behaviour reflects a damaged sexuality, so consequently does her daughter's. Ajax is, however, an interesting male character, whose presence in the Bottom has aroused interest in Sula when she is twelve. The only woman Ajax has ever loved is his mother, clearly on account of her loving him and his brothers dearly when children. This is most certainly why Ajax is so attractive to women in general, in addition to being inaccessible due to his lack of interest in any of them. The women have violent fights over him, but as pointed out earlier, Ajax looks upon women as sexual objects and he looks Sula up because he is curious about her:

So when his curiosity was high enough he picked two bottles of milk off the porch of some white family and went to see her, suspecting that this was perhaps the only other woman he knew whose life was her own, who could deal with life efficiently, and who was not interested in nailing him. (127)

This passage suggests that Ajax is not looking for a steady partner, and is instead attracted to Sula because she is so independent, that is, not needing a man for a relationship. He is also attracted to Sula as he thinks she resembles his mother. Sula finds pleasure in Ajax because he talks to her; they have real conversations. His treatment of her as an equal seems to be what wakes Sula's interest in him: "Thinking she was possibly brilliant, like his mother, he seemed to expect brilliance from her, and she delivered" (128). Ajax's expectations of Sula influences her response towards him, and she opens up to him: ". . . he listened more than he spoke" (128), leaving Sula with an attentive male listener for the first time. His generosity and sense of being comfortable in her presence are something new to Sula, which is also reflected in their love-making:

He liked for her to mount him so he could see her towering above him . . . She looked down, down from what seemed an awful height at the head of the man whose lemon-yellow gabardines had been the first sexual excitement she'd known. (129)

What is particularly noteworthy here is that Sula seems to enjoy the presence of Ajax, and that she in fact is on top of him when they have sex. In the descriptions of her other sexual experiences she is underneath the man, and she experiences only sadness, whereas with Ajax she is happy and superior, towering over him. The superior versus subordinate position here is rather interesting as it says something about her relationship to Ajax, as well as her relationships to the other men. Another aspect in this passage is that Ajax represents her first sexual excitement, going back to the summer of the beautiful boys and the innocence of childhood. Furthermore, the image of Sula towering above Ajax may symbolize that she is happy not following the conventional gender codes. Also, imagining herself pulling layers off Ajax's being may symbolize how she wants to connect to the deeper sides in him, and how she wants to get to know more of him. It is clear that she experiences some sort of deep bonding to Ajax, and she starts to feel possessive towards him: "*I will water your soil, keep it rich and moist.*" (131) But things go wrong. Sula starts to expect Ajax to come to her, she becomes interested in her own looks, starts to clean the house and prepares a meal for Ajax:

Putting her fingers deep into the velvet of his hair, she murmured, "Come on. Lean on me."

Ajax blinked. Then he looked swiftly into her face. In her words, in her voice, was a sound he knew well. For the first time he saw the green ribbon. He looked around and saw the gleaming kitchen and the table set for two and detected a scent of the nest. . . .

He stood and mounted the stairs with her and entered the spotless bathroom . . . As he came into the bedroom, he saw Sula lying on fresh white sheets, wrapped in the deadly odor of freshly applied cologne.

He dragged her under him . . . (133-134)

Sula has become attached to Ajax and has started to expect his presence, thus acting like any other woman – which Ajax does not appreciate. Ajax is a man who does not want the responsibilities of family life, he wants his freedom, but he also wants Sula's independence. To Sula, Ajax has been a healing ingredient in her life as she breaks her destructive pattern of purely physical relationships and starts to feel closeness and possession. "But Sula is inexperienced, becomes . . . clinging . . . and frightens Ajax away" (Demetrakopoulos, 60). When Ajax senses her desire to create a nest, he takes the superior part in the relationship. The balance of power in their relationship suddenly changes: "But like most of Morrison's

characters, Ajax wants to fly, to transcend; he is not the stable, but rather, the airy masculine” (Demetrakopoulos, 58). The only thing that he leaves Sula is his driver’s licence where Sula discovers that Ajax’s real name is Albert Jacks. Sula wonders how she has never known his real name, his true identity, starting to reason with herself why Ajax has left her. In her loneliness, Sula thinks of Nel and their first sexual experience with Ajax, an experience she shares with Nel: “. . . when she and Nel were trying hard not to dream of him and not to think of him when they touched the softness in their underwear . . . ” (136).

When Ajax leaves and Sula realises that he will not return, her thoughts shift to focus on Nel, on their childhood when Nel tells her that her head will not fall off like a paper doll’s. Now, Sula thinks Nel has been wrong as she realises that she has not been able to hold her head stiff enough when meeting Ajax.

When Nel and Sula are girls, they are soul mates who can predict what the other is thinking without a word being uttered. It is their close friendship as children that is the reason for Sula not realising the pain she causes Nel when sleeping with Jude, combined with her ignorance of the institution of marriage that changes the closeness between the two:

Marriage, apparently, had changed all that, but having had no intimate knowledge of marriage, having lived in a house with women who thought all men available . . . she was ill prepared for the possessiveness of the one person she felt close to. (119)

Entering adulthood and married life, Nel becomes the dull individual her mother has successfully shaped, whereas Sula becomes a sexual predator who is lacking in both social skills and perceptiveness of other people’s feelings, even those of her best friend Nel. When Sula betrays Nel’s trust and sleeps with Jude, she is unintentionally pushing Nel into a void of despair and loneliness: “Nel marries Jude out of sheer pity for his plight, but when she loses her husband to Sula’s careless seduction, she knows that she will have no other men” (Sumana, 72). Even though Nel marries Jude for the wrong reasons, she certainly feels deprived of both the love and sex that normal life had promised her, and her best friend is the one to blame for her loss. Sula, on account of her licentious behaviour, has in the end become a social outcast in the Bottom, entirely indifferent to other people’s emotions. When the two women meet for the last time, Nel still sees Sula as her enemy, but goes to visit Sula because the latter is sick. To Nel, Sula represents shame and the loss of love – loss of her love for Jude and even her love for her children who become a chore for her after the breakup of her

marriage. She is still angry at Sula for not seeming to understand the consequences of her actions:

“Why? I can do it all, why can’t I have it all?”

“You *can’t* do it all. You a woman and a colored woman at that. You can’t act like a man. You can’t be walking around all independent-like, doing whatever you like, taking what you want, leaving what you don’t.”

...

“You say I’m a woman and colored. Ain’t that the same as being a man?”

“I don’t think so and you wouldn’t either if you had children.”

“Then I really would act like what you call a man. Every man I ever knew left his children.” (142-143)

Sula’s refusal to comprehend how she is supposed to act according to the gender codes in society illustrates the severity of the conflict between her and Nel, a conflict created by their different family backgrounds. When Suranyi comments on this conversation she points to how it illustrates how Sula, in her own way, tries to put up “ . . . a rebellion against racism and sexism” (Suranyi, 21), and refers to the episode where Sula cuts off her finger tip as a way to defend herself and Nel against the Irish boys. Suranyi furthermore links this to Freud’s penis envy theory. It is clear that Sula sees herself as independent and identifies herself with masculine rather than feminine behaviour. Her refusal to adopt to the gender codes of society may certainly be viewed as a rebellion against racism and sexism. She refuses to settle and have babies just because other women do, and she refuses not to act independently like any white person would. The passage shows clearly how Nel, on the other hand, is comfortable with and has adapted to her oppressed position as a black woman in society. Consequently, she has to live without a man in her life, and raise her children on her own. When it comes to the incident in which Sula slashes off her finger tip, she does this out of fear of the boys, but also as a way to protect Nel and herself, thus indeed demonstrating how she is willing to put up a fight against male oppression. Linking the episode further to Freud is rather interesting as her finger then symbolizes the penis; by cutting it off Sula shows disrespect for its masculine connotations of dominance. Not only do Sula and Nel view their place in society differently, they also have a different understanding of love:

“And you didn’t love me enough to leave him alone. To let him love me. You had to take him away.”

“What you mean take him away? I didn’t kill him, I just fucked him. If we were such good friends, how come you couldn’t get over it?”

“You laying there in that bed without a dime or a friend to your name having done all the dirt you did in this town and you still expect folks to love you?” (145)

As Sula does not link sex to love, and rather thinks it strange how Nel cannot forgive her for having sex with Jude when they are such good friends, it seems to be impossible for the two women to understand each other. Their opposing views are so deeply rooted within them that their conflict is left unresolved when Sula dies. Despite their closeness when small, their differences as adults are too great: “Sula is emotional and adventurous and Nel is cautious and consistent. Whereas Nel becomes a slave to sexism and racism, Sula becomes a liberated woman” (Sumana, 71). However, seeing Sula’s behaviour exclusively as part of her becoming “a liberated woman” seems rather problematic. On the one hand, she does distance herself from the gender conventions of the community, which may be positive, but, on the other hand, Sula’s actions make people hate her, which in turn, leaves her an outcast in the community. Nel and Sula’s different attitudes towards what may be considered acceptable behaviour are what breaks their relationship. The bond that Sula and Nel once shared was what made them into whole beings: “. . . their friendship was so close, they themselves had difficulty distinguishing one’s thoughts from the other’s” (83). Without each other as grown-ups they are both lost: “Women without female bonds are, in my opinion, the most lost and alienated of human beings” (Demetrakopoulos, 51). It is clear that the loss of their friendship has marked the two. They do, however, seek each other’s company in the end – Nel visits Sula when she hears she is sick, and Sula thinks of Nel when she dies. Sula is excited how death does not hurt and cannot wait to tell Nel about it, suggesting that she is unable to feel anger with Nel for not understanding her in their last meeting. Besides thinking about Nel on her death bed, Sula remembers her mother’s burning, and how she had simply been watching, mesmerized and thrilled: “I didn’t mean anything. I never meant anything” (147). When Rubenstein (132) elaborates on this passage, she suggests how Sula, also at the time of her mother’s death, may have been emotionally thwarted, distancing herself from normal feelings. However, Rubenstein also infers how Sula’s statement can be understood differently;

Her words also suggest another meaning: having misunderstood Hannah’s overheard comment about loving but ‘not liking’ her daughter, Sula has since believed that she never *meant* anything to her own mother. (132)

Sula’s loss of mother-love, or thinking that her mother did not love her, can therefore be viewed as an explanation of Sula’s impeded and stymied emotions, as Rubenstein’s labelling of her as an “emotional orphan” (131) suggests.

The novel clearly demonstrates how inequality between the sexes whether linked to dependency or independency, may function as a destructive agent in the relationships between

men and women, and between women themselves. This is especially true for the friendship between Nel and Sula which is ruined by Sula's inability to follow the gender codes in society. Sula's distorted view of love and sexuality, which is handed down to her through her immediate environment as a child, is the reason for the licentious behaviour that turns her into an outcast who in the end dies alone and poor. It is within the realm of female friendship, first and foremost, that the problems of gender and sexuality can be read. According to Suranyi (21-22) it is apparent that the central concern of the novel is that of black-female bonding. She argues further that this black-female bonding has lesbian connotations, but points out at the same time that Morrison herself disagrees. According to Morrison it is not a lesbian relationship the novel focuses on but rather on friendship between women – which is special. “In the absence of close bonds with one or both parents, a child seeks some other person who will satisfy the need for a deep, abiding emotional attachment” (Rubenstein, 134). What Rubenstein alludes to here is how both Nel and Sula intensely need a friend when small, neither having close bonds with their parents, which is also the case of the friendship between Christine and Heed in *Love*. The ending of the novel is particularly interesting in this respect, where the true closeness of the friendship between Nel and Sula is expressed in Nel's long cry for Sula when she realises that it was not Jude she missed all those years, but Sula, her childhood friend:

A soft ball of fur broke and scattered like dandelion spores in the breeze.

“All that time, all that time, I thought I was missing Jude.” . . . “We was girls together,” she said . . . “O Lord, Sula,” she cried, “girl, girl, girlgirlgirl.”

It was a fine cry – loud and long – but it had no bottom and it had no top, just circles and circles of sorrow. (174)

CHAPTER 3. SEXUALITY AND OPPRESSION IN *THE BLUEST EYE*

African American women have a history of being sexually exploited – in the days of slavery, as well as in their own subsequent communities. Sexual harassment and exploitation are still a problem, and by addressing this issue, Morrison aims, in *The Bluest Eye* (1970), to shed light on what has been and still is a taboo in the African American society. As she herself puts it in her Afterword:

“ . . . this is a terrible story about things one would rather not know anything about.” (*The Bluest Eye*, 213; all subsequent references to this novel will only be given as page numbers in the running text)

The Bluest Eye, Morrison’s first novel, opens with a children’s tale of “the happy family”. The short sentences in the opening passage are repeated over and over again until the story becomes ridiculous, and illustrate how children are brainwashed into believing the tale about the happy family which naturally consist of a sweet mother, a father who is big and strong, and two happy children. The tale is one of make-believe, and also clearly serves as a foreshadowing of danger, as the reading of the repetitive sentences creates a sense of horror. It is in the next passage that the main narrator in the novel is introduced, who looks back at a tragic event of 1941. The information in the first few sentences creates a sense that *The Bluest Eye*, like *Sula*, will have a tragic outcome. The topic of sexual abuse becomes clear when it is revealed that the narrator’s friend, the eleven year old Pecola, will become pregnant with her father’s baby. The narrator here, Claudia, whose name is not given yet, thinks back on how she and her sister try to help Pecola by planting seeds of marigolds in the earth:

We had dropped our seeds in our own little plot of black dirt just as Pecola’s father had dropped his seeds in his own plot of black dirt. Our innocence and faith were no more productive than his lust or despair. What is clear now is that all of that hope, fear, lust, love and grief, nothing remains but Pecola and the unyielding earth. Cholly Breedlove is dead; our innocence too. The seeds shriveled and died; her baby too. There is really nothing more to say – except why. But since *why* is difficult to handle, one must take refuge in *how*. (5-6)

The opening passage illustrates how the story deals with a broken childhood and the loss of innocence due to a father’s “lust or despair”. Morrison herself explains why she decided to share the secret of Pecola so soon: “The intimacy I was aiming for, the intimacy between the reader and the page, could start up immediately because the secret is being shared . . . ” (Morrison: 1989, 21). Thus Morrison implicates the reader in the story from the very beginning, as well as in the “investigation” of the secret. The narrator wants to ask why this

has happened, but realizes at the same time that to ask *why* is too painful and therefore settles for trying to describe *how* things happened. Morrison uses the seeds that the girls are planting as an image of their hope and faith, which is also an allusion to the parable of the seeds from the Bible; when the seeds do not grow it is because of an unyielding earth or a hostile environment. Suranyi points to the metaphorical parallel between the seed of the marigolds and the seeds of Pecola's father: "The metaphor extends to Pecola herself, who was born in a hostile world, in the wrong place at the wrong time" (Suranyi, 14). When Pecola's baby dies – both the baby and the seeds are images of innocence – the novel suggests that the social environment in which the girls live is barren, unwelcoming and destructive.

The Bluest Eye is the story of two sisters, and particularly of Pecola who thinks that if she only had blue eyes, people would be nice to her. The story deals with the effects of low self-esteem, violence, drinking, poverty, abuse, incest, pedophilia and shame, which can all be linked, in one way or another, to oppression. The blacks are oppressed by the white society, the children suffer different kinds of oppression and lack of love from their parents, and in turn the children oppress one another. The story of the three girls illustrates how children who live in an environment of subjugation are affected and marked for life. The unjust and most damaging exercise of power in this community, however, is chiefly carried out by men who express their authority through their sexuality, and often in the most degrading manner – the victims being women and children. The thwarted sexuality that is dealt with here may be seen as an expression of the abuse of power, and this degrading and oppressive sexuality is what in the end ruins the life of Pecola. When the novel reveals the stories behind broken childhoods, and shows that the sins of the fathers – and mothers – will haunt their children, it attempts to answer *why* by explaining *how*.

In *The Bluest Eye* Morrison uses the oppressors' perverted sexuality to illustrate the oppression in the society on a number of different levels, and she portrays the oppressed as well as the oppressors. She also reveals how the characters who are subjected to oppression often end up as oppressors themselves. The characters' sexuality thus serves as a symptom of the environment that the characters have been subjected to.

When the nine-year-old Claudia introduces herself and her surroundings, she comes forth as an observant, strong, but angry girl who would like to spank the rich, white girl next door, Rosemary Villanucci, when she and her sister Frieda sees her eating bread in a 1939 Buick.

The car and the bread are images of wealth and function as stark contrasts to Claudia's life living in a chilly, old house. The family's poverty is emphasised by the narrator telling how she and her sister have to pick up coal along the railroad tracks in order to help keeping the house warm. Not only is the house described as cold, but the adults around them are for the most portrayed as dismissive and uncaring.

Claudia hates Shirley Temple, the popular child actress of the time, with her sparkling blue eyes and golden locks of hair, but whom her sister Frieda and Pecola, along with everybody else, adore. Claudia also hates the white baby dolls the adults give her, expecting her to love them and play with them. The adults are outraged when Claudia dismembers and destroys the dolls:

How strong was their outrage. Tears threatened to erase the aloofness of their authority. The emotion of years of unfulfilled longing preened in their voices. I did not know why I destroyed those dolls. But I did know that nobody ever asked me what I wanted for Christmas. (21)

The passage illustrates how the adults are oblivious to Claudia's needs, and expect her to have the same desire for a white baby doll as they themselves had when they were children. The white, blue-eyed doll, together with Shirley Temple, represent the oppressive society of whites, whose norms of beauty have become the norms also in the black society:

Measured against white standards of skin color and physical beauty, the black female's options, as depicted in Morrison's first novel, are accommodation, misery, or degradation, if not all three. Unless they are, like Claudia MacTeer, endowed with enough inner strength to believe in themselves . . . (Rubenstein, 129)

Claudia has this kind of inner strength and she opposes these norms not only by destroying the dolls, but also by wanting to hurt white little girls who are given much more attention than she is. Claudia's environment of poverty and oppression makes her hate not only the white dolls, but also white little girls and everything they represent. However, Claudia is not ultimately destroyed by the environment as there are some traces of love around her. She remembers her mother's hands in the night when she is sick: ". . . somebody with hands who does not want me to die" (12). Claudia does to a certain extent feel loved, which is also illustrated by her fond memories of how she would sit in her Big Mama's kitchen and listen to her Big Papa playing the violin.

Claudia remains healthy and sane and is not victimized like Pecola, as she uses her anger to fight back: “Claudia, who survives this story, has the attitude that enables her survival” (Holloway, 41). When she and her sister Frieda are introduced to an oppressive male sexuality it clearly has a negative impact on them, but it fails to break them. The arrival of Mr. Henry, a roomer, is memorable to Claudia and Frieda for a number of reasons. First, he smells and looks nice. Secondly, he talks to the girls and makes them laugh when calling them Greta Garbo and Ginger Rogers. He also puts up a show of a disappearing coin which the girls search for on his body. The girls’ parents are even amused by the performance:

Daddy was smiling, and Mama’s eyes went soft as they followed our hands wandering over Mr. Henry’s body. We loved him. Even after what came later, there was no bitterness in our memory of him. (16)

The passage illustrates how their first meeting with Mr. Henry and his disappearing coin is a happy one, but at the same time the narrator’s comment about what is to come later, serves as a foreshadowing of something negative which is connected to the man. When Mr. Henry is mentioned the second time, we become aware of that the girls know about his dirty pictures in a scene when they are bored and discussing what to do: “‘You want to go up to Mr. Henry’s room and look at his girlie magazines?’ Frieda made an ugly face. She didn’t like to look at dirty pictures” (26). Frieda, being older than Claudia, is clearly much more mature than her sister. Claudia actually seems not to mind looking at these pictures, as it is suggested that this is something they have done before, and also suggesting that the girls do not connect any danger with the pictures, only a dislike on Frieda’s part. The scene suggests that pornography is an integral part of the environment in which the girls grow up, to the extent that even children are accustomed to it.

Another passage in which the true character of Mr. Henry is revealed is when the girls come home and find Mr. Henry at home, seemingly alone. He sends the girls out for some ice cream, but when coming home sooner than expected, they are surprised to see Mr. Henry and two women through the living room window:

We knew immediately who they were, and our flesh crawled. One was China, and the other was called the Maginot Line. The back of my neck itched. These were the fancy women of the maroon nail polish that Mama and Big Mama hated. And in our house. (77)

The girls know who the women are, having heard terrible rumours about them. When Claudia sees Mr. Henry licking one of the women’s fingers, she thinks of the girlie magazines that

they have seen in his room, leaving her with a strange feeling: “A cold wind blew somewhere in me, lifting little leaves of terror and obscure longing” (77). Claudia’s reaction is a mixture of fear and a strange pleasure. In contrast, when entering the living room after the prostitutes have left, and not having the safety of the window between them, Claudia is left uncomfortable by merely watching Mr. Henry’s lips when he is about to drink from a bottle. The way Mr. Henry lies about the women, explaining to the girls that his visitors are members of his Bible class, illustrates how he cannot be trusted, and certainly not when it comes to sexuality. The lies and Claudia’s uncomfortable feeling may also serve as a foreshadowing of his indecent approach to Frieda some time later:

“He . . . *picked* at me.”
“Picked at you? You mean like Soaphead Church?”
“Sort of.”
“He showed his privates at you?”
“Noooo. He touched me.” (99)

When Frieda tells Claudia how Mr. Henry has touched her breasts, Claudia is most interested in hearing what it felt like, and annoyed for not being present when it happened. The fact that Frieda runs out of the house to her parents when Mr. Henry has touched her, suggests that she knows that what Mr. Henry has done is wrong. However, it seems not to be the touching alone, but rather the commotion that follows that makes Frieda cry; the screaming of her parents, and her mother’s screaming when a Mrs. Dunion tells her mother that she should have Frieda checked, as she could be ruined. None of the girls fully understands what that means, except that they know that the Maginot Line is ruined. The incident illustrates how the girls are subjected to exploitation, although not fully understanding how. However, the way their father reacts to Mr. Henry, shooting at him and chasing him away from the house, is an act of protection on the father’s part, and it is this reaction from their parents that saves them. Their parents’ behaviour here may be contrasted with the indifference and neglect that Pecola’s parents show their daughter, which also serves as an example of how crucial the home environment is for the children’s lives later.

The girls’ conversation also reveals their familiarity with a character named Soaphead Church, a freak in their society known to the girls for showing his privates to people. He is only mentioned in one sentence, but his significance in the story is foreshadowed here, and in the end he is the one who will seal Pecola’s fate of madness by making her believe that he has given her blue eyes.

When Pecola is introduced in the story she is referred to as a “case” by Claudia’s mother. Referring to a child as a case that has been dropped into her lap shows how Pecola, the poor girl whose father is serving time for having burnt down their home, has been reduced to a nameless thing. Claudia and Frieda’s mother is angry at Pecola for drinking all the milk, assuming she has done so out of greediness, and starts scolding the girls, so as to not direct her anger only at Pecola. The mother’s ranting over the three quarts of milk illustrates how the family is struggling to make ends meet:

“ . . . As if I don’t have trouble enough trying to feed my own and keep out the poorhouse, now I got something else in here that’s just going to *drink* me on in there. . . . Don’t *nobody* need *three* quarts of milk. Henry *Ford* don’t need three quarts of milk. That’s just downright *sinful*.” (24-25)

The anger that the mother displays here, verbally lashing out at the girls, illustrates her own fears of becoming poor, her anger at society, and her indignation with Pecola’s father for not even checking whether his daughter is dead or alive after the fire. The girls never really intend emptying the milk however, they simply want to please Pecola as they know how she likes to see the face of Shirley Temple on the cup she is drinking from. Also, the fact that Pecola is emptying the milk is rather interesting, as milk may be used in literature to connote fertility, and consequently serves as a foreshadowing of what is to come later.

The girls try to make Pecola’s stay as nice as possible to prevent her from feeling “outdoors”. The narrator makes a point of Pecola being outdoors, meaning that she has no shelter, no home. The sisters own situation makes them nonetheless able to empathize with her: “Being a minority in both caste and class, we moved about anyway on the hem of life, struggling to consolidate our weaknesses and hang on . . .” (17). The narrator’s comment on their place in society specifically ties the sisters to Pecola, and the girls’ knowledge of Pecola’s father’s behaviour creates a special consideration and care in the girls. This is illustrated by the girls letting Pecola sleep between them in their bed. The three girls have fun together, and the sisters even stop fighting. This ability of love and care that the girls display towards Pecola serves as an example of how their parents have managed to instil compassion for other people in them. The girls also dislike being oppressed: “When we discovered that she clearly did not want to dominate us, we liked her” (19). They try their best to make Pecola’s stay a good one and try to help her when she is getting her period:

A brownish-red stain discolored the back of her dress. She kept whinnying, standing with her legs far apart.
Frieda said, "Oh. Lordy! I know. I know what that is!" (27)

When the mother is alarmed by Rosemary that the girls are outside "playing nasty", she first becomes really angry. However, when she understands that Pecola has started menstruating, she immediately changes and sets out to help her getting cleaned up. It is interesting that the mother, who lashed out at Pecola when she had emptied the milk, now feels an almost tender sympathy for the girl. This demonstrates that the mother in fact has compassion for somebody who needs her help.

The scene in which Pecola gets her period represents a combination of several interesting passages. First, the girls talk about Mr. Henry's dirty pictures, introducing the motifs of both sexuality and oppression. Then they hear the mother's soliloquy in the kitchen: "But I ain't feeding no elephants" (27), where the use of the word elephant may connote a pregnant woman. The image of an elephant may of course simply mean somebody big who needs a lot of food, but considering that it is the milk that makes the mother think of an elephant, it is tempting to connote elephant to pregnancy. At the same time, Pecola starts to bleed, which is a sign that she is in fact able to become pregnant. Furthermore, when the girls try to help her, they are accused of "playing nasty", implying that this is a sexual game. Also, the fact that they aim to bury Pecola's bloody pants, is illustrative of an oppressive society that instills shame about a most natural part of a woman's life. The sequence ends with the three girls lying in bed discussing babies and love:

"Is it true that I can have a baby now?"

"Sure," said Frieda drowsily. "Sure you can."

"But . . . how?" Her voice was hollow with wonder.

"Oh," said Frieda, "somebody has to love you."

"Oh." . . .

Then Pecola asked a question that had never entered my mind. "How do you do that? I mean, how do you get somebody to love you?" But Frieda was asleep. And I didn't know. (32)

All the mentioned elements of this sequence are a foreshadowing of what is to come: sexual abuse, shame, and at the end Pecola's pregnancy. The discussion which closes this sequence also demonstrates the girls' ignorance when it comes to adult matters. Finally, Pecola's ignorance is underlined when she asks how one gets somebody to love you. It is interesting to note how Frieda's assumption that love is a requirement for becoming pregnant illustrates the

sisters' background. Frieda's notion that love is necessary to get a baby is beautiful, but sadly for Pecola this is wrong: Sexuality is all it takes.

Whereas Claudia fights back any oppression, directing her anger at her white dolls and white girls, the many interlocking stories around Pecola illustrate how she silently accepts her fate of shame and oppression. Her being bullied at school is just one example: "She was the only member of her class who sat alone at a double desk" (45). Pecola is either harassed or ignored by the other children, and overlooked by her teachers. When the other kids tease her, she does not fight back, but submits to the feeling of worthlessness:

If she looked different, beautiful, maybe Cholly would be different, and Mrs. Breedlove too. Maybe they'd say, "Why, look at pretty-eyed Pecola. We mustn't do bad things in front of those pretty eyes." (46)

Pecola believes that it is her not being beautiful that causes her parents to behave badly. The same goes for other people she meets; it is as if she expects them to dislike her for her ugliness and her blackness. "Pecola's yearning for blue eyes – the white American standard of beauty – is an external manifestation of the internal need to be loved and accepted by the white community" (Sumana, 52). The fact that Pecola both anticipates and experiences such a distinct dislike from others may be due to her low self-esteem. This is demonstrated when she buys sweets in a shop:

But she has seen the interest, disgust, even anger in grown male eyes. . . . She has seen it lurking in the eyes of all white people. So. The distaste must be for her, her blackness. . . . She holds the money toward him. He hesitates, not wanting to touch her hand. (49)

Suranyi argues (12) that Pecola's encounter with Mr. Yakobowski, who won't touch her hand, confirms to her her own insignificance and invisibility in the community: "One should not, however, fail to note that Pecola suffers not only because of her race but also because of her gender. In other words, she suffers both as a black and a female" (Sumana, 60). Ryan also argues how Pecola's presence in the community is that of invisibility, reflected by Mr. Yakobowski's conduct when pointing to how his indifference to her resembles that of "the white male gaze" (153). Anger and shame are what she is left with after the meeting with Mr. Yakobowski. Her attempt to feel anger does not last, even if the feeling comforts her, and she cheers herself up by eating the Mary Jane candy she has bought, wrapped in paper picturing a smiling, blond and blue-eyed little face. "Three pennies had brought her nine lovely orgasms

with Mary Jane” (50). Using the word “orgasms” as an image of Pecola’s experience of complete pleasure when simply eating the candy, is ironic in its play on sexuality.

Another incident which demonstrates Pecola’s inability to fight back against oppression is when Claudia and Frieda, along with the light-skinned girl Maureen, find her being bullied by a group of boys. The boys tease her for being black and shout at her that her dad sleeps naked:

They had extemporized a verse made up of two insults about matters over which the victim had no control: the color of her skin and speculations on the sleeping habits of an adult, wildly fitting in its incoherence. That they themselves were black, or that their own father had similarly relaxed habits was irrelevant. It was their contempt for their own blackness that gave the first insult its teeth. (65)

The adult Claudia, who is the narrator of this passage, reasons how the boys’ self-hatred, due to their blackness, is handed down to them by society, which they in turn use to suppress someone even more vulnerable than themselves. The girls watch the frightening game until Frieda breaks the circle of bullying boys and rescues the crying Pecola. When Claudia observes her sister’s actions, she sees her mother’s eyes in Frieda, a comment which implies that their mother has a sense of justice that Frieda has inherited. The fact that Pecola is not able to stand up for herself explains how she becomes a victim, not only of the boys, but also of her parents’ neglect.

Later in the same sequence, after Maureen has ingratiated herself with Pecola and bought her ice cream, she starts asking Pecola whether she has really seen a naked man:

Pecola blinked, then looked away. “No. Where would I see a naked man?”
“I don’t know. I just asked.”
“I wouldn’t even look at him, even if I did see him. That’s dirty. Who wants to see a naked man?” Pecola was agitated. “Nobody’s father would be naked in front of his own daughter. Not unless he was dirty too.”
“I didn’t say ‘father.’ I just said ‘a naked man.’”
“Well . . .”
“How come you said ‘father’?” Maureen wanted to know. (71)

Maureen obviously reintroduces the subject that the boys had brought up when bullying Pecola. She appears to have bought Pecola the ice-cream in order to be able to investigate the topic further. Here Claudia breaks in and defends Pecola, not only due to Maureen’s suggestive insult, but also due to Maureen’s failure to buy the sisters any ice-cream. More importantly, Claudia does not want her remembrance of their own father’s nakedness, which she refers to as “friendly-like” (72), turn into a shameful memory. Claudia’s anger and

motivation display a healthy attitude towards nakedness, and she guards her own integrity by defending Pecola against Maureen's interrogation. When the fight between the girls does not stop and it becomes apparent that Pecola has seen her daddy naked, and Maureen denigrates him by calling him black, Claudia attempts another approach to shut her up: "'You think you so cute!' 'I *am* cute! And you ugly! Black and ugly black e mos. I *am* cute!'" (73). The fight turns from a dispute about whether Pecola has seen her father naked, into a fight between the girls about race and beauty. By linking nakedness to Pecola's black father, Maureen manages to produce a double degradation – that of race as well as sexuality. Again, Claudia's observations of Pecola here illustrate very well how the incident feeds Pecola's suppressed being:

Her pain antagonized me. I wanted to open her up, crisp her edges, ram a stick down that hunched and curving spine, force her to stand erect and spit the misery out on the streets. But she held it where it could lap up into her eyes. (73-74)

Pecola seems to take to heart the insults hurled at her, as if she had no choice in the matter. "Pecola is possibly the most pitiful victim in all of Morrison's fiction" (Holloway, 41). Pecola is so engulfed in her own pitiful situation that she is unable to notice the strong defence of her that Frieda and Claudia's actions display.

Another example portraying Pecola as a victim is connected with Louis Junior and his mother, Geraldine, whose own suppressed feelings have made her unable to love her son Junior, who in turn becomes one of Pecola's offenders and oppressors. Geraldine is the kind of woman who has devoted herself to getting an education and marrying someone who can provide her with a home, which she will run with orderliness and a firm hand, and who thinks beauty is synonymous with pale skin and straight hair. She does not consort with other blacks, nor does she want her son Louis Junior to do so, thus setting both herself and her son apart from the rest of the black community. She has traded her black identity and her soul away for a superficial life of white middle-class values, denying her own background:

They are as sweet and plain as butter-cake. . . . They wash themselves with orange-colored Lifebuoy soap, dust themselves with Cashmere Bouquet talc, clean their teeth with salt . . . They straighten their hair with Dixie Peach, and part it on the side. . . . They do not drink, smoke, or swear, and they still call sex "nookey." . . . They . . . learn how to do the white man's work with refinement . . . Here they learn the rest of the lesson begun in those soft houses with porch swings and pots of bleeding heart: how to behave. The careful development of thrift, patience, high morals, and good manners. In short, how to get rid of the funkiness. The dreadful funkiness of passion, the funkiness of nature, the funkiness of a wide range of human emotions. (82-83)

Geraldine and the women like her have been subjected to oppression from the white society, in which the role prescribed to blacks is that of servitude and subordination to the whites. These women seem to have adopted the same norms of beauty as the whites, such as making their hair straight. Their own cultural inclinations are gone as they have learnt how to behave “properly”. These codes of behaviour represent white, middle class America, and appearances and climbing the social ladder matter more to these women than being true to their own black selves – making them into cultural orphans. The resultant suppression of character also includes the suppression of sexuality. Consequently, Geraldine cannot enjoy sex; she only lifts her nightgown to the navel when having sex with her husband, and regards the whole sexual act as unnecessary, worrying only about her hair and his sweat:

While he moves inside her, she will wonder why they didn't put the necessary but private parts of the body in some more convenient place – like the armpit, for example, or the palm of the hand. . . . When she senses some spasm about to grip him, she will . . . pretend she is having an orgasm. She might wonder again, for the six hundredth time, what it would be like to have *that* feeling while her husband's penis is inside her. (84-85)

Geraldine has only come close to experiencing orgasm when walking down the street, when her sanitary napkin has slipped out of its place – and when her cat curls into her lap:

She will fondle that soft hill of hair and let the warmth of the animal's body seep over and into the deeply private areas of her lap. . . . she opens her legs just a little, and the two of them will be still together . . . until four o'clock, when the intruder comes home . . . (85-86)

Geraldine has feelings, and a need for closeness, but is only able to share this with her cat, rather than her husband and son. Her behaviour is inhibited and unnatural, as for instance during intercourse when she does not sweat from her armpits or between her thighs. She represses her physical self as well as her emotions for her family, and denies her son the love he deserves, indulging only in his material needs. She teaches her son the difference between black people and coloured people:

He . . . tried to get kids to stick around as long as possible. White kids; his mother did not like him to play with niggers. She had explained to him the difference between colored people and niggers. They were easily identifiable. Colored people were neat and quiet; niggers were dirty and loud. (86-87)

Failing to identify with her own ethnicity, Geraldine regards black people the same way as whites do, and this attitude is adopted by her son. Also, as her life is consumed by making her

home her universe and limited to taking care of the material needs of her husband and son, she does not tend to the emotional needs of any of them, nor her own. Her repressed sexuality is a case in point. Geraldine is an illustration of how women of all classes and races may experience the same sort of repression, where the needs of others are more important than their own. In other words, the gender roles in society cross class borders as well as racial borders. Junior's mother's life and sexuality are crippled by her hate towards her own race, and she hands down her limitations and hatefulness to her son. When not being allowed by his mother to play rough with the black boys, Junior takes to tormenting the cat which his mother loves, and bullying girls. When he sees Pecola pass through the playground all by herself, he lures her to his house where he says they have kittens. When Junior throws the cat in Pecola's face and tries to hold her prisoner, he is taking his hatred for his mother out on both the cat and Pecola. And when Geraldine comes home and finds the cat lifeless on a radiator, Junior lies to his mother by telling her that Pecola has killed the cat. The thoughts that come to Geraldine when looking at Pecola demonstrates how she views people of her own race:

She looked at Pecola. . . . She had seen this little girl all of her life. . . . They were everywhere. They slept six in a bed, all their pee mixing together in the night as they wet their beds each in his own candy-and-potato-chip dream. . . . They sat in little rows on street curbs, crowded into pews at church, taking space from the nice, neat, colored children . . . Grass wouldn't grow where they lived. . . . "Get out," she said, her voice quiet. "You nasty little black bitch. Get out of my house."
(91-92)

This passage shows the resentment and disgust which women like Geraldine have for the poor and less fortunate members of their race, an attitude which is shared by the white society. "Thus, Pecola Breedlove in the novel is oppressed not only racially, but also sexually and on the basis of class distinction" (Sumana, 64). Geraldine sets herself above common blacks, and having succumbed to the oppression from the white society herself, she hands down this oppressive attitude to her son Junior, who in turn oppresses Pecola and other girls who are weaker than himself.

The only places where Pecola feels comfortable are in Claudia and Frieda's house and in the apartment of the whores, who live upstairs in the same house as the Breedloves: "China, Poland, and Miss Marie. Pecola loved them, visited them, and ran their errands. They, in turn, did not despise her" (50-51). Pecola knows the women by their names, and does not refer to them by using the degrading labels like the rest of the community do. Marie even uses

different nicknames for Pecola, illustrating how she cares for the girl. It is also clear why Pecola loves them:

All three women laughed. Marie threw back her head. From deep inside, her laughter came like the sound of many rivers, freely, deeply, muddily, heading for the room of an open sea. China giggled spastically. Each gasp seemed to be yanked out of her by an unseen hard jerking an unseen string. Poland, who seldom spoke unless she was drunk, laughed without sound. When she was sober she hummed mostly or chanted blues songs, of which she knew many. (52-53)

These “fallen women” serve as a sharp contrast to Geraldine and to Pecola’s own mother as they actually take note of Pecola, they laugh in her presence, and they even answer her questions about love. “The town whores were the only ones who did not ‘despise’ Pecola” (Holloway, 44). As Samuels and Hudson-Weems put it,

They are self-employed people who control their business; they are independent and self-reliant. Though no longer young, they do not appear squandered or devastated. They are social pariahs, yet they are not devoid of self-confidence. (20)

The portrayal of the women as independent and sexually confident seems to suggest that their occupation have, in some paradoxical sense, liberated them from the oppressive norms of society. In fact, they oppress their customers instead of being oppressed women themselves: “... these women hated men, all men, without shame, apology, or discrimination” (56). They view the men as weak, and when given a chance, they cheat them. Nor do they have any respect for what they call the “sugar-coated whores” (56), the women who deceive their husbands. In contrast to these women, the prostitutes do not pretend to be anything they are not: “They were whores in whores’ clothing, whores who had never been young and had no word for innocence. With Pecola they were as free as they were with each other” (57).

Aware of being outcasts in society, the women perhaps recognize how Pecola is an outcast too, and feel no need to put her down. These grown women are able to stand up for themselves, whereas the child Pecola is not. Prostitution must generally be said to demonstrate the derogatory position of females in society, which is linked to the conventional gender roles, but in the world of the novel the women are paradoxically portrayed as powerful and with self-worth. These women are even “ . . . capable of giving love to Pecola, whose quest for it elsewhere is futile” (Suranyi, 17). It is also worth noting that a similar positive depiction of prostitutes is found in both *Sula* and in *Love*. To Pecola, the three women are intriguing: “Pecola looked and looked at the women. Were they real? Marie belched, softly,

purringly, lovingly” (58). These three ladies are the only adults in Pecola’s life who treat her decently.

Pecola’s parents, on the other hand, who are the most closely related to Pecola, do not give her the love she needs:

Cholly Breedlove, then a renting black, having put his family outdoors, had catapulted himself beyond the reaches of human consideration. He had joined the animals; was, indeed, an old dog, a snake, a ratty nigger. Mrs. Breedlove was staying with the woman she worked for; the boy, Sammy, was with some other family; and Pecola was staying with us. Cholly was in jail. (18)

This is how Pecola’s family is introduced by Claudia, the narrator in the first chapter, when Pecola is taken into the care of Claudia and Frieda’s parents. Later, we learn from an omniscient narrator who portrays the oppression of Pecola and explains her fate, that it is the adults’ conduct that is the reason for Pecola’s miserable childhood:

Except for the father, Cholly, whose ugliness (the result of despair, dissipation, and violence directed toward petty things and weak people) was behaviour, the rest of the family – Mrs. Breedlove, Sammy Breedlove, and Pecola Breedlove – wore their ugliness, put it on, so to speak, although it did not belong to them. (38)

Cholly’s ugliness is linked to his behaviour and his character, and consequently the other members of the family adopt this ugliness as if it also belongs to them. Cholly’s desperate and horrid situation is transmitted to the rest of the family, which according to Rubenstein can be seen both literally and in terms of their behaviour:

The Breedlove family’s sense of utter hopelessness and helplessness is externalized in their appearance: both literal and spiritual poverty manifest themselves as ugliness in a world in which beauty is equated with success: poverty is ugly. (127)

Rubenstein goes on to explain how Cholly and Pauline serve as stereotypical caricatures of the poor and destitute. Cholly drinks, and he and Mrs. Breedlove fight with each other, disregarding their kids entirely, which makes Sammy, Pecola’s brother, regularly run away and Pecola hide: “Cholly and Mrs. Breedlove fought each other with a darkly brutal formalism that was paralleled only by their lovemaking” (43). Their hate and violent behaviour towards each other is so infused in their beings that it spills over into their sexuality.

Pecola's parents' brutish and oppressive behaviour towards each other is thus mirrored in their sex-life. Pecola tries to hide and make herself disappear, as she believes these circumstances are inescapable and somehow due to her own ugliness. She prays for those pretty blue eyes which she firmly believes will change her parents' behaviour towards her. The link between the Breedlove's fighting and their lovemaking is illustrated further when Pecola is visiting the women upstairs, wondering what love feels like:

How do grown-ups act when they love each other? Eat fish together? Into her eyes came the picture of Cholly and Mrs. Breedlove in bed. He making sounds as though he were in pain, as though something had him by the throat and wouldn't let go. Terrible as his noises were, they were not nearly as bad as the no noise at all from her mother. It was as though she was not even there. Maybe that was love. Choking sounds and silence. (57)

Trying to connect her observations of her parents having sex, and the way the prostitutes talk and sing about boyfriends, makes Pecola confused. Her father's sounds of lovemaking she finds troubling enough, but she is even more scared by her mother who makes no sound at all. Her parents' love for each other has turned into a power struggle, and in turn they have become dependent on the abuse they give to one another. Mrs. Breedlove needs her husband's drunken and violent behaviour in order to become the martyr who has to suffer, so that Jesus can judge him. She looks down on Cholly, and needs him to keep on being a brute so she can use her own suppressed self to righteously punish and oppress him. In the same manner, Cholly needs Mrs. Breedlove:

No less did Cholly need her. She was one of the few things abhorrent to him that he could touch and therefore hurt. He poured out on her the sum of all his inarticulate fury and aborted desires. Hating her, he could leave himself intact. When he was still very young, Cholly had been surprised in some bushes by two white men while he was newly but earnestly engaged in eliciting sexual pleasure from a country girl. The men had shone a flashlight right on his behind. He had stopped, terrified. They chuckled. The beam of the flashlight did not move. "Go on," they said. "Go on and finish. And, nigger, make it good." . . . he hated, despised, the girl. (42)

This explains how Cholly takes his anger out on Mrs. Breedlove, also in their love-making, which is rooted in despair that goes way back to his childhood, and for which he has no words. Cholly experiences the worst kind of humiliation, being laughed at literally, with his pants down, during the first sexual experience of his youth. This strips him of all his dignity: " "Get on wid it, nigger," said the flashlight one. "Sir?" said Cholly, trying to find a buttonhole. "I said, get on wid it. An' make it good, nigger, make it good" (148). At gunpoint, Cholly and Darlene have to pretend to have sex, which clearly is a kind of rape enforced on both of them.

Not being able to hate the white men, against whom he is powerless, he directs his anger towards Darlene instead, who is the witness of his humiliation by the men. The feeling of being emasculated and rendered impotent in front of the girl he should be able to protect is too much for him. His mortification and his unwillingness to face Darlene make Cholly run away. “From that humiliation, his attitude toward female sexuality is tainted with a mixture of furtiveness, shame, and anger” (Rubenstein, 140). Aggravated by subsequent experiences of humiliation and violence, such as his experience of being rejected by his father, his loss of self-esteem and compassion finally makes Cholly into an oppressor himself.

Neither is Mrs. Breedlove’s childhood a happy one. The fact that she is completely ignored as a child and left to herself, she explains to be the result of a deformed foot from an injury when she was very little:

Slight as it was, this deformity explained for her many things that would have been otherwise incomprehensible: why she alone of all the children had no nickname; why there were no funny jokes and anecdotes about funny things she had done . . . why nobody teased her . . . Her general feeling of separateness and unworthiness she blamed on her foot. (110-111)

Yet it is her deformed foot that catches the attention of young Cholly when they first meet. Pauline experiences for the first time what it is like to be looked after and cared for, but their love and Pauline’s optimistic attitude to the future seem to change when she loses her front tooth. Also, her loneliness, having settled up north among whites and blacks who were better off than them, makes her more dependent on Cholly. Likewise, Pauline’s attempts to look like the women up north creates a problem, as she has to ask her husband for money in order to buy clothes. As their life more and more evolves around discussions about money, Pauline having a need for clothes to feel good about herself, and Cholly a need for drink, she resorts to taking several jobs. Moreover, she is introduced to the idea of romantic love and physical beauty when going to the movies:

Both originated in envy, thrived in insecurity, and ended in disillusion. In equating physical beauty with virtue, she stripped her mind, bound it, and collected self-contempt by the heap. She forgot lust and simple caring for. She regarded love as possessive mating, and romance as the goal of the spirit. It would be for her a well-spring from which she would draw the most destructive emotions, deceiving the lover and seeking to imprison the beloved, curtailing freedom in every way. (122)

Losing her front tooth becomes the ultimate confirmation that she neither has the kind of beauty the women in the movies have, nor a husband like the caring white husbands portrayed

in them, thus adding further failure and discontent to her already lack of self-worth. Her discontent with herself and her family makes her take out her anger on Cholly as well as her children. She only seems happy when she is working for the white family where she is surrounded by all the beautiful things she is missing in her own life, and which she has seen in the movies. As Suranyi notes,

In the Bluest Eye, the black mother hates her own child as a reminder of her hopeless situation and adores the young child of the white family she works for. Morrison clearly condemns a racist culture for its worship of white standards of beauty . . . (13)

Pauline adores the white little girl in this family, and gives her the love and affection she denies her own children. The white family is happy with her too. Not having had a nickname as a child, she finally gets one as the family calls her Polly, which adds to her sense of belonging to the white culture. To them she is the ideal servant, keeping everything in its place, caring about the little girl who lives there, whereas she ignores her own: “Into her son she beat a loud desire to run away, and into her daughter she beat fear of growing up, fear of other people, fear of life” (128). The discontent and anger which Pecola’s parents feel about their own lives, clearly ruins Pecola’s childhood. The childhoods of Cholly and Pauline have not added to their understanding of their children’s needs, in spite of, or perhaps because of, the fact that both Pauline and Cholly are neglected and abused kids themselves: “The Breedloves despise themselves because they believe in their own unworthiness which is translated into ugliness for the women of that family” (Sumana, 51). This is also shown in Pecola’s thoughts about how things would be different if she only had blue eyes. The distorted perception of love and care that Cholly displays when he rapes Pecola, and which stems from his own childhood experiences of unworthiness, illustrates how her parents’ attitudes to love and sexuality have become perverted into abuse:

She was washing dishes. Her small back hunched over the sink. Cholly saw her dimly and could not tell what he saw or what he felt. Then he became aware that he was uncomfortable; next he felt the discomfort dissolve into pleasure. The sequence of his emotions was revulsion, guilt, pity, then love. (161)

Cholly senses how unhappy and miserable Pecola is, and he becomes angry at her for not being happy, reading her “helpless” and “whipped” posture as an accusation against himself. When he sees his daughter’s haunted and loving eyes he becomes furious, but when she scratches the back of her calf with a toe he is reminded of Pauline’s gesture when he first saw her, and he is filled with a softness that turns into a sexual arousal: “He wanted to fuck her –

tenderly. But the tenderness would not hold” (162-163). Cholly’s chaotic emotions make him rape his own daughter: “Cholly’s rape of Pecola is, thus, the distortion of his love for Pecola” (Sumana, 56). He is not able to distinguish between parental love and sexual lust. Nor is he able to control the mixed feelings of anger and love that he feels for his daughter:

But the aspect of married life that dumbfounded him and rendered him totally disfunctional was the appearance of children. Having no idea of how to raise children, and having never watched any parent raise himself, he could not even comprehend what such a relationship should be. Had he not been alone in the world since he was thirteen . . . he might have felt a stable connection between himself and the children. As it was, he reacted to them, and his reactions were based on what he felt at the moment. (160-161)

Consequently, Cholly, the abused child, turns into the abusive parent, whose daughter, at a particularly bad moment, becomes victim to his confused sensations. His thwarted love, mixed with sick anger, makes him sexually molest her, wanting to hurt her at the same time as he wants to care for her. His confused emotions also make him cover her with a blanket after the rape, illustrating how he cares for her in his own twisted way, but obviously not in a way that is enough to prevent him from raping her in the first place. Being abused by both parents, by Cholly raping her and her mother not believing her, Pecola becomes “a victim of trauma who would be unable or unwilling to tell the story of her rape” (Suranyi, 15), which is why the rape is not related by Pecola, but: “. . . related through the eyes of the abuser” (15). To observe the incident of the rape here through the eyes of Cholly not only states how Pecola’s traumatic experiences have rendered her voiceless, but also how Cholly, the rapist, becomes victim to his own emotionally twisted self. As Samuels and Hudson-Weems put it, “. . . he above all remains incapable of providing the fertile parental soil a child needs to grow and develop a positive sense of self. He is without role models” (14).

When Pecola becomes pregnant she is ostracised by society and has to quit school. Adults only talk of the shamefulness of it: how Cholly is the father of the baby, why she did not put up a fight, and how the baby will not live. This shows how ignorant, uncaring and even hostile the community around Pecola is, particularly when it comes to a subject like sexual exploitation: “She is abused by her own mother and father, denied or made invisible by other adults, but is also the target of ridicule from other children who constantly pick on her” (15). The only ones who seem to care about and feel sorry for Pecola, are Claudia and Frieda. The girls even make the sacrificial act of planting seeds in the ground which, in turn, they believe, if they grow, will mean that Pecola’s baby will live. Pecola herself, having been pushed to the

edge in her despair, becomes more and more obsessed with getting the blue eyes which she has been praying for so long. Ultimately her obsession makes her turn to Soaphead, a victim of his own background himself, who is the town's famous fortune teller and reader of dreams, but also notorious for being a pedophile:

He could have been an active homosexual but lacked the courage. Bestiality did not occur to him, and sodomy was out of the question, for he did not experience sustained erections . . . the one thing that disgusted him more than entering and caressing a woman was caressing and being caressed by a man. . . . His attentions therefore gradually settled on those humans whose bodies were least offensive – children. . . . he further limited his interests to little girls. They were usually manageable and frequently seductive. (166)

Soaphead's distaste for closeness to other adults and for people in general make him direct his sexual cravings towards children, who are clean and easy to manipulate. To quote Rubenstein: “. . . Soaphead Church is a pedophile; little girls are the only sexual objects who do not threaten his fragile and sterile masculinity” (140). His failed marriage and the beatings of his father have rendered him emasculated. This is emphasised by the information about how he is unable to hold an erection. Nor is he able to hold a regular job, but when he comes to Lorain, Ohio, the women there – as he does not show any interest for them – find his celibacy supernatural and he is given an almost divine position in the community: “He became a ‘Reader, Adviser, and Interpreter of Dreams.’ It was a profession that suited him well. . . . and he had numerous opportunities to witness human stupidity . . .” (165). Soaphead feels superior to other people. His celibacy, his diverse but failed academic background, and his family heritage – being one of the British nobility – have set him apart from the common blacks. He looks down on his visitors, belittling their requests about love and money, and considers how he himself would have done a better job than God creating the universe. Furthermore, when he admits that his encounters with girl children are twisted, he reasons that God has also created evil and therefore blames God for his lust, thus justifying his sexual appetite for little girls. He realizes, however, how much of a fraud and a charlatan he is when Pecola comes to see him, asking him to grant her blue eyes:

Here was an ugly little girl asking for beauty. A surge of love and understanding swept through him, but was quickly replaced by anger. Anger that he was powerless to help her. . . . A little black girl who wanted to rise up out of the pit of her blackness and see the world with blue eyes. His outrage grew and felt like power. For the first time he honestly wished he could work miracles. (174)

Soaphead's supernatural abilities are all a sham, but the meeting with Pecola creates in him compassionate feelings for her and her desperate plight. He considers her “pitifully

unattractive” (173) when he first sees her, and truly wishes he can help her when she asks for the blue eyes. His commiseration with her blackness and his anger with his own powerlessness are a tenuous ground for compassion; he ends up manipulating her into killing the dog on his porch. He deceives her, making her believe that God may grant her blue eyes if she makes the sacrificial act of feeding Bob – the old dog whom Soaphead abhors – the poisoned piece of meat which he himself has not got the courage to give him. When Soaphead promises Pecola blue eyes, he knows it to be an act of deception, but one that she will not challenge, as he knows she will now believe she has blue eyes. Soaphead then writes a letter to God where he expresses an anger with Him for not seeing the ugly little girl who has come for blue eyes, as well as justifying his sexual desires for little girls:

Let me tell you now about the breasts of little girls. . . . Do I have to apologize for loving strangers?

But you too are amiss here, Lord. How, why, did you allow it to happen? . . . The love of them – the touch, taste, and feel of them – was not just an easy luxurious human vice; they were, for me, A Thing To Do Instead. Instead of Papa, instead of the Cloth, instead of Velma, and I *chose* not to do without them. (178-179)

These are the words of the man that seals Pecola’s fate, “the reader of dreams” and someone who Pecola puts her trust and faith in. In reality he is a victim of his own childhood and life experiences which have made him into a pedophile and certainly not the wise man Pecola thinks he is, whose counsel could have rescued her. Believing that he has a God-given right to violate little girls, saying that he *chose* to use them, Soaphead constitutes a danger to the society. Despite not touching Pecola physically, he violates her mentally, and in doing so, Soaphead claims to be trying to rectify what God has done wrong. Soaphead’s actions are, according to Rubenstein, more destructive for Pecola than the ones of Cholly Breedlove: “. . . he violates her spiritual innocence as surely as her father abuses her physical innocence” (142). Cholly Breedlove and Soaphead’s actions are both destructive for Pecola, but to say that Soaphead’s is more devastating than her father’s is in my view to go a bit far. After all, had it not been for her father’s loveless behaviour and thwarted and violent sexuality, Pecola would not have been in the state she is when she seeks out Soaphead. Still, what has gone wrong with Pecola as well as Soaphead himself is of course not the result of the actions of God, but the actions of people.

All the grownups around Pecola are in one way or another twisted and sick, except perhaps Claudia’s parents and most certainly the prostitutes who respond to Pecola in a healthy

manner. Mr. Henry, Geraldine, Pauline, Cholly and finally Soaphead are all characters whose sexuality are warped. Thus, the social environment around Pecola is like the unyielding earth where nothing can grow. After Pecola's encounter with Soaphead, she becomes obsessed with watching her own reflection in the mirror, and with discussing her new blue eyes with her imaginary friend; The mirror is significant here as: "She is not *seen* by herself until she hallucinates a self" (Morrison, "Unspeakable Things Unspoken," 21). Pecola is a victim of an oppressive and racist society, of uncaring and oppressive parents (who, when children, were neglected themselves), and of other children (whose bullying of Pecola is a result of their own experiences of being subdued). The story of Pecola explains how and why oppression only creates more oppression. Abuse is depicted as something which is handed down through generations. Getting to know Pecola's as well as her parents' childhood, is vital for the understanding of why Pauline mistreats her and why Cholly rapes his daughter.

In the end the lonely and abused Pecola becomes insane. She is ignored by society, rejected by everybody and left to her own fate. It is finally Soaphead's authority that makes her go insane, as Pecola goes to him as a last resort. It is also ironic that this man, who Pecola sees as an authority, is in fact a child molester. This tragic story portrays a society in which many of the characters have, each in their own distinct manner – due to their own backgrounds – acquired a thwarted sexuality which is the result of dehumanizing social codes and pressures. As Rubenstein puts it, "*The Bluest Eye* is a narrative of both violence and violation . . . Incest and rape become metaphors for both black and white nightmares of inverted love and suffocation of selfhood" (144). The abuse of Pecola has left her with no self – or a fragmented one – due to the subjugation she experiences from a very early age. The oppressive structures of either race, gender or class in society can inflict irreparable harm on the psyche of children – and Pecola is subjected to all of them. Being black in a society of white dominance, a girl living under a gender apartheid, and a poor child in a society of consumer affluence becomes too much for her to bear. Her quest for blue eyes is merely a symbol of her many-faceted oppression. As Sumana notes, "*The Bluest Eye*, thus, makes one of the most powerful attacks on the relationship between western standards of female beauty and the psychological oppression of black women" (50).

In this novel sexuality becomes an indicator of how oppressive and sick a society is. At the same time, sexual oppression is shown to be the most devastating and cruel kind of oppression. Suranyi also makes a point of how Morrison uses narration to make a statement

about the severity and hopelessness of Pecola's situation because of " . . . her awareness that for a child the language needed to describe the traumatic effect of violence and abuse is not available" (Suranyi, 17). Holloway also points to how Morrison here " . . . portrays victims rendered voiceless . . . a victim of incest and violence, Pecola and her identity are gradually annihilated" (163). Pecola is left with no voice of her own, which consequently prevents her from telling anyone of the crimes committed against her. The story, therefore, needed to be narrated by Claudia and an omniscient narrator, who provide a crucial perspective for understanding the crime:

. . . there is a redemption in the fact that this story of incest has been told finally from a female point of view, told so well, and I believe, for the first time in human history in this depth and completeness. There is also an implicitly forgiving attitude in Morrison towards all her characters. (Holloway, 45)

CHAPTER 4. SEXUALITY AND LOVE IN *LOVE*

Like *The Bluest Eye*, *Love* (2003), Morrison's eighth novel, deals with sexual abuse and pedophilia, here specifically in relation to love – or the lack of love.

In addition, *Love* displays some obvious similarities with *Sula*, as it relates the story of a friendship between two girls. Christine and Heed, like Nel and Sula, become close friends when small, and both relationships, however painful, is to last their whole life. Both friendships are ruined when sexuality becomes an issue, but whereas Sula and Nel's friendship turns cold, the relationship between Heed and Christine becomes ridden with jealousy, betrayal and hatred before reconciliation. However, feelings of betrayal may also be said to be part of Nel's feelings towards Sula, and there is also a sense of "reconciliation" in Nel at the very end of the novel. The setting of a strongly patriarchal and sexist society in *Love* serves as a canvas where heterosexual sex as well as pedophilia are played out and become the instruments of the ruination of the two girls' deep love for each other. The many characters in the novel are in one way or another victimized or marked by the patriarch Bill Cosey's authority in the community, even after his death. Furthermore, *Love* can also be said to be a novel about familial love, self-love, and romantic love, but most of all the strong love between two little girls:

If such children find each other before they know their own sex, or which one of them is starving, which well fed; before they know color from no color, kin from stranger, then they have found a mix of surrender and mutiny they can never live without. Heed and Christine found such a one. (Love, 199; all subsequent references to this novel will only be given as page numbers in the running text)

Still, it is perverted love and a sick sexuality that break the unique bond and soil the pure affection between the main characters Christine and Heed, turning their friendship into a feud which is kept alive by the memory of Bill Cosey's betrayal. Bill Cosey's thwarted sexuality and twisted love in his many relationships ruin the lives of Christine and Heed and affect the other characters in the novel in different ways. The novel specifically uses sexuality as a means to reveal and portray the different kinds of love between the characters.

The novel's narrator, referred to as L, is an old woman and a cook who used to work for Bill Cosey for many years, and who intermittently relates the story of the Coseys as well as of the rest of the community. L is the outside observer who makes profound and insightful comments about the other characters and the community. L is clearly the intrusive narrator

whose voice, which visually stands out in the text, being in italics, reflects her views on sexuality and love with reference to the different characters. Her observations and interpretations of the complexity of love and sexuality function as a guide as to how to interpret both story and characters. The role of L being the unobtrusive observer is further underlined when she compares herself to “background music.” Thus she implies that she herself has not had a prominent part in the life of the community, merely watching others’ love affairs and not being included in any herself. Her humming in the background, combined with her direct comments on the characters, is interpretive; like music guides our emotional responses to a scene in a film, she is our guide in *Love*.

Not only is L an observer relating the story of the Coseys’ fall, she is also in part directly involved in the action as she is the one who kills the old man in the end, despite – or perhaps because – that she was most likely his only true friend in life. L’s story is told in retrospect, and as the novel progresses, the history according to L and the different stories of the different characters, which are focalized through their various narrative voices, are revealed through several vantage points both looking back and revealing the action in present time. This is particularly interesting as it reveals different layers and versions of the truth, thus presenting multiple perspectives, particularly on the topics love and sexuality. When L is first introduced she spends her time observing the girls of Maceo’s Cafe Ria discussing boyfriends, thinking back on the people who used to live on Mr. Cosey’s holiday resort along with its visitors. She also makes comments about the changes in society that she has been a witness to:

The women’s legs are spread wide open, so I hum. . . . back in the seventies, when all the magazines started featuring behinds and inner thighs as though that’s all there is to a woman, well, I shut up altogether. Before women agreed to spread in public, there used to be secrets – some to hold, some to tell. . . . I’m background – the movie music that comes along when the sweethearts see each other for the first time, or when the husband is walking the beachfront alone wondering if anybody saw him doing the bad thing he couldn’t help. (3-4)

L’s profound musing over the past and the present, discoursing on how women have fallen to displaying their bodies publicly, suggests that women today have let themselves be reduced to mere sexual objects. The narrator’s viewpoints, like the one in the passage above, thus guide our interpretation of the role of sexuality in the novel.

When she watches a husband walking the beachfront after having done something bad, which may, on the one hand, refer to L remembering back to seeing Bill Cosey sneaking home after

an adulterous affair with Celestial, a prostitute, and on the other hand be a foreshadowing of one of the many secrets which is to be revealed later in the story. In the same passage, L further comments on the secrets that wild women keep, suggesting that sexual abuse is the reason for their promiscuity:

Naturally all of them have a sad story: too much notice, not enough, or the worst kind. . . . Each story has a monster in it who made them tough instead of brave, so they open their legs rather than their hearts where that folded child is tucked. (4-5)

Not receiving enough love or attention may according to L result in the same behaviour in women as sexual abuse does, turning them to licentiousness instead of opening their hearts to reveal their innocent selves and their secrets. Despite the seemingly happy and carefree atmosphere of Cosey's Hotel and Resort on Sooker Bay, which is the famous and pulsating vacation spot for the blacks with money and social status on the East Coast, L hints about the existence of a hidden monster there. When children, Christine and Heed have both suffered from this monster's actions, having either been subjected to or having witnessed "*the worst kind*" of love. Not only are they victims of the actions of such a monster, but they have also both been deprived of healthy parental love. L's voice in the novel functions in part like a voice-over which pretends to or seems to know what has happened and how things have happened, but it is also one that suspensefully reveals the many secrets of Bill Cosey and the other characters.

The topics of sexuality and love, and of sexual abuse and parental neglect, are extended also to include Junior, who consequently becomes a prominent character in the novel. Junior is a young girl whose abusive past and homelessness have driven her to apply for a job as personal assistant with the old Mrs. Cosey. When introduced, she is looking for directions to the house on Monarch Street and on her search she meets Sandler Gibbons, a man in his sixties, who is also the grandfather of Romen and a former friend of the late Bill Cosey. In the brief encounter between Sandler and Junior in the first chapter of the book, sexuality between a young girl and an old man is hinted about. This is clearly a foreshadowing of where some of the novel's main focus lies, the lust of an old man aimed at a young girl. Sandler immediately notices Junior's appearances, which seem to make a strong impression on him:

He remembers the crack of her heels on concrete as she approached; the angle of her hip . . . He remembers the pleasure of her voice . . . Sandler Gibbons scanned her legs and reckoned her knees and thighs were stinging from the cold her tiny skirt exposed them to. Then he marveled at the height of her bootheels, the cut of

her short leather jacket. . . . She looked to him like a sweet child, fine-boned, gently raised but lost. (13-14)

Sandler's description of Junior is interesting as it initially portrays Junior as a rather innocent-looking girl who, despite her choice of clothing worn to signal self-confidence, seems lost. However, her promiscuously short skirt and naked legs that catch Sandler's attention, instil in the reader an image of someone showing off her sexuality. Furthermore, Sandler's remark on the pleasure of her voice gives a clear impression that he likes what he sees, which is emphasised in a later passage where Vida, his wife, teases Sandler about noticing the girl's legs and short skirt. Sandler's comments about the girl clearly illustrate how his response to the girl's sexual being is healthy, which is supported by the notion that his reaction is neither secret nor dirty since Vida teases him about it – he has obviously given a description of the girl to his wife. Thus it may be argued that the innocence that Sandler registers as belonging to Junior, may in fact belong to Sandler himself rather than to the girl. This interpretation is supported by how Junior at the end of the novel turns out to be an uncaring person who is oblivious or at least ignorant of other people's needs – someone totally lacking in empathy for others. However, it is revealed in some passages subsequent to Junior's and Sandler's chance encounter how Junior has affected Sandler, and here his sexual response seems more problematic:

Vida was on her game. He *had* been struck by the girl's legs. In freezing wind, not a goose bump in view – just tight smooth skin with the promise of strong muscle underneath. Dancer's legs: long, unhappy at rest, eager to lift, to spread, to wrap themselves around you. He should be ashamed, he thought, as the chuckle grew into smothered laughter: an over-fifty grandfather faithful and devoted to his wife giggling . . . happy to be arousable by the unexpected sight of young thighs. He knew his gruffness with her had been a reaction to the feelings she stirred and believed she knew it too. (38)

The passage here clearly demonstrates the ambiguity regarding Sandler's innocence. On the one hand Sandler's sexual arousal may be viewed as innocent as he thinks he, a grandfather, ought to be ashamed by it, but as he also seems amused by his reaction, the meeting has made him proud that he is still able to be aroused by a young girl's legs. Although Sandler seems to stand out as very different from Mr. Cosey, he is still marked by the sexist attitudes of society: "Besides Cosey, traits of patriarchal intimidation are to be found in Sandler, who perhaps is the moral referee in the novel" (Sathyaraj and Neelakantan, 3). There is also a suggestion that Junior must have known how he would react to her, or at least, this is what Sandler thinks, further suggesting perhaps how an old man can read much more into an encounter with a

young female than there really is. This is also emphasised later: “. . . the windblown girl who had singled him out . . . looking only at him” (40). Sandler’s notion that the girl has singled him out emphasises the pride he feels when thinking back on the meeting. The meeting between the two characters reveals how sexuality is used to portray the characters. There is no love between the two, and Sandler is clearly the only one who feels a sexual attraction here. But as argued above, Sandler’s thoughts may simply relate how he is experiencing a secret and harmless lust for the girl. The encounter between Sandler and Junior thus demonstrates and situates the topic of sexuality in the novel. Beside L, Sandler seems to be the character that has the most healthy view of sexuality and love (his wife Vida seems far too ready to absolve Mr. Cosey from complicity for what happens). Although Sandler admits, in this passage, to being aroused by the young girl, thus acknowledging the enormous significance sexuality has in our lives, he is honest about his own reactions and his old man’s pride in being sexually aroused. At the same time, however, he reminds himself of the fact that he is a grandfather, and also a faithful and devoted husband. Thus sexuality as a human drive is not denied, but at the same time it is not confused with love. Sandler, like Romen at the raping of the young girl, has a sense of his own humanity.

That Junior’s encounter with Sandler opens the actual story of the novel may also be related to L’s comments earlier about wild women, how they deep down are innocent children. Junior may precisely be one of these wild women, somebody whose innocence (we later discover) has been tucked away, and instead of opening her heart she “opens” her legs, as she shows off her naked legs to Sandler. If this is the case, Junior’s “innocence” is not only a foreshadowing of her promiscuity, but also a comment about her background of abuse. Furthermore, her arrival in the community and in the Cosey women’s house may well seem rather innocent, but she unknowingly becomes the agent who contributes to the conflict between Christine and Heed reaching its head. This act is not in itself what marks her as a cruel character, but her lack of empathy is shown when she leaves the two old ladies to their own fate one night in the abandoned hotel, when they need her help the most. L also observes the newly arrived Junior when visiting Maceo’s Cafe, where she paints a rather crude picture of the girl:

The girl with no underwear – she calls herself Junior – comes in a lot. . . . Boots. Leather. Wild hair. Maceo couldn’t take his eyes off her either . . . her skirt was long this time, but you could see straight through it – a flowery nothing swinging above her boots. All her private parts going public . . . (66)

In this passage Junior does not come forth as innocent, but rather as the promiscuous girl who displays her sexuality openly, perhaps invitingly. According to L's description she may be one of the wild women of the 90s who spread their legs in public. Junior also has a quick tongue, and can't help herself commenting to Theo about his part in a gang-rape: "*I see why you need a posse. Your dick don't work one on one?*" (67). The comment underlines her rather crude character, but she also comes across as someone who dares to speak up against male oppression. L cannot take her eyes off the girl as she reminds her of Celestial, Bill Cosey's prostitute lover, but remarks that the girl cannot match Celestial's style. It is interesting to note how L's comments imply that she recognizes that both are loose women, but Junior's letting her "private parts going public" is contrasted to Celestial's more elegant style of not showing off her private (sexual) life in public. Susana Vega-Gonzales points out an interesting connection between Junior and Celestial in her article "Toni Morrison's *Love* and the Trickster Paradigm":

At first sight, both characters appear linked by a bodily mark . . . If Junior has merged toes, Celestial has a scar on her face which, incidentally, reminds us of Sula's birthmark or Pilate's lack of navel. But the connection L establishes is not coincidental. Apart from their physical marking, both characters share their active sexuality . . . (283)

All the characters mentioned in the passage above are in one way or another viewed as outlaws in society due to their licentious behaviour, which is indicated by their physical quirks that serve as symbols of their position in society. It is fascinating that L indirectly connects the girl to Mr. Cosey, particularly as the old man who has been dead for many years clearly has a profound and bizarre effect on the young Junior:

The face hanging over her new boss's bed must have started it. A handsome man with a G. I. Joe chin and a reassuring smile that pledged endless days of hot, tasty food; kind eyes that promised to hold a girl steady on his shoulder while she robbed apples from the highest branch. (30)

It is in the house on Monarch Street that Junior discovers the portrait of Mr. Cosey, which is to have a profound impact on her. The portrait resembles ". . . the tall, handsome man . . ." (55) – the father that Junior has been looking for all her life, and that seems to have a calming effect on her. She feels protected by the man in the painting that Heed has introduced to her: ". . . 'What you see there is a wonderful man.'" (26). To Junior, who has a dream in which the man in the picture carries her on his shoulders (118), he is the man who will become her lover and substitute father:

The erotic and sinful implications of apples together with the indirect reference to the loaded image of the horse signal Junior's sexually charged vision of Mr. Cosey. On several occasions Junior is described as "riding" her Good Man's shoulders in what can be read as sexual intercourse, if we take into account the phallic connotations of the horse. (Vega-Gonzales, 282)

The man in the portrait represents the protection of a home she feels she will get in the house on Monarch Street, in addition to representing the father that she never had: "As soon as she saw the stranger's portrait she knew she was home" (60). But she also develops a bizarre although imaginary sexual relationship with the late patriarch Bill Cosey, a relationship bearing the resemblance of an incestuous father-daughter affair. Junior not only talks to the picture as if the man in the painting can actually hear her, she even goes as far as wearing the old man's underpants thinking it will turn him on. Not only is she attracted to the young Romen who works for the old ladies, but also ". . . becoming obsessed with the father figure he represents for her and that she lacks" (Vega-Gonzales, 279). In this manner Junior is the last of many women who have been charmed by Bill Cosey, whom she refers to as "her Good Man", and thus she is the last woman to join Cosey's harem of women who want his attention and love.

It is intriguing to note that Cosey even from his grave is able to orchestrate the yearnings of the women and also wield conquistadorial powers over them. For example, though a mere phantom in the novel's present, Cosey succeeds in impressing upon June a flattering image of himself as "Good Man" both through his impressive portrait and Heed's evocative descriptions. This is significant because June neither knew Cosey nor enjoyed any kinship with his family. (Sathyaraj and Neelakantan, 3)

Gallego also points out how the diverse stories of the women in the novel are all centered around ". . . their obsession with the patriarch of the family . . ." (92), which also goes for Junior who has never met the man in real life. Nor is she a member of the family in any way, although the ending of the novel may perhaps suggest that she will become one.

The way her invented character of Mr. Cosey becomes Junior's confidante is particularly interesting as it portrays Junior as both innocent and at the same time as rather perverted: "As if she had known Mr. Cosey for a long time, she talks to him openly, using sometimes a language and acting in a way that verges on incestuous love" (Vega-Gonzales, 281). She talks to him about his marrying Heed at eleven at the same time as she tells him how an old man had tried to force her at Correctional. She even thinks her Good Man would have rescued her: "If you'd been there you'd have killed him" (156). The notion of a "healthy" father-daughter

relationship with the ghost of Mr. Cosey is, however, disturbed when she goes on to tell him about how she has indulged in sexual activities with Romen, in the garage where she believes the old man has observed them together. She also gives praise to Romen for being: “So nice and mean” (157), emphasising how she does not see the contradiction in her characterization of him to her ghost, leaving her personality rather warped. The revelation in a conversation Romen has with his grandfather of how Junior wants him to be rough with her when making love, underlines this interpretation further:

Characteristically, June’s masochism is suggestive of the violence that inheres in patriarchal abstractions and the ruthless power with which they evacuate the dignity and character of women. (Sathyaraj and Neelakantan, 3)

Later when she is on her way to the hotel with Christine she hopes her Good Man is there, and finds him again at the house in Heed’s bedroom: “Even this special kind of ‘love-affair’ Junior entertains with Mr. Cosey ends up in unexpected betrayal (Vega-Gonzales, 282). Junior is, like the other women around Mr. Cosey, left to herself in the end. Even if she cannot feel his presence any more, she still wants to make love to Romen in the bed with the portrait towering over them. Her fantasy about Cosey reflects a bizarre father-lover relationship. But she does not know what to expect of a father, as she has had no experience having a father herself. Nor does she seem to know the codes of acceptable behaviour in a relationship; She lacks experience of any loving relations in her past – even that of a loving mother. In the article “Family and Parenting in Toni Morrison’s *Love*”, Neelakantan and Sathyaraj elaborate on how Morrison employs the narrative of Junior “to capture the debilitating and corrosive effects of a dysfunctional family. Junior’s mother . . . and her equally callous father . . . her idle teenage uncles . . . like the Breedloves’ in *The Bluest Eye* fail to foster lasting emotional ties” (1). Comparing the background of Junior with the background of Pecola underlines the tragedy of Junior’s childhood and early years. But whereas Pecola in *The Bluest Eye* is powerless and ends up going mad, Junior seems to be turned into an emotionally cold and calculating person who disregards anybody but herself. This is illustrated in a passage when Christine is rushing to the hotel, expecting Heed and Junior to have plotted against her:

She should have known. She did know. Junior had no past, no history but her own. The things she didn’t know about or had never heard of would make a universe. The minute the girl sat down at the kitchen table lacing her lies with Yes, ma’ams, oozing street flavor like a yell, she knew: This girl will do anything. Yet that was precisely what was so appealing. And you had to admire any girl who survived on the street without a gun. (169)

Despite her obsessive suspicions, Christine seems to be aware of Junior's dishonesty and fears she is going to be victimized by it, but at the same time she does in a way respect her. Christine herself has a past of being homeless and has had to struggle to survive, as well as having had to grow up without a healthy father figure. It is also interesting to note here that the portrayal of Junior having no past and no history but her own bears resemblance to not only the predicament of Heed but also the descriptions of Shadrack and Sula in *Sula*, suggesting that also Junior has been damaged by her past experiences. Being a Settlement girl, Junior has never lived in a real house before the one on Monarch Street. Her running away at eleven emphasises how she despite her background is determined to act when sensing the gravity of a situation which not even her mother is able to rescue her from: "Vivian could not protect her from Vosh or the uncles . . ." (58). Junior sees no other option than to flee: "Clean away from people who chased her down, ran over her foot, lied about it, called her lucky . . ." (59). Running away from an abusive childhood, only to enter Correctional where she experiences an attempted assault by the Administrator, she still considers Correctional as what saved her from the Settlement:

Some girls liked his Conferences; traded them for Office Duty, sexy underwear, trips off campus. But not her. . . . Anyway, she got her sex from Campus A or from a girl crying for home. Who wanted or needed an old man (he must be thirty, at least) wearing a wide red tie pointing down to a penis that couldn't compete with raw vegetables, bars of soap, kitchen utensils, lollipops, or anything else inventive girls could conjure? . . . She had no intention of going back to the Settlement. Correctional had saved her from them. (116-117)

Junior's settlement background has taught her to survive and fight back like she does the Administrator. Her experiences of sexuality are related to abuse and not love, and as she clearly seems to enjoy the physical aspect of sex she lays down the rules for her and Romen's relationship. When she sees the young boy she singles him out as a sexual object. This is illustrated in her first question to him: "Don't tell me you're fucking these old women too" (62). In this manner Junior aims to seduce Romen, whose limited sexual experience makes him an easy prey for her as she plans to ". . . make it everywhere" (115). Her manipulative behaviour does not just affect the women in the house, but also Romen: "Junior's depiction as a victim of specific family pathologies provides a rationale for her repeated manipulative and maneuvering behaviour in the novel's present" (Neelakantan and Sathyaraj, 1). She particularly controls Romen to her advantage, taking what she needs from him, disregarding his feelings the same way her family disregarded hers. As we see from her manipulative

behaviour, and by her “relationship” with the father figure of Cosey, Junior stands out as a thwarted and damaged character. She also, rather indifferently, leaves the two women to their fate towards the end of the novel.

Not having had the experience of love, Junior settles for sexuality as opposed to love. At the end of the novel she reveals herself as emotionally corrupted, without empathy for other people. Still, she is very young, and she should perhaps be given more credit as she is infatuated with Romen. His licking her foot in the bathtub is what triggers the change in Junior and makes her reveal how she has left the women alone at the hotel:

It was when they left the tub . . . that the slipperiness had begun. . . . This beautiful boy on whom she had feasted as though he were all the birthday banquets she'd never had. The jitter intensified and suddenly she knew its name. . . . That was why, later on, when he'd asked her a second time, she told him the truth. (196)

Romen's act of licking Junior's foot is clearly an act transcending the mere sexual in their relationship, and it is this loving gesture from Romen which gives birth to Junior's feelings of love towards him, and which enable her to get in touch with something inside herself that makes her tell him about the women at the hotel. The imaginary conversation between Christine and the dead Heed also serves to illustrate a possible change in Junior: “Should we let her go, little rudderless, homeless thing? We could let her stay, under certain circumstances. . . . She knows how to make trouble. So do we” (198). This imaginary conversation suggests how Junior might not be wholly rejected at the end, and even if she means trouble, in a weird way she may become a part of the Cosey family – a family, finally, as Cosey's hold over them has been broken.

Romen's first encounter with sexuality is when he rescues a girl who has been raped by a gang of boys at a party, and where he is the next in line: “Last of a group of seven” (46). His action of refusing to take part in the rape gives him trouble with the other boys later, and in the end he is beaten up. The portrayal of Romen's struggle with himself for standing up for the raped girl makes him stand out from the crowd, as he is refusing to act like the other boys:

He . . . couldn't understand what had made him melt at that moment . . . What was that thing that had moved him to untie her, cover her, Jesus! Cover her! Cover her up? Get her on her feet and out of there? The little mitten hands? The naked male behinds convulsing one after another after another after another? . . . As he put his arm around her and led her away, he was still erect, folding only as they stepped together out into the cold. What made him do it? Or rather, who? But he knew who it was. It was the real Romen who had sabotaged the newly chiseled,

dangerous one. The fake Romen, preening over a stranger's bed, was tricked by the real Romen . . . (49)

It is the real Romen who weeps "girl tears"(49), and it is the sensitive and compassionate Romen who reacts to the brutality and assault of Pretty-Fay. Watching how all the other boys join in the rape and deciding not to go through with it, Romen becomes the example of a male who is not corrupted and keeps his morality intact. But Romen is insecure, and a part of him would rather be the dangerous Romen than the real one. It is with this experience in mind and the bullying and beating from the other boys that he responds to Junior's invitation with a sense of pride. As a victim of childhood neglect and older men's violent sexuality she takes charge of Romen who is younger and less experienced than her:

He was fourteen doing an eighteen- or maybe twenty-year-old woman. Not only did she want him; she demanded him. Her craving was equal to his and his was bottomless. (113)

Junior's desire for sexual violence is what gives her away as someone not to be trusted, but Romen does not sense the danger, nor is he mature enough to see how she infects and corrupts him. His new-found sexual experiences give him a lot of self- esteem, which is enhanced by the attention that the boys and girls at school give him. Romen is greatly admired and respected by his peers now, who are wondering whether he has scored with a teacher or someone's older sister, illustrating further how society celebrates male sexuality and the prestige it represents. However, his grandparents who also notice the change in him worry about him: "As ideal surrogate parents, Sandler and Vida not only feel 'responsible for Romen' (146) but also see in such responsibility a means to perpetuate the love for their 'own daughter' (146)" (Neelakantan and Sathyaraj, 1). Christine on the other hand sees the relationship between Junior and Romen as something that will benefit herself: "Who cared if she sneaked around with Vida's grandson from time to time? Good for him. Fun for her. A happily sexed girl would be more likely to stay on" (169). Christine has obviously no objection to seeing Junior take advantage of Romen; she is indifferent to possible dangerous implications the liaison may have for the boy and wants Junior to stay on – even if she does not trust her. However, Vida and Sandler's worrying about their grandson makes them act upon it, and Sandler makes an attempt to reason with the boy when the latter says:

"No. I mean. We were just looking, fooling around, you know?"

"Who you think you talking to?"

"No, like, I mean -?"

"Romen, we men or not?" . . .

"Well, it did get, you know. Rough, I guess you'd say. Know what I mean?"

“What did you do, Romen? Out with it.”
“Not me. Her.”
“Will you just say it, boy?”
“She plays hard, that’s all. I mean she likes being hurt.” (152-153)

By addressing him as a man, Sandler gets Romen to reveal to his grandfather what he has got himself messed up in. Romen is clearly nervous as to how his grandfather will react, but the way Sandler attempts to appeal to Romen’s own reasoning is what makes this conversation possible and later so important for the boy:

“Whack, huh? Well, I never believed much in free will. It ain’t nothing if there’s nothing you can control. . . . But of the few things you do have some say over, who you choose to hang out with is one. Looks like you hooked yourself up with somebody who bothers you, makes you feel uneasy. That kind of information is more than instinct; it’s information . . . Don’t worry about whether backing off means you a wimp. It can save your life. . . . Some friends you know better than to bring home. There’s a good reason for that, you understand me?”

“Yes, sir. I hear you.”

“A woman is an important somebody and sometimes you win the triple crown: good food, good sex, and good talk. . . . A good man is a good thing, but there is nothing in the world better than a good good woman.” (154)

On the one hand Sandler’s lecture gives a clear impression of his human and ethical character, but it may also indirectly characterize Romen, as Sandler is his grandfather and thus his ancestor. Sandler is not afraid to give advice to Romen, trying to appeal to both Romen’s instincts and reason regarding his relationship to Junior. Sandler’s view of women here is very important, both as characterization of himself as well as education for Romen. Moreover, the way Sandler looks at women serves as a sharp contrast to how Mr. Cosey and the other males in the novel view and treat women. The conversation between Sandler and Romen demonstrates on the one hand how crucial the role of the wise parent is, and on the other hand how important it is as an influence on Romen’s behaviour at the end of the story. Sandler’s very words are what make Romen get out of bed and search for Christine and Heed, whom Junior has abandoned at the hotel. His response is immediate:

“You left them there?”

“Why not? . . . Turn out the light, sugarboy.” He ran – fast, down the stairs, out the door, chased by the whisper of an old man. “You not helpless, Romen. Don’t ever think that.” Stupid! Clown! He was trying to warn him, make him listen, tell him that the old Romen, the sniveling one who couldn’t help untying shoelaces from an unwilling girl’s wrist, was hipper than the one who couldn’t help flinging a willing girl around an attic. (195)

By his moral choice Romen here discovers his true self and realises how his grandfather's advice has been a warning to him. Sandler's attitude towards women and sexuality is an important element of Romen's background of having a healthy, loving family – and particularly that of being influenced by a healthy father figure. Romen realizes at this moment that the relationship he has with Junior is destructive. So he runs – like Sandler told him: “You see a scary one, make tracks” (155). Romen's decision of rushing off to help the old women shows that he is not a wimp; it makes him stand out from the crowd of men. However, judging from Romen's own thoughts earlier, it is also clear that he would not have been able to make such a decision without the guidance of his grandfather:

Following his successful internalization of Sandler's parental wisdom, Romen, eventually, retreats from Junior to assist the Cosey women, and this movement clearly signifies his evolution into an emotionally mature and socially sturdy individual. (Neelakantan and Sathyaraj, 1)

As Morrison argues herself in her essay “From ‘Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation’”:

There is always an elder there. And these ancestors are not just parents, they are sort of timeless people whose relationships to the characters are benevolent, instructive, and protective, and they provide a certain kind of wisdom. (Morrison: 1984, 201)

Like L, Sandler may be regarded as a benevolent ancestor in the story. Not only does his advice to his grandson save Romen a lot of trouble regarding his relationship to Junior, he also indirectly instructs Romen in his decision of trying to rescue Heed and Christine in the hotel. However, Sandler seems to have more success in the role of the wise ancestor than L has in her attempt to influence Heed and Christine by faking the will, as the two ladies do not reconcile and resolve their conflict until one of them is dying.

Mr. Cosey, as suggested above, serves as a great contrast to Sandler. Most members of the community, and especially the women such as Vida, who did not have a very close relationship with Mr. Cosey, think of the man as “the county's role model” (37). The women's attitude towards the charming Mr. Cosey reveals how they fail to see the real Bill Cosey, only the charming handsome man who is so nice to everybody. They only see a Mr. Jekyll, whereas a chosen few see Mr. Hyde – the monstrous part of him. According to Vida “ . . . a powerful, generous friend gazed out from the portrait hanging behind the reception desk. . . . she didn't know who she was looking at” (45). Both Sandler and Vida knew Mr. Cosey

when he was alive, but Vida is the one who has the fondest memories of the man from the time she used to work as a receptionist at the hotel:

His pleasure was in pleasing. “The best good time,” he used to say. . . . the beaming Bill Cosey and the wide hospitality his place was known for. His laugh, his embracing arm . . . (34)

Vida’s loving memories of Bill Cosey illustrate how the man influenced his surrounding women: “. . . she squeezed only sweetness from those nine years . . .” (34). Vida thinks back on Bill Cosey as if she was in love with him – almost as if she had an affair with him, and this underlines the awe and respect the man created for himself among the women: “Mr. Cosey was royal; L, the woman in the chef’s hat, priestly. All the rest – Heed, Vida, May, waiters, cleaners – were court personnel fighting for the prince’s smile” (37). Not having had a close relationship with Mr. Cosey herself, Vida sees only the charming side of who she perceives as the powerful man who helped her escape from working in the cannery, and thus she cannot see him from any other perspective. Vida still thinks of Mr. Cosey as elevated above everybody else and blames the women around him for ruining the business her hero has built: “. . . a commanding, beautiful man surrendering to feuding women, letting them ruin all he had built. How could they do that, Vida wondered” (36).

Vida is thus revealed to be totally ignorant of what the real Mr. Cosey is like and will not listen to her husband’s critical remarks about him, nor his defence of the Cosey women. Vida speaks only negatively about Christine and Heed as if they were trash and below Cosey in social rank. Sandler knows better (45), that in fact Mr. Cosey’s interest in and marriage to Heed was indecent, and that Heed was merely an innocent child:

Vida . . . acted as though Heed had chased and seduced a fifty-two-year-old man, older than her father. That she had chosen to marry him . . . They forgave Cosey. Everything. Even to the point of blaming a child for a grown man’s interest in her. (147)

Cosey, being more than fifty years older than Sandler, opens up to him on their boat trips and reveals his secrets about how he had not touched Heed until she had had her period, as if this would justify the fact that he had taken a child bride. On one of these boat trips Cosey shares his memories of the young Heed with Sandler: “. . . hips narrow, chest smooth as plank . . . invisible navel above scant, newborn hair” (148). Sandler responds to this information by noting that most men do not take pleasure in this kind of observation, thus separating himself from Cosey and implying that Cosey’s lust is unnatural. “But the more Sandler learned about

the man, the less he knew” (44). Despite Mr. Cosey’s many relationships with grown women, and despite the fact that women used to fight for his attention, Sandler’s recollection of Cosey and his child bride suggests that Mr. Cosey is a pedophile. Sandler clearly resents the man and uses his knowledge about him as a point of reference when he thinks about how to deal with Romen: “Let him preen awhile, thought Sandler. Otherwise he might end up dog-chasing women his whole life” (110). Another time where Sandler uses Bill Cosey as a point of reference to decide what is proper conduct is when he meets Junior for the first time: “Bill Cosey would have done more. Invited her in to warm herself . . . ” (40). Another time, Sandler recognizes a particular look on Romen’s face and remembers having seen this look in Mr. Cosey’s face in a photo when he is looking at what seems to be Celestial:

. . . the face had a look he would recognize anywhere. One that Romen was acquiring: first ownership. Sandler knew that sometimes the first was also the last and God help the boy . . . (112)

Sandler and Vida’s diverging attitudes towards Bill Cosey come as the result of Vida’s ignorance and Sandler’s knowledge about the man’s habits and behaviour. Sandler has clearly defined thoughts about how one should and should not behave, and consequently, when Sandler learns that Mr. Cosey wanted to find and marry a girl he could “educate to his taste” (110) makes Sandler resent him altogether. Thus he ends up fighting “hard to keep Romen, his grandson, from adopting Cosey’s ‘bachelor behaviour’ . . . ” (Sathyaraj and Neelakantan, 3).

L is most likely the woman in Cosey’s life who knows him best, having witnessed the man’s ups and downs; his first wife’s death and then his son’s, his untimely and unhealthy marriage to Heed, along with his affair with Celestial and numerous other women. She is also the one who organizes his funeral after having killed him, but leaves her place at the Cosey hotel immediately afterwards. “*Mr. Cosey never lied to me. No point in it*” (67). The two seem to know each other very well, but L does not see herself as one of his women. Instead she regards herself as “background music” (4) in his – and other people’s – life. She has fond memories of the man from when she was a little girl, for example remembering seeing him and his first wife Julia in the water – how lovingly he treats her. However, a wedding photo where Bill Cosey is looking at somebody else than Heed may suggest that this other person could very well be L rather than Celestial, as the former is a friend of both bride and groom.

Bill Cosey's hidden personality and thwarted sexuality becomes apparent already in the beginning of the story when L remembers how he sneaks home after an adulterous affair with his longtime lover Celestial. This is a foreshadowing of how the man has a split personality, a dark side, hence his father's name. Another example of this is when his first wife Julia gets to know his ways and finds his sexual appetite distasteful. Moreover, Julia also shows disgust for him when she learns where his money comes from, that it came from his blood-soaked father's businesses. As Feng argues, "Morrison reveals in the novel that along with family money and properties is an inheritance of guilt and greed. One has to countenance the blood on the money as well as the intrigues and plots associated with it" (38). Bill Cosey's father, whom the blacks had named Dark due to his meanness, and who had deprived his family of love and good clothes, but left his blood money as inheritance, may be the very reason for his son turning out the way he does: His big heart and charitable actions among the poor are what makes him ". . . a ray of light" (68) in the community compared to his father. On the other hand, even if he despises his father's ways and aims to be his father's complete opposite, Bill Cosey still resembles him in the way he treats the ones closest to him, depriving them of a loving father and husband. According to Neelakantan and Sathyaraj, "In analyzing the life stories of Romen and Junior, the novelist rediscovers with insight and clarity the supreme role of family and parents in shaping responsible individuals/citizens" (2). Not unlike Romen and Junior, Mr. Cosey is also affected by his family background and parents. Giving information about Cosey's family background and his cruel father serves as an explanation as to how and why Bill Cosey turned out the way he did, mistreating those that are closest to him.

According to L things start to turn ugly when Mr. Cosey decides to marry Heed, Christine's best friend. Having lost his first wife, and then his son, Bill Cosey chooses a child bride to give him children, someone who has been the playmate of his granddaughter since they were little girls. As the narrator (L) puts it:

When we were just the two females, things went along fine. It was when the girls got in the picture – Christine and Heed – that things began to fray. Oh, I know the "reasons" given: cannery smell, civil rights, integration . . . It was marrying Heed that laid the brickwork for ruination. (104)

Until Mr. Cosey's marriage to Heed there seems to be a set order among the women surrounding the man, everybody knowing their particular place, and everybody in their own way concentrating on pleasing him. The disturbing marriage distorts this seemingly happy atmosphere in the hotel, in addition to ruining the special friendship between the two girls:

“*See, he chose a girl already spoken for . . . she belonged to Christine and Christine belonged to her*” (105). Not only is Heed Christine’s close friend, which makes this marriage anomalous and improper but Heed also belongs to a different class, something which makes May dislike the friendship in the first place: “*- a bottlefly let in through the door, already buzzing at the food table and, if it settled on Christine, bound to smear her with the garbage she was born in*” (136). The devastation that May feels when her father-in-law breaks the news of the marriage seems to be just as much about the class difference between the bride and the groom as their age difference. Not only that, seeing how the Johnson girls are known for being loose May worries that this will rub off on her own daughter. These are the reasons why she starts to hate Heed and succeeds in making Christine her accomplice in the hatred, and thereby sealing the fate of the girls’ friendship.

Christine suffers greatly from the loss of her friend, having previously lost her father and her close relationship with her mother, as she is left in L’s care when Billy Boy dies. The thought of Heed and her grandfather in bed together makes Christine’s and her mother’s meanness even worse. When her mother forces her daughter to leave her bedroom for a room on another floor because there were “*. . . things she shouldn’t see or hear or know about*” (95), she feels like Heed has taken over her place. Not until many years later does Christine realize that her being thrown out of her bedroom was an act by her mother carried out to protect her. Sexuality is what ruins her natural place in the home and which also ruins her relationship to both her grandfather and to Heed. When Christine is more or less thrown out, she is first sent away to school by her mother, and then finds herself alienated from her family so much that she ends up in a brothel, although by accident, at the age of sixteen. Her fate finally seems sealed:

She hadn’t escaped from anything. Maple Valley, Cosey’s hotel, Manila’s whorehouse – all three floated in sexual tension and resentment; all three insisted on confinement; in all three status was money. And all were organized around the pressing needs of men. (92)

The passage illustrates very well how Christine’s life seems to be organized by male sexual desires. Christine’s escape from the hotel and her family is spurred by her desire to find independence and to be able to create her own life, but all she succeeds in doing is ending up having a string of unhealthy relationships with men – in all of which the men have the upper hand. Christine never achieves the goals she has set out to reach. When her first husband cheats on her she gets up and leaves, but her second relationship is with someone who is

already married, illustrating how she has turned into “the other woman”, disregarding his wife’s feelings altogether: “She didn’t really care whether he separated from his wife or not, slept with the mother of his children or not, gave her a lesser Christmas present or not” (162). She has become used to adapting to the needs of men, and consequently loses her self-worth. She looks up to Fruit, a civil rights activist, and becomes his dedicated helper in the fight: “Christine became a dedicated helpmate, coherent and happy to serve” (163). However, the real reason for Christine’s contentment with her relationship with Fruit is clearly not primarily due to love. It has more to do with how she sees her position together with him:

There, with him, she was not in the way; she was in. Not the disrupting wife, the surplus mistress, the unwanted nuisance daughter, the ignored granddaughter, the disposable friend. She was valuable. (164)

Her references to what she is not is based upon her previous experiences from her marriage and from the different relationships in her past. The fact that she was sent away by her mother makes her think of herself as unwanted, and her grandfather and Heed’s relationship makes her feel ignored and discardable. Her many abortions that she claims are the result of her not wanting to become a mother is really the legacy of her own mother’s lack of care and love. In addition, her male companion does not think fatherhood is appropriate for someone who is an activist. So she adapts to the man’s needs, just as she adapts to Fruit having other women: “having men meant sharing them” (165). Having grown up around a grandfather who sneaked around with other women and telling Heed off in front of everybody that he neither needs nor wants her (165) had taught Christine that infidelity was normal. However, she clearly views rape differently, because when seeing how Fruit avoids a confrontation with one of his comrades accused of raping a seventeen year old girl, Christine protests, but “The girl’s violation carried no weight against the sturdier violation of male friendship” (166). As Feng notes, also among civil rights activists “. . . seeking racial equality” (55) there is a sexist attitude among the men, which is a further illustration of the extent of sexual abuse pervading all levels of society. To Christine, being accustomed to men’s infidelity is one thing, but ignoring sexual abuse is something else. This is yet another example in the novel of the problem of abnormal sexuality that has nothing to do with love. Christine’s reaction is also clearly due to her memories of her grandfather who has just died:

He was dead. The dirty one who introduced her to nasty and blamed it on her. He was dead. The powerful one who abandoned his own kin and transferred rule to her playmate. (165)

Christine shows no grief for her deceased grandfather, only disgust for the man who introduced her to sexuality, then gave all his attention to Heed and put her in charge of everything. The fact that her grandfather masturbates in her room makes his behaviour approximate not only that of pedophilia, but that of incest. Gallego also points out how there are several passages in the novel which hint about “. . . some kind of sexual understanding . . .” (95), some kind of incestuous relationship between Christine and Mr. Cosey. It is implied, but not explicitly stated, that the fact that her mother ordered her to a bedroom on another floor, away from her grandfather, was due to suspicion of such a relationship. This would also explain, as Gallego suggests, Christine’s jealousy of Heed – not being allowed to go on the honeymoon together with Heed, as well as her sensation that Heed is taking her place. However disgusted Christine is with the thought of her grandfather when he dies, when she finds herself in a relationship with Dr. Rio, it is with a man with a striking resemblance to the grandfather she hates: “When he died I said Bingo! Then right away I took up with somebody exactly like him. Old, selfish, skirt-chasing” (188), a rich married man a lot older than his mistress Christine, a man whose sexist and dominant behaviour is revealed to Christine when he throws her out of the apartment he has put her in.

Heed’s acquaintance with Mr. Cosey starts with a friendship with another little girl on the beach outside his hotel. Coming from a totally different background than Christine, Heed is at first not welcomed by May, but, playing together the two girls become inseparable. Mr. Cosey, however, changes all that when he touches Heed’s nipple, an act brought on by lust in the old man who is to become her husband: “Knowing she had no schooling, no abilities, no proper raising, he chose her anyway . . .” (72). Thinking back on the marriage, Heed is still proud of having been chosen by the man. The shocking announcement of the marriage affects everybody at the hotel and ruins Heed’s friendship with Christine, although at the time she is not able to understand why. However, Heed’s recollection of how everybody hates her is softened by the knowledge that her husband whom she calls Papa never made her feel uncomfortable. The memory of their wedding night on the beach brings fond memories of the man who gave her her first sexual experience – at the age of eleven:

No penetration. No blood. No eeks of pain or discomfort. Just this man stroking, nursing, bathing her. She arched. He stood behind her, placed his hands behind her knees, and opened her legs to the surf. (77-78)

Making sure that Heed does not experience any physical pain during her first sexual experience, Mr. Cosey in one sense treats her like the child she really is. The same goes for

their activities on the honeymoon, shopping and playing “wrestle” in the mornings and letting Heed play with paper dolls and colouring books alone in the afternoons. At twenty-eight, however, Heed finds herself alone, wanting children. Her loneliness results in a love affair, and when she becomes pregnant she realizes that she is not the one who is barren after all – not having been able to produce an heir to Bill Cosey. All she wanted was for her husband to say that he loved her: “. . . after 1947, she never heard him say it either. Not to her, anyway, and she listened for twenty-four years” (130). Heed’s adult life is wasted on a man who would neither love her nor give her children. Nonetheless she keeps up appearances and acts as the grieving wife at her husband’s funeral. She is determined not to lose the battle over the man. In the end she hires Junior because she needs help with her scheming and plotting against Christine, hoping that Junior will help her find the real will of the Cosey estate. Her determination to sort out the will and to make sure that she is the beneficiary of her husband’s estate grows even stronger: “They didn’t understand that winning took more than patience; it took a brain. . . . let him “go fishing” without tackle or bait. There were remedies. But now there was less time” (79). Heed refuses to let her husband’s degrading behaviour towards her break her. Neither his sleeping around nor the spanking of her at Christine’s sixteenth birthday-party can break her; these memories and all that she has had to put up with from May and Christine just feed her determination to succeed further.

The first time Christine and Heed meet each other as young children is when Christine shares her ice cream with her on the beach. After Christine’s mother has made an unsuccessful attempt to show Heed off their private beach the two girls become close friends. Their close relationship is, however, disturbed by the girls’ individual sexual experiences with Bill Cosey, memories they are unable to share with each other. Still, it is not until Heed comes back from her honeymoon with Mr. Cosey that she – and Christine – really see the enemy in the girl who used to be her friend:

May, of course, started it, laughing aloud at Heed’s new clothes; but Christine joined in with a smirk Heed had never seen before. . . . Trembling, Heed looked to Christine for help. There wasn’t any. Her friend’s eyes were cold, as though Heed had betrayed her, instead of the other way around. (127-128)

The contempt that May and Christine display is a direct result of Mr. Cosey’s bizarre marriage to Heed. They take their anger out on Heed instead of directing it at the old man, ridiculing the grown-up clothes and shoes that Mr. Cosey has bought for his eleven year old bride. Having limited upbringing and maturity, Heed is clearly not able to see why Christine

has turned against her and why they can not be friends any more. To Christine, however, the change in her life is devastating. She has lost her grandfather to her playmate, and she dares not blame her grandfather, so she blames Heed, as her mother does, although realizing as a grown-up it is her grandfather who has been in charge of the decision of the marriage:

“ . . . We were best friends. One day we built castles on the beach; next day he sat her in his lap. One day we were playing house under a quilt; next day she slept in his bed. One day we played jacks; the next she was fucking my grandfather. . . . One day this house was mine; next day she owned it. . . . There’s virgins and then there’s children,” she said . . . (131-132)

Telling Junior about her relationship with Heed stirs up the bitter betrayal Christine feels towards Heed and the past. She blames her grandfather for putting Heed in his lap, but then blames Heed for sleeping in his bed and having sex with him. She also claims that Heed stole the house from her. However, she ends her anecdote to Junior by concluding that Heed was not only a virgin, but also a child, insinuating that the actions of her grandfather were the ones of a pedophile. Thus it becomes clear beyond doubt that it is Cosey’s thwarted sexual behaviour which ruins their lives. Christine’s bitterness thinking back is also related to how she had struggled to keep Heed as her friend when small, how she had fought her mother who did not like her playing with someone below her in class. Christine’s bitter memories of betrayal are also connected with the fact that they used to share everything; they laughed together and even had their own secret language:

Then to have your best and only friend leave the squealing splash in your bathtub, trade the stories made up and whispered beneath sheets in your bed for a dark room at the end of the hall reeking of liquor and an old man’s business, doing things no one would describe but were so terrible no one could ignore them. She would not forget that. Why should she? It changed her life. It changed May *for* life. Even L’s jaw dropped. (132-133)

Not only does she feel that both her friend and her grandfather betrayed her; the sick relationship shocks everybody and destroys their lives. Also, when Heed sets fire to Christine’s bed after having been spanked at Christine’s birthday party, Christine is the one who has to leave, not Heed. It is her grandfather’s suggestion, but her mother does not put up a fight. In this way the betrayal that Christine experiences is double, as her mother does not protest when her grandfather makes the decision of sending off his own flesh and blood.

When Christine is back in Monarch Street years later, the tables are turned; Christine lives downstairs in the servant’s quarters and Heed in the upstairs apartment, the two barely

managing to stay under the same roof. “Christine’s downward movement in terms of class ideology can be contrasted easily with Heed’s upward struggle” (Feng, 42). It is each needing the other’s services that makes them put up with the arrangement, and the fact that they can live together in the house in separate parts: “. . . each woman lived in a spotlight separated – or connected – by the darkness between them” (25). The darkness that both connects and separates them serves as a metaphor for Bill Cosey – or their memories of him and the betrayal each feels the other is responsible for, but which Mr. Cosey created: “Twenty-five years after his death, his pervasive presence still shapes and conditions these women’s responses to each other” (Gallego, 92). When they take their mutual hatred out on each other it is by verbal abuse as well as physical fights over things such as the silverware and rings that used to belong to Bill Cosey. “. . . it is the interaction of love and hate between Christine and Heed that is the sustaining narrative drive throughout the novelistic discourse” (Feng, 39). Their battles reflect their continuous competition over their positions in regard to the dead old man, and their fight over who is the rightful beneficiary of the estate, is in a way over the man’s attention:

So the one who had attended private school kept house while the one who could barely read ruled it. The one who had been sold by a man battled the one who had been bought by one. (86)

The bitter resentment that Christine feels about their reversed roles makes her consult her lawyer, and Heed’s fear about Christine succeeding in overturning the will results in Heed hiring Junior. However, it is Bill Cosey who has brought this on the women in the first place, having traded his granddaughter for Heed. The fight about the estate and the will is thus not merely a fight over material possessions and money but, as suggested above, instead a competition for the love and affection from a ghost, which culminates in their final meeting at the hotel: “The eyes of each are enslaved by the other’s. Opening pangs of guilt, rage, fatigue, despair are replaced by a hatred so pure, so solemn, it feels beautiful, almost holy” (177).

When Heed suffers a fatal fall Christine does the unlikely thing of gathering her in her arms, as if it is her only reasonable response. Both having expected a quarrel, they instead start to talk about their childhood, exchanging thoughts about how their mothers either sold or gave them away; Heed’s mother having sold her at the age of eleven and May giving Christine away at thirteen to a boarding school. Their sad memories from childhood confirm how their experiences are similar in terms of neither having had a loving mother:

Hating you was the only thing my mother liked about me.

I heard it was two hundred dollars he gave my daddy, and a pocketbook for Mama.

. . . He took all my childhood away from me, girl.

He took all of you away from me. (193-194)

In their final meeting at the hotel they share thoughts about their deprived childhood, realizing how much they meant to each other, and it becomes clear how much they had loved one another until the monster deprived them of their love for each other: “What the hell was on his mind?” (188). There is a marked change in their attitude towards each other now, having realized and admitted to their respective innocence regarding their past and furthermore directing their anger at Bill Cosey. Their only good memories seem to be from the time they spent alone together playing happily in the playhouse they had named Celestial Palace, sharing secrets using their secret language “idagay”. They had named their playhouse after Celestial: “. . . a pariah in the community due to her condition as a licentious woman. Thus women warn children to keep away from her . . . ” (Vega-Gonzales 283). Despite being an outcast, Celestial represents someone whose strong sense of individuality and freedom cannot even be tamed by Mr. Cosey. To the girls, Celestial represents something daring and brave, and whenever one of the girls tell the other about some audacious act they have done, the other utters: “Hey, Celestial”, to show recognition.

There were, however, some secrets which were too difficult to share when small, even for little girls with a secret language, because the shame that was created by the actions of the monster hidden in Bill Cosey was too great. “Even in idagay they had never been able to share a certain twin shame. Each one thought the rot was hers alone” (190). When Morrison uses the word twin about their feeling of shame, she “. . . signifies a state of *twin-ness* or interconnectedness that resisted division” (Feng, 43), thus making the shame they feel even greater. In Feng’s view, this twin-ness Christine and Heed feel “is forcefully broken up by patriarchal domination, maternal imposition, and sexual shame” (43). The feeling of guilt carried by both the girls is what makes them keep quiet about the actions of an old man, and it is keeping this from each other that makes the lie about the jacks so big. On their way to a picnic on the beach with one of L’s packed lunches they remember having forgotten the jacks, which Heed volunteers to go and get while Christine waits outside for her. When running upstairs to find the jacks she bumps into “. . . the handsome giant who owns the hotel and who nobody sasses” (190), who starts touching her:

He touches her chin, and then – casually, still smiling – her nipple, or rather the place under her swimsuit where a nipple will be if the circled dot on her chest ever changes. . . . Heed bolts back down the stairs. The spot on her chest she didn't know she had is burning, tingling. (191)

When Heed looks for Christine, who has been delayed inside the hotel by May, she finds her behind the hotel with vomit on her bathing suit, which makes her believe that Christine must have seen the whole incident with her grandfather:

Her face is hard, flat. She looks sick, disgusted, and doesn't meet Heed's eyes. Heed can't speak, can't tell her friend what happened. She knows she has spoiled it all . . . That first lie, of many to follow, is born because Heed thinks Christine knows what happened and it made her vomit. (191)

What Heed does not know is that Christine has not seen Heed and her grandfather together. Instead she has witnessed from the ground below her grandfather alone, masturbating in her own bedroom, and it is this sight which makes her vomit. The reason Christine cannot meet Heed's eyes is that she is ashamed of her grandfather and of herself. Furthermore, the incident in the bedroom is particularly disturbing as it gives proof of the man's pedophile nature:

Cosey's sexual arousal over the incident, indicated by his subsequent masturbation in Christine's bedroom window, suggests an inclination toward pedophilia, which he then attempts to make more 'socially acceptable' by marrying the girl thereafter. (Gallego, 96)

In my view, Cosey's behaviour must be viewed as more serious than just "an inclination" toward pedophilia. The fact that the man actually takes it as far as marrying the eleven-year old girl later is something which supports this.

Heed, however, having wiggled her hips before Mr. Cosey touched her, thinks she is the one to blame. Both girls feel strangely aroused and ashamed by their experiences:

It wasn't the arousals, not altogether unpleasant, that the girls could not talk about. It was the other thing. The thing that made each believe, without knowing why, that this particular shame was different and could not tolerate speech – not even in the language they had invented for secrets. (192)

Having been exposed to sexuality at this young age, and by an old man who is the grandfather of one of them, makes their experiences too reprehensible to speak about, and ultimately it is these experiences which initially push the two girls apart. The marriage comes later, totally wrecking their friendship which is not rekindled until their very last meeting in the hotel.

Both girls are thus turned into outcasts by Bill Cosey, each left on their own to fend for themselves and without the proper guidance of a benevolent ancestor. L, however, is perhaps the only one who looks out for them and tries to protect them:

I see you. You and your invisible friend, inseparable on the beach. You both are sitting on a red blanket eating ice cream . . . I can see you, too, walking the shore in a man's undershirt instead of a dress . . . Hi, want some? Unnecessary now, the secret friends disappear in favor of flesh and bone.

It's like that when children fall for one another. (199)

L observes how the two lonely girls find each other, each replacing their imaginary friend in favour of a real one. She suggests that the place parents occupy to a child is secondary to the first love between children, that the love between children comes before everything else. L makes it clear that the grown-ups around them are responsible for the girls' separation and what follows:

And if, on top of that, they are made to hate each other, it can kill a life way before it tries to live. I blame May for the hate she put in them, but I have to fault Mr. Cosey for the theft. (200)

As Feng sees it,

May feels the imperative of separating the two friends because of class ideology and an unstated sexual phobia. In order to maintain bourgeois propriety, she needs to distance her daughter from a lowdown 'Up Beach girl' (*Love* 75) and perhaps even more so from the danger of (abnormal/pedophilic) sexuality – the old man business behind the door and the potential lesbianism. (47)

It is clear that both class prejudice, (Heed being below Christine in class) and fear of licentiousness (the possible influence on Christine by a "loose" Johnson girl) are central factors contributing to May's attempts to separate the girls. However, when it comes to May's fear of sexually deviant behaviour, it is in my view more likely that she fears Mr. Cosey's pedophile tendencies than the possibility of the two girls being lesbians. There is no clear indication in the novel that the love between the girls is of a lesbian character. According to L, the love between the girls is in fact of a kind which ignores class, race and sex (199). Although L clearly blames Mr. Cosey for the despoilment of the relationship between the girls, she is in two minds about the man, even if she recognizes how appallingly he has treated them:

You could call him a good bad man, or a bad good man. Depends on what you hold dear – the what or the why. I tend to mix them. . . . He was an ordinary man ripped, like the rest of us, by wrath and love. I had to stop him. Had to. (200)

The passage illustrates how L must in some way have loved the man, since she is at all able to characterize him as partly good. However, when she decides to poison and kill him before he dies of natural causes – as she knows that in his will he has left almost everything to Celestial – it is most likely out of love for the women around him, particularly the girls, and not the old man. By scribbling down a will of ambiguous meaning on a menu, she forces the women to have some kind of contact with each other, and it is the fight over the will which in the end causes their final meeting and their reconciliation.

Killing Bill Cosey as an act of love for the women is one thing, but killing the man because she loves him, if this is the case, would imply that her love for the man is of a different kind: *“People with no imagination feed it with sex – the clown of love. . . . It takes a certain intelligence to love like that – softly, without props”* (63). So if Bill Cosey and L loved one another, it was a love without sex, and a fatal one at that, as she kills him: “L’s hidden love for Mr. Cosey paradoxically engenders her in a desire to kill him” (Vega-Gonzales, 285). L is, as said, perhaps the one who knows the man the most, having spent all those years with him at the hotel, and she clearly has a deep love for him. Mr. Cosey’s relationship with Celestial is of another nature, as they have a sexual liaison but one in which there seems to be a strong love, too. Cosey’s desire to leave all his worldly goods, besides a boat, to Celestial is a clear example of this. His love for Celestial is also demonstrated when it is suggested that the double C’s on the silverware meant Celestial Cosey, the woman whom he could not marry due to her social standing. Ironically, it is L and Celestial, although not together, who are the only two ghostly visitors to his grave. None of them have been officially in a relationship with him, but are still the women who may have loved him the most, and whom he perhaps loved and respected the most too.

It is difficult to point out exactly with whom the main focus of the novel lies, whether it is with Bill Cosey, L, Heed, Christine or Junior. The characters are too dependent on each other – as are the embedded stories in the novel – for one to become singled out as more important than the others. What is clear and most striking, however, is how the character Bill Cosey is able to influence and destroy the relationship between, and the childhood of, the two girls Christine and Heed by letting his own sick sexuality become an intrusion into their lives. Furthermore, his presence in the community and at the hotel as the supreme patriarch also marks the other characters and influences their behaviour towards each other. Having created a haven for the black bourgeoisie in the South, Mr. Cosey seems raised above everybody else:

. . . a place where they could walk in the front door, not the service entrance; eat in the dining room, not the kitchen; sit with the guests, sleep in beds, not their automobiles, buses, or in a warehouse across town. A place where their instruments were safe, their drinks unwatered, their talent honored so they didn't have to go to Copenhagen or Paris for praise. Flocks of colored people would pay to be in that atmosphere. (102)

Having set himself and his family above the rest of the community in terms of money and class, even though he aims to promote and honour black musicians and other successful blacks, Mr. Cosey comes to represent the tradition of patriarchy. This is also an example how class is made a serious issue in the novel:

The fact that the rest of the black community was not allowed into the resort also demonstrates a class consciousness among African Americans that repeatedly draws Morrison's reprobation. (Gallego, 93)

This explains why Cosey is either loved or hated among the people in the community, and why he, whether liked or not, still has an influence over the people, even after his death.

All in all, the novel portrays how people in general and women in particular are marked by authoritarian males in the black community. Not only is he an authoritarian male, but also a sexist whose licentious conduct marks the women around him. All the women close to him suffer from his behaviour, one way or another, especially his wives, his prostitute lover as well as May, Christine and L: "Indeed, although Cosey's women have felt some kind of love for him, most of them have also felt betrayed by him" (Vega-Gonzales, 282). In many ways he also represents the male who has failed in being a good husband and father. There is considerable irony in Heed calling him Papa, Junior calling him her Good Man, and even Julia calling him Papa on her death bed; the nicknames actually reveal his failure of being a dependable and responsible character. Bill Cosey was not what his tombstone said: "*Ideal husband. Perfect father*" (201). In fact, he is anything but. In this way Heed, Christine and Junior share the same fate – all of them lacking fathers, and all having been exposed to sexual abuse. As a consequence of this they end up in unhealthy relationships. Instead of being a healthy loving father figure and husband, Cosey destroys the lives of his wife Heed and his granddaughter Christine by betraying them both. The author's foreword explicitly reveals this theme:

People tell me that I am always writing about love. Always, always love. I nod, yes, but it isn't true – not exactly. In fact, I am always writing about betrayal. Love is the weather. Betrayal is the lightning that cleaves and reveals it.

Gallego quotes in her article on the novel a comment Morrison makes to Diane Mc-Kinney-Whetstone in an interview: “I was interested in the way in which sexual love and other kinds of love lend themselves to betrayal. How do ordinary people end up ruining the thing they most want to protect?” (Gallego, 92). The novel as a whole, with its embedded stories, examines the complex relationship between sexuality and love. As Feng puts it, “Love, in this instance, draws out many emotions that are exactly its opposites, and the novel thrives on the energy generated from these conflicting force fields” (38). The novel demonstrates how the more destructive and damaging expressions of love and sexuality ruin people’s lives. Its main focus is on how children like Christine and Heed become damaged when not given the parental love they deserve and subsequently become the victims of a debased and debasing sexual behaviour. However, as Feng argues: “From the moment of their reconciliation, their mutual love resumes its power and moves beyond the ending of the novel, and literally not even death can separate them” (45). Their relationship thus functions as the core element of the novel.

Living in a patriarchal and sexist society, Christine, Heed, Junior and Romen are all exposed to different kinds of sexual perversions like rape, pedophilia and incest when very young. The novel illustrates that a male-dominated society is pervaded by sexist behaviour and attitudes: “*Love* is a critique of patriarchal hegemony and the ideologies imprecated in such a stance” (Sathyaraj and Neelakantan, 2). The narrator L in particular discourses on the fact that society is infused with destructive gender roles and power structures of the past. Their shameful experiences of sexual abuse when children mark their lives in a manner which prevent them from forming healthy loving relationships in adulthood, in addition to destroying their feeling of self-worth:

Morrison tellingly points to the power of male adults over girls and further highlights the authority of “parental laws” governing the society. Such a hypnotizing impact of black patriarchs over young girls in *Love* is reminiscent of Cholly Breedlove’s relationship with his daughter, Pecola Breedlove, in Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*. (Sathyaraj and Neelakantan, 2)

Sandler is the obvious exception from this portrayal of dominant and depraved males, whose healthy attitude towards women and beneficiary advice to his grandson Romen help save both Romen’s and, perhaps, in turn Junior’s life. Sandler and Romen thus serve as clear examples that also men are able to act as healthy members of society, whose endeavours of empathy and love, like when Romen rescues the raped girl, are markedly different from those actions

that are merely based on sexual drives. However, Sathyaraj and Neelakantan argue that Sandler may not be entirely guilt free in relation to his attitudes towards women; he does fantasize about Junior's thighs and firm youthful body, and he expects the dinner to be cooked and made ready by his wife when she comes home from work: "Sandler thus represents certain stereotypical social attitudes and is guilty of perpetuating the gendered dichotomies of human societies" (Sathyaraj and Neelakantan, 3). This is hard to argue against, but it seems in a way overly categorical in the context of the abusive, sexist behaviour of people like Bill Cosey.

It is clear that Mr. Cosey's destructive powers over the women around him serve as the incarnation of patriarchal and sexist attitudes:

By his sheer force of presence and vigorous claims to the roles of "father", "husband", and "Big Daddy," Cosey wills the women in his world into a grovelling submission . . . (Sathyaraj and Neelakantan, 3)

However, in L's musing over the man, she emphasises his ability to love; remembering how she at five had watched the tenderness in Mr. Cosey when holding his first wife Julia in his arms in the sea: "I believed then it was the sunlight that brought those tears to my eyes – not the sight of all that tenderness coming out of the sea" (64). She also comments on how money changed hands between Cosey and Heed's parents when Cosey wants to marry the girl, but upon May's remark on how little Heed was worth, L objects to the idea of Mr. Cosey being cheap: "But we all knew Mr. Cosey never bought anything cheap – or if he did, it came to have value in time. Like a child who would soon grow up and bear other children" (138). L herself is not convinced that Heed was an investment for him to have children, which is what Mr. Cosey tells his friends:

Well, that's what he told his friends and maybe himself. But not me. He never told that to me because I had worked for him since I was fourteen and knew the truth. He liked her. (139)

There is a striking ambiguity in this passage; L claims that Mr. Cosey did not marry Heed because he wanted children, but because he liked her. Choosing the word *like* instead of *love* when describing Mr. Cosey's feelings for Heed suggests that their relationship is not based upon love, but rather the one-sided sexual attraction that Mr. Cosey has for the child Heed. L's interpretive voice gives a complex and ambiguous picture of the man; on the one hand she describes him as this generous, loving man and blames May for destroying the friendship between Christine and Heed. On the other hand, she insinuates that Mr. Cosey is, in fact, a

pedophile – wanting children – to serve his sexual needs. Heed calling him Papa also supports this interpretation.

In conclusion, *Love* aims, on a more general level, to elucidate the complexity of sexuality and love in a patriarchal and sexist society. The various kinds of expressions that love and sexuality may assume are portrayed in terms of a range of different characters and relationships. The collective impact of these interrelated individual fates suggests that they are deeply rooted in the structures and conventions of society, not least its dehumanizing gender roles. Morrison's novel delves into the darkest sides of a masculinist society in which debased forms of sexual behaviour damages individuals – above all women – for life.

CONCLUSION

Each of Morrison's novels *Sula*, *The Bluest Eye* and *Love* demonstrates how a patriarchal and sexist society is the breeding ground for different kinds of sexual deviance. The main focus in my thesis has been to examine how the novels' themes of gender, oppression and love are expressed through the characters' sexual conduct. Morrison's novels clearly regard sexuality and love as social and cultural constructs. Thus the characters' sexual behaviour serves as a portrayal of the society in which they live.

All of Morrison's novels, down to her last one, *A Mercy*, deal with different aspects of love between individuals, not least within the family. The lack of love and the perversion of love which many of the characters in *Sula*, *The Bluest Eye* and *Love* suffer from is for the most part connected to the relationships between parents and children. In particular the damaging sexual behaviour of males, as demonstrated in many of these relationships, is what in the end destroys the lives of young girls and women. The adults' sick sexuality is also contrasted to the pure and innocent love between children, whose capacity for love and affection is stunted, often for life, by the adults' behaviour.

All three novels show how gendered oppression in American society marks individuals and relationships. Morrison clearly criticises the African American community for its "tradition" of oppressing women and children. Regarding sexual abuse as part of this oppression, she blames the community for not acting against it, and she uses graphic portrayals of this abuse to demonstrate its horrors. The three novels analyzed in this thesis focus first and foremost on children, who have limited control of their destiny, being at the mercy of the adults around them. Through her narratives, Morrison claims that individuals, and especially children, who are deprived of genuine love and attention from their parents, will suffer from this deprivation all their lives. What is more, when such children are also exposed to thwarted sexual behaviour, the effects are devastating. As Samuels and Hudson-Weems note with reference to *The Bluest Eye*,

Although now a highly publicized topic, child abuse, including incest and rape, was once a socially unmentionable subject that remained unaddressed though secretly known. It is readily explored by Morrison, however, in her pioneering first novel. (14)

As demonstrated in my thesis, Morrison's subsequent narratives continue to explore issues related to the mistreatment of children. Sula and Nel in *Sula*, like Pecola in *The Bluest Eye*, as well as Christine, Heed and Junior in *Love* are all examples of children suffering from some kind of abuse. Whereas Nel and Sula's lives and friendship become damaged or restricted by society's conventional gender codes, Christine, Heed and Junior, like Pecola, become the direct victims of male incestuous and pedophile behaviour.

Morrison does not relate only the stories of the oppressed, but also of the oppressors; Cholly Breedlove, Soaphead and Mr. Cosey all serve as prototypes of male domination whose sick sexual behaviour is a result of their deprived and loveless backgrounds. Time and again the author demonstrates how a sick society creates sick individuals. "For she portrays over and over characters that have only been shown to be monsters before, yet have their untold stories" (Holloway, 163). It is clear that Morrison's portrayals of the oppressors' backgrounds, telling *their* stories as well, become part of her social criticism. As Feng affirmatively formulates it, "Morrison . . . has high hopes to further our education and development after we are implicated in the shame and trauma, and exposed to the lessons of love through the act of participatory reading" (59). Clearly not condoning sexual abuse in any way, Morrison relates the oppressors' stories in a way that makes it possible for the oppressors to be understood. Inviting her readers to reason around the acts of abusive behaviour in this manner is part of a humanist endeavour of social criticism.

Female friendships are also central in Morrison's works, and particularly in the novels of my investigation. In both *Sula* and *Love*, friendship between lonely little girls and later women serve as background for studying the effects of thwarted sexual behaviour on vulnerable individuals. In both novels these friendships last a lifetime. In *The Bluest Eye*, there is also a special friendship between little girls, where Frieda and Claudia try to rescue Pecola. The fate of Pecola, however, is so devastating that a mutual and lasting friendship between her and the two sisters is beyond reach.

It is also interesting to observe how in *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*, the friendships Morrison portrays are between girls from similar backgrounds, whereas in *Love*, the girls come from very different classes. Class normally determines the relationships of its members, except in the case of children, where friendships across class divisions, may take place, like the one between Christine and Heed. As they grow older, however, class may become an obstacle. It

may also be argued that Junior, whose background is of striking resemblance to that of Heed, will in the end become Christine's friend, also possibly illustrating a friendship across class barriers. The fact that class is an issue in all three novels suggests that sexual abuse pervades all levels of society and all social classes; the victims experience the exact same kind of guilt and shame. This also demonstrates that class is irrelevant for, and subservient to, the gender codes of society.

There is also an obvious critique in Morrison's narratives of the lack of healthy parental figures, particularly the lack of good males and of fathers in today's black communities. The critique, however, also encompasses the female adult characters. The relationships that Helene and Hannah in *Sula*, Mrs. Breedlove in *The Bluest Eye* and May in *Love* have with their daughters are all at fault with regard to a healthy mother-love. When it comes to some of the male figures, however, it is often sexuality that serves as a means of dominance and ruination of young girls' and women's lives. To Morrison the lack of loving and benevolent ancestors is the most important factor in the degeneration of the younger generation.

Furthermore, Morrison critically examines how society creates outsiders, where not only individuals, but also whole families become victims of society's gender codes, along with oppressive sexist behaviour. The most devastating examples of this are the Breedloves and the Cosey family. Even the members of the Peace family, consisting of women, are in different ways viewed as outsiders by the community due to their licentious behaviour. Intriguingly, the depiction of outsiders like the prostitutes China, Poland and Miss Marie in *The Bluest Eye* and Celestial in *Love* is markedly different from the portrayals of family-based characters whose sexuality is thwarted; Morrison emphatically portrays these women as bold, beautiful and loving. There are also examples of such arresting positive comments about the prostitute Rochelle and Hannah in *Sula*. In this manner, Morrison may be said to deconstruct the stereotypical portrait of prostitutes. Morrison's writing certainly aims to liberate children and women from the restraints and oppression of patriarchal and sexist societies. As McBride argues, "If any one theme might be said to characterize the primary intellectual commitment of Toni Morrison's work, even across genres of fiction and non-fiction, it would be the pursuit of freedom" (166). Through her writing, she directs the reader's minds towards the unhealthy and damaging codes of behaviour, particularly those of gender that seem to pervade contemporary society, not only African American communities. Morrison clearly aspires to educate the reader when speaking out about how we treat our children. Since our children

are products of our behaviour, and since the amount of love and guidance we give them is vital in determining their mental health, we – as adult readers – are encouraged by the author to learn from her fictional stories. As Justine Tally puts it: “As with most great authors, Morrison may be talking about the past, but she is speaking to the present” (3).

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