TRACY RENEE BUTTS
Boys in the Mother 'Hood: Literary Representations of Black Mother-Son Relationships in the Works of Ernest J. Gaines and Toni Morrison
(Under the Direction of HUGH RUPPERSBURG)

Very little scholarship exists on the subject of black mother-son relationships. However, black mother-son relationships have pervaded the literary works of African American writers since the slave narratives and continue to do so today. The abundance of primary texts and the scarcity of critical sources necessitated that I narrow my focus; after considerable thought and study, I decided to focus my attention on the literary works of Ernest J. Gaines and Toni Morrison because of my interest in determining to what extent gender inflects the author's view of the mother-son dynamic. The dissertation relies upon a number of theoretical approaches—anthropological, psychological, sociological, historical, and black feminist theory—in addition to personal interviews, literary criticism, and close readings of Gaines's and Morrison's literary works. Although Gaines and Morrison both insist that their works are not autobiographical, their works reveal that both their gender and their experiences shape their portrayals of mother-son relationships. Reared by his maternal great aunt, who was severely handicapped, Gaines writes from the perspective of the son. Consequently, his works often depict mothers, drawn in the image of the infallible, strong black woman, rearing sons who believe initially that their mothers seek to control their lives, but who eventually come to realize that their mothers only have their best interests at heart. However, as a single mother, Morrison writes from the perspective of the mother. Therefore, Morrison, who is aware of the difficulties and challenges of motherhood for black women, refuses to subscribe to the good mother versus bad mother dichotomy when portraying her mother figures. Some of her mothers succeed and others fail, but they are all flawed in some way. When looked at together, Gaines's and Morrison's works suggest that the black mother-son relationship, despite being fraught with difficulties, is, for the most part, loving and harmonious.

INDEX WORDS: Ernest J. Gaines, Toni Morrison, Black mother-son relationships, African American Literature, Black feminist theory, Gender

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by

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DEDICATION

To my mothers.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The literary careers of Toni Morrison and Ernest J. Gaines both began in the 1960s. Morrison began working on The Bluest Eye (1970), her first novel, in the late 1960s, expanding on a short story she had "jotted down . . . about a little girl who longed for blue eyes" (Samuels and Hudson-Weems 6). Morrison, who subsequently published six other novels—Sula (1974), Song of Solomon (1977), Tar Baby (1981), Beloved (1987), Jazz (1992), and Paradise (1998)--has won numerous book awards and accolades, including a Pulitzer Prize for Beloved and the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1993. Unarguably, Toni Morrison is one of the best writers at work today. Her contemporary Ernest J. Gaines, however, has received considerably less critical acclaim. Like Morrison, Gaines, whose first novel, Catherine Carmier, was published in 1964, has seven fictional works to his credit: Of Love and Dust (1967), Bloodline (1968), The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman (1971), In My Father's House (1978), A Gathering of Old Men (1983), and A Lesson Before Dying (1994). In 1994, after the publication of A Lesson Before Dying, Scott Jaschik hailed Gaines as "a new star in the canon" (287). Ironically, by this time, Gaines had already met success with The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman, which was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize. Perhaps Jaschik's oversight could be due to the fact that Gaines had been hard at work during a time "when the stars of black literature [have been] women" (Jaschik 287). Although "Gaines [has] won his share of awards and plaudits . . . other black writers such as Toni Morrison and his friend Alice Walker excited far more attention. His was a quieter kind of fame, largely centered around Miss Jane, which has been translated into a dozen languages and is taught on numerous college campuses" (Laney 277). In June 1995, Gaines was awarded the prestigious MacArthur "genius grant," signaling that he had indeed arrived.

Despite the fact that their literary careers have taken off at different times, Toni Morrison and Ernest J. Gaines share a number of connections. Morrison and Gaines are both widely taught on college campuses. Even though Morrison is a northerner by birth, both writers are permanent fixtures in Southern literature classes because their works evoke the history and the culture of the South. However, thanks in part to Oprah Winfrey, who chose Beloved, Paradise, and A Lesson Before Dying as selections in her famed book club, both writers are experiencing a wider readership outside of the academic realm and an increase in financial success. Those books selected by the Oprah Winfrey book club have all gone on to become bestsellers. Another connection the two share is that both writers say that their writing has been strongly influenced by William Faulkner. Gaines used Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha as "a model for the fictional city, Bayonne, that would provide the setting for all his works" (Babb 4). Morrison's narrative strategies have been compared "to those of William Faulkner, who incidentally, along with Virginia Woolf, was the subject of her master's thesis" (Mobley 190). Morrison has also been paired with Faulkner in numerous essays and in two book-length works, What Else But Love? (1996) and Unflinching Gaze: Morrison and Faulkner Re-envisioned (1997). Despite these connections, an intertextual relationship between Morrison's and Gaines's texts has yet to be identified.

A very significant connection the two share, however, is that mother-son relationships figure prominently in their works. These relationships tend to be overlooked when scholars devote critical attention to the works of Gaines and Morrison. Most scholars tend to look at Gaines's works as concerning sons in search of fathers, and those who study Morrison look at her representations of mother-daughter relationships or simply her representations of motherhood. This oversight on the part of scholars is indicative of the lack of critical attention given to this area of study in the larger body of African American literature. When scholars devote attention to the area of black mother-child relationships, they tend to focus either on girl children primarily, or they conduct generic studies of black motherhood and do not focus specifically on the gender

of the child. As a result, black mother-son relationships have been ignored and overlooked by scholars.

Using black feminist, historical, sociological, and psychological critical approaches, I looked at the portrayals of black mother-son relationships in the texts of Ernest J. Gaines and Toni Morrison. The idea for a dissertation studying black mother-son relationships first came to me while teaching a freshman english multicultural literature class. I taught Gaines's "The Sky is Gray," Langston Hughes's "Mother to Son," and rapper Tupac Shakur's "Dear Mama" together. The texts seemed to speak to one another despite the fact that "Mother to Son" was written forty-seven years before the publication of "The Sky is Gray" and seventy-two years before the release of "Dear Mama." Whereas "Mother to Son" focuses on a mother admonishing her son, "So boy, don't you turn back./Don't you set down on the steps/'Cause you find it's kinder hard," "The Sky is Gray" and "Dear Mama" both express the sons' appreciation for their mothers. Throughout "The Sky is Gray," James, the eight-year-old protagonist, constantly states that he loves his mama and he looks forward to the summer, cotton-picking time, for "[he's] going to pick plenty cotton and get her a coat . . . a red one" (2678). Shakur, in "Dear Mama," also talks of how grateful he is to his mother for "all of the sweet things [she] did for [him]." He asserts, "there are no words to express how I feel/ You never kept a secret, always stayed real/ and I appreciate how you raised me/and all the extra love that you gave me." The song ends with a twist of sorts. Shakur closes by encouraging <u>his</u> mother to "hold on." Looking at "Mother to Son," "The Sky is Gray," and "Dear Mama" together, one witnesses a coming of age of the manchild. The Hughes and Gaines pieces offer representations of mothers guiding their sons and instilling in them the skills and knowledge they need to become men, whereas the Shakur piece shows a man grown to maturity who, having learned from his mistakes, now recognizes that his mother always had his best interests at heart and is now ready to step up and assume responsibility for his family and loved ones.

I became fascinated with the subject of black mother-son relationships and began looking for texts that focused on or included portrayals of the relationship. Most of the time, black mother-son relationships are viewed as being rather precarious and troubling. The three works by Gaines, Hughes, and Shakur, however, reflect relationships that are strained at times, but which remain intact, nurturing, and supportive. As I became immersed in my search, I discovered that the subject of black mother-son relationships has pervaded the texts of African American writers since the slave narratives. Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave (1845), My Bondage and My Freedom (1855), and The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass (1881) all reflect on the effects of slavery on Frederick Douglass's estranged relationships with his mother and grandmother. In his narratives, Douglass recounts the tale of his mother, Harriet Bailey, walking twelve miles "to see [her son] in the night travelling the whole distance on foot, after the performance of her day's work" (16). Taken from his mother at an early age, Douglass ponders, "For what this separation is done, I do not know, unless it be to hinder the development of the child's affection toward its mother, and to blunt and destroy the natural affection of the mother for the child. This is the inevitable result" (Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass 16). Although he did not have a close relationship with his mother, Douglass credits her with instilling in him the desire to learn to read: "I am happy to attribute any love of letters I may have, not to my presumed Anglo-Saxon paternity, but to the native genius of my sable, unprotected, and uncultivated mother—a mother who belonged to a race whose mental endowments are still disparaged and despised" (Life and Times of Frederick Douglass 11).

The slave narratives reveal that the institution of slavery failed to eradicate the bond between mother and child. Josiah Henson and Harriet Jacobs both reflect on the mother-son relationship; Henson speaks from the perspective of the son; whereas, Jacobs speaks from that of the mother. Like Douglass, they both credit their relationships with giving them the will to live and the strength to survive their bondage. Josiah Henson, upon whom Harriet Beecher Stowe's

Uncle Tom is based, praises his mother for instilling in him a sense of humanity and for teaching him how to be steadfast in his faith in God:

> From a little boy up I have remembered my mother; I remember what the prayers of my dear mother were; I have heard her pray for me: for she was a good Christian woman before I was born; and I thank God that I was born of a good Christian mother, a mother whose prayers fell on my ear. Of all earthly blessings there is none can approach to a good mother. I remember her entreaties; I remember her prayers to God for me. Blessed is the child, the son or daughter, that has the prayers of a mother. (Henson 28)

Although Jacobs's feelings are mixed, she prizes her son for affording her comfort during a most difficult and trying time. On the birth of her son, Jacobs comments, "The little vine was taking deep root in my existence, though its clinging fondness excited a mixture of love and pain. When I was most sorely oppressed I found a solace in his smiles. I loved to watch his infant slumbers; but always there was a dark cloud over my enjoyment. I could never forget that he was a slave" (Jacobs 62).

As witnessed in the texts of Douglass, Henson, and Jacobs, the mother-son relationship is central to the slave narrative. Growing up, I always heard the expression, "mama's baby, papa's maybe." I never quite understood the saying until I began to study the slave narratives. Within this tradition, numerous examples of "mama's baby, papa's maybe" present themselves. According to James Olney's "Master Plan for Slave Narratives," most slave narratives include "a sketchy account of parentage, often involving a white father." The institution of slavery was structured so that children inherited the legal condition of the mother. Therefore, a child born to a slave mother, regardless of whether the father was a freedman, was a slave. If a white man sired a child, the social and moral codes of slavery forced blacks to remain silent about the child's paternal heritage. To state publicly that the child's father was a white man was deemed a crime for which the culprit was certain to be punished by being sold away from family, physically

beaten, or even killed. Black fathers were effectively denied their parental rights and were rendered incapable of offering protection to black women and their offspring. Families were torn asunder and neither mother nor father could do anything to prevent it. During slavery, "only the bond between the mother and her child continually resisted the disruptive effect of economic interests that were inimical to family life among slaves" (Frazier 32).

In African American literature and in the African American community, the mother becomes more of a central figure than does the father because "[she] was the bulwark of the family even during slave days" (Frazier 309). This was due in part to the nineteenth century construct of the cult of true womanhood, which stated that true women were pure, pious, submissive, domestic, and the moral and spiritual centers of the family. Even though this ideal of womanhood was constructed for middle class white women, black women also struggled to achieve it, despite the realities of their lives. Thus, a woman's identity becomes tied to her role as mother. A child without a moral and spiritual mother was lost in the world, doomed. For this reason, "the birth of the child imposes certain obligations upon the mother because the mores of the Negro community make the relation between the mother and child the most sacred of the human relations" (318).

Just as black mother-son relationships pervade the slave narratives, they also inform the literary imagination of African American writers from Frances E. W. Harper to E. Lynn Harris. Literary representations of mother-son relationships vary throughout the canon of African American literature. These literary portrayals, written by female and male writers alike, are told from the perspective of both the mothers and the sons. The literature reflects these often problematic and difficult relationships; it also "reveals the diversity of mother-to-son relationships and the complexity of black life" (King and Mitchell 55). Faced with difficult decisions, black mothers struggle to make the right choices, to do what is best for their sons, but they sometimes fail. Not all of the literary portrayals of mother-son relationships are successful. Nor are all of them disastrous.

Some of the literary representations of mother-son relationships deal with issues of reunion and separation or loss. Harper's Iola Leroy (1892) has a touching scene during which the newly emancipated Robert Johnson embarks on a search to find his long lost mother. After being reunited with her, Johnson exclaims, "At last, I thought I would come and hunt you myself and, now that I have found you, I am going to take you home to live with me, and to be as happy as the days are long" (Harper 183). The unnamed protagonist in James Weldon Johnson's The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man (1912) is forced out of "the place of purity and safety in which [his mother's] arms held [him]" and into the world to make his way alone after his mother's death (Johnson 3).

Other representations of mother-son relationships reflect mothers attempting to rear sons who will continue the fight for social justice and equality. In Richard Wright's "Bright and Morning Star," published in Uncle Tom's Children (1940), Aunt Sue sacrifices her son Johnny Boy for the sake of the movement, the Communist Party, to which he is deeply committed. Sue could save her son's life by disclosing the names of the party members to the sheriff. Choosing instead to protect the anonymity and lives of the party members, Sue allows Johnny Boy to be tortured and killed because "her love for him was for his happiness" (Wright 187).

There are also stories of mothers who support and nurture their sons, as well as stories about those who emasculate and suffocate their sons. Ann Petry's The Street (1946) focuses on Lutie Johnson, a single mother struggling to protect her son, Bub, from the dangers of 116th Street in Harlem, New York, and to "bring him up so that he would be a fine, strong man" (Petry 72). Lorraine Hansberry's A Raisin in the Sun (1959) details Walter Lee Younger's attempt to wrest control away from his domineering mama, Lena Younger, and establish himself as the head of household. LeRoi Jones's Madheart (A Morality Play) (1966) shows Black Man attempting to escape the evil clutches of Mother, who privileges Sister and whiteness over her son. Mattie Michael in Gloria Naylor's The Women of Brewster Place (1982) suffocates her son, Basil, turning him into little more than "a little boy who would always need her" (Naylor 52). And in

Invisible Life (1994), written by E. Lynn Harris, Raymond Tyler relies on his mother for strength as he comes to terms with his sexuality and deals with the pressures of being a young black homosexual man in a white heterosexual world.

Despite these and numerous other literary representations of mother-son relationships, a search of the Modern Language Association's bibliography yields little scholarship on the subject. In fact, to my knowledge, there are only three studies that look at black mother-son relationships. In "Mothers and Sons: A View of Black Literature from South Africa, the West Indies, and America," Robert E. McDowell focuses on these three geographical areas in order to find common themes in the works of writers who concern themselves "with the young man growing up in the matriarchal family" (356). Diane Long Hoeveler's "Oedipus Agonistes: Mothers and Sons in Richard Wright's Fiction" "endeavors to show . . . that the pervasive violence toward women in Wright's fiction is caused by the irreconcilable oedipal dilemmas that afflict his heroes" (65). There is only one book-length work devoted to the study of black mother-son relationships. Joyce Elaine King and Carolyn Ann Mitchell's Black Mothers to Sons studies representations of mother-son relationships in African American literature in an attempt to gain insight into effective ways that mothers can rear sons and "teach parents and educators about the realities of black life and to dispel stereotypes of black people and families" (108).

As I began to organize my thoughts concerning this study, it appeared to me that there were too many primary sources and too few secondary sources, that I had collected enough primary texts on which to write a number of books. I realized that I needed to narrow my focus, so I decided to focus on Morrison and Gaines. The two appealed to me for a number of reasons. They have yet to be studied together. Also, they offer different views of mother-son relationships—Morrison writes from the perspective of the mother and Gaines from that of the son. However, the fact that both began their literary careers during the time of the Black Arts Movement, though neither was associated with the movement, appealed to me the most. At just about the same time that Morrison and Gaines began their literary careers, many contemporary

scholars of African American literature began their work, and the black mother came under tremendous scrutiny as a result. The publication of Senator Daniel P. Moynihan's The Negro Family: The Case for National Action, in 1965, commonly referred to as The Moynihan Report, was instrumental in perpetuating the notion of the black matriarch or the emasculating sapphire. The Moynihan Report held the black woman responsible for the demise of the black family. Findings of the report suggested that "the reason for welfare dependency, out-of-wedlock children, educational failure, crime and delinquency, and so on, is the unnatural dominance of women in the family structure" (5). Despite the inherent racism and sexism of the report, many artists of the Black Arts Movement accepted its conclusions, and accordingly began to vilify the black mother in their works.

When black artists and scholars looked to the black community, the myth of the black matriarch, the emasculating sapphire who rendered her sons helpless and dependent and taught her daughters to be controlling and domineering, appeared to be true. Scholars such as sociologist Robert Staples argued that black women were making unprecedented educational, occupational, and social gains at the expense of the black man. In 1979, Staples published "The Myth of the Black Macho: A Response to Angry Black Feminists" in The Black Scholar. Staples's controversial essay accuses Michele Wallace and Ntozake Shange of "selling out" the black man to white audiences for the sake of pecuniary gain. He criticizes what he judged to be their negative portrayals of black men in their works Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman (1979) and for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf (1975). Staples questions why "Ms Shange does not care to tell us the story of why so many black men feel their manhood, more accurately their feeling of self-respect, is threatened by black womanhood" (26). Citing black women's accomplishments and their willingness to cast black men in a negative light as part of the reason black men feel so threatened, Staples claims that because black men were unable to fulfill the socially prescribed roles of breadwinner and

protector, the act of "desertion . . . [became] the lower-class male's style of exercising his masculine perquisite" (28). He predicts that "as the percentage of female-headed households increases, and they may be the majority of the black families by the year 2000, the women will make all of the decisions because the men simply will not be there" (28).

The response to Staples's essay was so overwhelming that it provoked a special edition of The Black Scholar on "The Black Sexism Debate." This issue was divided into three sections: "Feminism and Black Liberation," "Political and Historical Aspects of Black/Female Relationships," and "Cultural and Interpersonal Aspects of Black Male/Female Relationships." Audre Lorde, Kalamu ya Salaam, Ntozake Shange, Juliane Malveaux, M. Ron Karenga, June Jordan, Sherley A. Williams, and Alvin F. Pouissant were among the people who entered the debate in support of or against Staples. In his introduction to the issue, Staples asserts that his essay was meant simply to spark a dialogue between black men and women. To his chagrin, however, he noticed that the responses were clearly divided along gender lines, with the women defending Shange, Wallace, and black womanhood, and the men defending Staples.

Somehow in this discussion of myths about the matriarch and black macho, the dialogue Staples set out to spark shut down. Black men continue to this day to protest black women's portrayals of black men. For instance, the cinematic debuts of Alice Walker's The Color Purple and Terri McMillan's Waiting to Exhale were surrounded by controversy. When the movies were released, black men protested how black male characters were represented. Black women responded that it was the responsibility of black men to offer their own positive images of black manhood. At some point during this battle of wills, black women scholars abandoned scholarship on the manchild. I do not think that this was done intentionally, but it happened nonetheless. It is almost as if some sort of mock divorce battle occurred whereby the mother gained custody of the girl child and the father custody of the son.

Consider, for example, the abundance of recent works, both fictional and critical, which study black womanhood and mother-daughter relationships; many of these reveal the mothers'

desire to pass on their stories, their heritage, and their tales about the significance and achievements of their lives to their daughters. Mary Helen Washington, Nellie McKay, Frances Smith Foster, Trudier Harris, Miriam DeCosta-Willis, Deborah McDowell, JoAnne Braxton, Sherley A. Williams, Sandra Govan, Hortense Spillers, Cheryl Wall, Barbara Christian, Hazel Carby, Toni Cade Bambara, Alice Walker, Paula Giddings, bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins, Patricia Bell Scott, and Gloria Wade-Gayles were/are just a few of the black feminist scholars "brilliantly moving the uniqueness of black womanhood from 'theme' to 'theory' and creating space in which only they could/would speak for themselves" (Wade-Gayles xv). Black feminist scholars are breaking ground in terms of defining themselves and producing texts that speak to the inherent value of their lives and their experiences.

Of the texts written by these women scholars, Alice Walker's In Search of Our Mother's Gardens is especially significant. In the book's prefatory definition of the term womanist, Walker asserts that womanists are "committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female." Womanists, according to Walker, are not "separatists" (xi). Thus, it is necessary that womanists look at the relationship they share with their girl and boy children; it is important that they pass on tales of the significance and achievements of their lives to their sons as well. If the goal of womanism is not to draw lines of separation between the two sexes, then black mother-son relationships need to be studied. Black women want the same thing for their girl and boy children: survival. Black mothers teach their daughters to "learn to expect to work, to strive for an education so they can support themselves, and to anticipate carrying heavy responsibilities in their families and communities because those skills are essential to their own survival and those for whom they will eventually be responsible" (Collins 123). They want their daughters to be involved in loving relationships with men, but, simultaneously, they do not want their daughters to depend on men to provide them with financial support, to take care of them. For black mothers know that in a society hostile to black men, that black women, although they may not want to,

often have to step forward and assume responsibility for the family. Thus, they want their daughters to be prepared to take care of themselves.

Mothers wish to prepare their sons for the world which awaits them; they want their sons to live unharmed, unmolested, untouched by racism and prejudice. Black mothers have witnessed for decades the senseless lynchings and brutal deaths of their sons. They want to "protect [their sons] from the economic and psychological violence this society wages against black people as they interact with its institutions and in the black community" (King and Mitchell 23); they want to see them grow from boys to men. Knowing that outspokenness, aggressiveness, and too much determination will kill them, they teach them to control those outbursts. In their sons they try to instill the qualities and skills that black women desire in potential mates. Black mothers "expect [their] sons to demonstrate: (1) responsibility through reciprocity; (2) honesty and loyalty through mutuality and deference; and (3) faith and compassion through inner strength and self-control" (38). Overburdened and tired of having to go it alone, black women attempt to raise sons who as men will be capable of standing strong in the face of oppression and adversity, who will be able to stand beside them and share the responsibility of rearing children and taking care of the household. If boy children never reach manhood, then they will never be able to fight for change and social equality. The black mother has before her a very difficult task in rearing children, especially black sons. Because she knows of the challenges and trials which await her son, she has the very unenviable duty of delivering him safely to manhood: "Thus at every point in her child's development, the Black mother, cognizant of the slave master, the lynch mob, the present-day legal system, had to teach her child to mask and repress his normal masculinity and aggressiveness lest these put his life in danger. She had to, in other words, prepare him for his subordinate place in the world" (Dance 127-28).

However, the black mother's actions have often been misconstrued, and she has been accused of being an accomplice in her own son's oppression. Psychiatrists William H. Grier and Price M. Cobbs, authors of Black Rage, assert, "As a result, black men develop considerable

hostility toward black women as the inhibiting instruments of an oppressive system. The woman has more power, more accessibility into the system, and therefore she is more feared, while at the same time envied. And it is her lot in life to suppress masculine assertiveness in her sons" (Grier 63).

Given the number of male children reared by single black mothers and the vilification of black mothers, it becomes essential to look at the relationship black mothers and sons share. According to 1996 U.S. Bureau of Census statistics, roughly two-thirds of the black children under the age of eighteen live with their mother only. Of 10,376,000 black children, 3,816,000 live with both parents, 6,056,000 live with their mother only, and 504,000 live with their father only. In comparison, of 53,944,000 white children, 41,609,000 live with both parents, 10,239,000 live with their mother only, and 2,096,000 live with their father only. For this reason, Staples's prediction, regardless of how farfetched it may seem, needs to be given serious consideration.

Outside the academic community, the realization is dawning that it is necessary to look at the black mother-son relationship because the plight of the black manchild is fraught with difficulties and life-threatening situations. No one will dispute this fact. Black mothers are losing their sons to drugs, gang violence, the criminal justice system, AIDS, and premature death. As a result, community activists are beginning to focus their attention on devising ways to save the manchild. Yet, black feminists in the academy have been rather reticent in terms of producing scholarship that studies the plight of the black manchild. During a 1998 lecture at the University of Georgia entitled "U.S. Feminism Revisited: Issues and Challenges," sociologist Patricia Hill Collins asserted that black feminists within the academy may have been slow to act on the behalf of the manchild because they have different concerns than black feminists outside it. Black feminists scholars concern themselves with eradicating gender discrimination and the glass ceiling: "Black women scholars have consistently investigated a series of core questions, namely the simultaneity of race, class, and gender oppression, the importance of self-definition in

resisting oppression, and analyses of specific topics such as motherhood and political activism . . .” (Collins 16). By contrast, Black feminists outside the academy, according to Collins, are more concerned with drugs, violence, and guns, those things which pose a threat to the safety of their children, especially their sons. As the thinkers, the intellectuals, we are obligated to a certain extent to study and write about the concerns of those within the academy, as well as “the everyday ideas of Black women not previously considered intellectuals” (15).

The dissertation is comprised of seven chapters. Chapter two argues that any woman who takes on a mothering responsibility is considered a mother in the black community. Such is also typically the case with the literary and fictional representations of mothers and children. Most of Gaines’s works feature “othermothers” and “community mothers” (terms taken from Rosalie Riegle Troester’s essay “Turbulence and Tenderness: Mothers, Daughters, and ‘Othermothers’ in Paule Marshall’s Brown Girl, Brownstone” published in Sage: A Scholarly Journal on Black Women I in Fall 1984). Morrison, however, does not seem to favor any particular category of black motherhood. Her novels present an assortment of bloodmother, othermother, and community mother figures. By using this larger, more encompassing definition of the mother, I widen the scope of my focus to include all mother figures.

Devoted to Gaines, chapters three and four examine the ways in which he writes from the gendered position of the son. Chapter three draws parallels between Gaines’s childhood experiences and his fictional portrayals of mother-son relationships. Reared by his maternal great aunt, whose strength and resilience he often praises, Gaines draws mother figures who are strong, positive, and uplifting influences in the home and community. Chapter four outlines the mothers’ three-step plan for transforming their sons from boys to men in Gaines’s works: selecting the One, the leader among the male children; showing him how to be socially responsible for his family and community; and having him act as a surrogate father figure for a troubled youth or young adults in his community.

Likewise, chapters five and six study Morrison, whose portrayals of mother-son relationships are colored somewhat by her experiences as a mother of two sons. Chapter five asserts that Morrison's depictions of her mother figures reflect the difficulties and complexities of motherhood for black women. A curious blend of abandoners, caregivers, culture bearers, mammies, matriarchs, murderers, and nurturers, her mothers are as imperfect as the world they inhabit. These flawed mothers, however, subvert the myth of the black matriarch who emasculates her sons and rears daughters in her likeness. Chapter six discusses how Morrison's novels privilege the sons, who bear the family's legacy and oral history, while sacrificing the daughters for the betterment of their brothers.

In this study, I hope to call attention to the subject of black mother-son relationships. By looking at the texts of Ernest J. Gaines and Toni Morrison, I attempt to 1) discuss mother-son relationships and the role of the family in the works of these two writers, 2) situate Gaines and Morrison within the tradition of African American writers whose literary imaginations have been informed by mother-son relationships, 3) show how black mothers fared in rearing black sons and how black sons fared under their mothers' tutelage, and 4) eradicate the myth of the black matriarch, for "the simplistic view of the black family as a matriarchy is an unfortunate theme repeated too often by scholars who should know better" (Grier and Cobbs 61). Neither Morrison nor Gaines has any hidden agenda. Nor does either have any particular loyalties to any group (i.e., feminism or Black Aestheticism) that might influence his or her characterization of black mothers and sons. The only loyalty that I can think of, perhaps, is their commitment to revealing the true nature, the humanity, of individuals—mothers and sons, men and women, blacks and whites. It is not my intention to advise mothers on how they should rear their sons. Instead, I hope to initiate a dialogue between mothers and sons, men and women, and black feminists within and outside of the academy that has been a long time coming.

CHAPTER 2

ARE YOU MY MOTHER?: DETERMINING WHO IS A BLACK MOTHER

Are You My Mother?, a children's beginner reader by P. D. Eastman, is the story of a newborn baby bird's search for its mother. Anticipating the arrival of her baby, the mother bird goes out in search of food. No sooner does she leave the nest, than the baby bird hatches. Because he does not see his mother anywhere, the baby bird decides to go look for her. However, because he has only recently hatched, he must walk because he is unable to fly. The first thing he encounters on his search is a kitten. "Are you my mother?" asks the baby bird of the kitten, who simply ignores him. The baby bird subsequently meets a hen, a dog, a cow, a boat, and a plane. Unaware of what his mother looks like or who she is, the baby bird asks each one "are you my mother?" thinking that he has found her. They in turn each reject the baby bird and none offer him assistance because biologically he is not theirs or even of their kind. Fortunately, the baby bird and his mother are reunited at the end of the story. He is returned to his home through the assistance of a bulldozer, which the baby bird calls a snort based upon the sound it makes—snort. The baby bird's mother returns, with dinner in tow, to the nest soon thereafter. Excited to see his mother, whom he recognizes on sight, the baby bird tells his mother, "You are not a kitten or a hen or a dog. You are not a cow or a Snort! You are a bird, and you are my mother!" The two embrace, and because this is a children's story, they live happily ever after. The end.

As I began to organize my study of black mother-son relationships, Are You My Mother? came to mind because it serves as such a stark contrast to the texts of Ernest J. Gaines and Toni Morrison. The baby bird in the children's story has an unfortunate experience while it is out searching for its mother. Unable to fly, the baby bird is totally defenseless and cannot protect itself. As evidenced by its chance encounter with the kitten (which luckily for the baby bird is no

more than a baby itself) and the bulldozer, it has not an idea as to who or what are its enemies—natural or manmade. However, in the literary works of Gaines and Morrison, motherless boy children, unlike the baby bird, are not forced to wander around aimlessly and unprotected because their mother is unable to care for them, has died, or has flown the coop. They are often taken in and cared for by women who are not their biological mothers. These women characters take on mothering roles and are considered by these children to be mother figures. Thus, in researching mother-son relationships, I began to discover that often in African American literature instances of boys and young men reared by women other than their biological mothers occurred rather frequently. Such is the case with the texts of Ernest J. Gaines and Toni Morrison. As a result, I was forced to decide whether to include these relationships, even though the women are not the biological mothers of the child and, therefore, it could be argued, they do not represent "true" or "real" black mother-son relationships.

In the end, I decided to include these pairings in my study because to omit them would be to ignore a number of important relationships that, while they may not be recognized in the Eurocentric view as "traditional" (i.e., biological) mother-son relationships, are regarded as such in the African-American community. By focusing solely on the biological mothers, I would be dismissing the importance other women play in the development of the black male child. But most importantly, I would be overlooking the fact that African American literature, which often reflects and imitates the mores, customs, and realities of the African American community, defines a mother as any woman who nurtures and provides for a child whether she is the child's biological parent or not. The reader needs to bring to the literature this larger, more encompassing definition of the mother. Therefore, in order to study black mother-son relationships in the literary works of Ernest J. Gaines and Toni Morrison, I felt that it was imperative that I adhere to the African American community's definition of mother and include all women who function as mother figures.

According to sociologist Patricia Hill Collins, author of Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment (1990) and "The Meaning of Motherhood in Black Culture and Black Mother-Daughter Relationships," it is a common practice for women who are not related to a child to assume responsibility, either full or shared, for his or her care:

> In African American communities, the boundaries distinguishing biological mothers of children from other women who care for children are often fluid and changing. Biological mothers or bloodmothers are expected to care for their children. But African and African-American communities have also recognized that vesting one person with full responsibility for mothering a child may not be wise or possible. As a result, "othermothers," women who assist bloodmothers by sharing mothering responsibilities, traditionally have been central to the institution of black motherhood. ("The Meaning of Motherhood in Black Culture and Black Mother-Daughter Relationships" 46-47)

Using terms taken from Rosalie Riegle Troester's essay "Turbulence and Tenderness: Mothers, Daughters, and 'Othermothers' in Paule Marshall's Brown Girl, Brownstone" (published in SAGE: A Scholarly Journal on Black Women I in Fall 1984), Collins classifies black mothers into three categories: 1) biological or bloodmothers, 2) othermothers, and 3) community mothers. As the title suggests, biological or bloodmothers are just that—the birthmothers of the child. Othermothers are normally related to the child; they are "grandmothers, sisters, aunts, or cousins" who "[take] on child-care responsibilities for one another's children" (Black Feminist Thought 119-20). Contrary to othermothers, community mothers are fictive kin. These women, whose connection to the child is through the community, not by blood, are neighbors, friends of the family, and sometimes even strangers who simply express an interest in the child's well being.

Many black children have been reared by othermothers and community mothers when their biological mothers either were unable to or did not care to raise them.

What is interesting is that although Gaines and Morrison do not use these terms, their works are often populated by an amalgamation of biological or bloodmothers, othermothers, and community mothers. Gaines offers very few portrayals of biological mothers. Amy in "The Long Day in November," Octavia in "The Sky is Gray," and Johanna in In My Father's House make up what I consider to be his significant biological mother characters. Pauline Guerine in Of Love and Dust and Alma Martin in In My Father's House are also the biological mothers of boy children, but their relationships with their sons are not central to the novels. With the exception of Johanna, whose son Etienne is a grown man, the biological mothers in Gaines's canon are normally present in the household when the sons are young boys, generally no more than eight or nine years old, but they tend to be absent when the sons are older. Both Sonny, who is six years old, and James, who is eight years old, have mothers at home, Amy and Octavia, respectively. Most of Gaines's works are peopled by othermothers and community mothers. The reason is that his biological mothers, out of necessity, move up North in search of suitable employment and leave their young sons behind to be cared for by maternal great aunts and godmothers.

An example of such a situation occurs in Gaines's novel Catherine Carmier. Jackson Bradley, the protagonist of Catherine Carmier, is reared by his maternal great aunt, Charlotte Moses, after his father abandoned him before he was born and his mother left the parish in search of work. Although Charlotte did not give birth to Jackson, she acts as his mother. She assumes responsibility for Jackson's physical well being and his education. Charlotte works hard to provide Jackson with a college education. Upon Jackson's return to the parish ten years later with a college degree, Charlotte prays to God, thanking him for returning her child back home. Talking about herself, she states, "Eh, Lord, they beg and beg for You to send they children back, and soon as You does, instead of they getting down on they knees and thanking You, they start thinking 'bout graves. Let me get on in this house and kneel myself down on that floor, yeah"

(36). Charlotte's use of "they children" reveals that she views Jackson as her own, as her son. Likewise, Jackson, though he feels encumbered by Charlotte at times and though he is reunited with his biological mother when he goes off to be educated, views Charlotte as a mother figure. Jackson admits that "he loved her—he probably loved her more than he did anyone or anything else . . ." (27).

Grant Wiggins, in A Lesson Before Dying, is also reared by his great aunt, Tante Lou, after his parents "moved to California during the war" (104). Like Charlotte, who has "sacrificed too much of her life to educate [Jackson]" (Catherine Carmier 35), Tante Lou has given unselfishly of herself so that Grant could better himself. By "cheating herself here, cheating herself there, but always telling [Grant] she's all right" (A Lesson Before Dying 218), Tante Lou is able to help Grant get through school. Reverend Ambrose, the parish's spiritual leader, reminds Grant of the physical discomfort Tante Lou endured so that Grant would be able to graduate from college: "I've seen her hands bleed from picking cotton. I've seen the blisters from the hoe and the cane knife. At that church, crying on her knees. You ever looked at the scabs on her knees, boy?" (218). As most mothers would do for their children, Tante Lou has sacrificed and deprived herself of basic necessities, material possessions, and physical comfort so that her child could have a better life than her own. She toils in the fields so that Grant does not have to endure the mindless and backbreaking labor of fieldwork. Because of her efforts, Grant, the parish's teacher, holds a highly respectable position. Although he must suffer the racist school superintendent's annual visits, he does not have to deal with the inhumane treatment that the white overseer and plantation owner dole out on a daily basis to the field workers.

Whereas Jackson Bradley and Grant Wiggins are reared by othermothers, Marcus Payne, in Of Love and Dust, is reared by a community mother—his godmother. Even though Miss Julie Rand has raised her own children, who have children of their own, she assumes parental responsibility for then twelve-year-old Marcus after "his mama died and his daddy just ran off and left him" (Of Love and Dust 12). Unlike Charlotte and Tante Lou, Miss Julie Rand, who

gains custody of Marcus after she has retired from her position as a cook on the plantation, lacks the money needed to take care of Marcus. Thus, instead of being prepared for high school and college, Marcus is forced "to get a job to help support [himself]" (250). As a result, he does not meet the same end as do Grant and Jackson. Whereas they go off to college, Marcus runs afoul of the law—twice. Both times he is guilty of committing violent acts, one of which is a murder.

Certainly this is not the life Miss Julie Rand envisioned for Marcus. Her comments to Jim Kelly suggest that she feels that her age prevented her from providing for Marcus properly: "I did my best to raise him right, but you can see I'm old" (12). Although Miss Julie Rand feels that she failed Marcus in some respects, her dedication to him, even when he is in trouble, proves that she has given him no less love and attention than she gave her own children. As a mother figure, she does not turn her back on Marcus. Instead, she continues to support him, and she even goes so far as to convince her former employer to intercede on Marcus's behalf and save him from the state penitentiary. Going to her boss to ask for a favor of this nature no doubt had to be a humbling experience for her. But Miss Julie Rand, aware that the "pen can kill a man" (11), is willing to sacrifice her pride in order to give Marcus a chance at survival.

Like Marcus, Jefferson, in A Lesson Before Dying, is reared by his godmother, Miss Emma. He, too, is not college educated, and he, too, runs afoul of the law. However, Jefferson is found guilty of a crime he did not commit. No mention is made as to the whereabouts of Jefferson's parents. Readers are simply informed that Miss Emma "has been everything to him—mama, grandmother, godmother—everything" (A Lesson Before Dying 8). Like the other mothers, Miss Emma is also willing to make sacrifices for her child. When Jefferson is sentenced to death by electrocution, Miss Emma, like Miss Julie Rand, goes to her former employer for assistance in getting permission for Grant to visit Jefferson in jail. She realizes that she cannot save her godson's life. Without a doubt, Jefferson will die in the electric chair. Miss Emma goes to her former employer because she wants to ensure that Jefferson's life has not been in vain. She wants Jefferson, who is only twenty-one-years old, to die like a man.

Whereas Gaines's fiction tends to offer more examples of othermothers and community mothers, Morrison's fiction is populated by more bloodmothers. Mrs. Breedlove and Sammy, as well as Geraldine and Junior in The Bluest Eye; Ajax and his mother in Sula; Ruth and Milkman in Song of Solomon; Halle and Baby Suggs in Beloved; Joe Trace and Wild in Jazz; and Soane and her two sons, Easter and Scout, in Paradise, represent Morrison's black bloodmother-son pairings. Of her seven novels, Tar Baby is the only one that does not depict a relationship between a biological mother and her male child. Unlike Gaines, whose portrayals of mother-son relationships are based somewhat on his childhood experiences and his relationship with the maternal great aunt who reared him, there is no clear-cut reason to explain why Morrison offers more biological mother-son pairings. Perhaps Morrison, a mother of two sons, prefers her fictional bloodmother-son relationships because they more closely resemble her own experiences.

In addition to bloodmothers, Morrison's novels present an assortment of othermothers and community mothers. Jimmy in The Bluest Eye and Pilate in Song of Solomon are two of her othermother characters; Rhoda Williams in Jazz and the community women in Paradise represent some of her community mother figures. Morrison's portrayals of othermothers and community mothers differ somewhat from Gaines's depictions. In Gaines's novels, these women mother children whose biological mothers have gone off in search of employment; however, in Morrison's novels, these women mother children discarded by biological mothers who are mentally incompetent or incapable of properly providing for their progeny. The care that the children receive from their adoptive parents, however, is comparable to what the mothers give their biological children. There is no difference in the care adoptive children receive because community mothers and othermothers do not distinguish between them and their biological children. Although there are occasions when circumstances force the needs of children upon them and they cannot decline to help, most community mothers and othermothers usually become mothers by choice. Unlike biological mothers, who may have been the victims of unfortunate

circumstances such as unplanned or teenage pregnancy, sexual assault, or even poverty, they generally decide if and when they will become parents.

It is uncertain as to whether Jimmy, described as a maiden lady, did not have children as a result of personal choice or circumstance, but her decision to rear Cholly, even though she is advanced in years, is clearly a choice. Jimmy rears her great nephew after his mother abandoned him. Cholly's biological mother, rumored to be insane, "wrapped him in two blankets and one newspaper and placed him on a junk heap by the railroad" (The Bluest Eye 132). Because Cholly was but four days old and unnamed when his mother "threw" him away, he had yet to be given a name. Jimmy names him after her brother—"Cholly Breedlove. A good man" (133). Her naming of him indicates that she wants to give him an advantage in life, that she wants the best for him. When Cholly asks why he was not named after his biological father, Samson Fuller, Jimmy replies, "Ain't no Samson never came to no good end" (133). Bearing in mind the biblical Samson's gullibility and downfall and Samson Fuller's irresponsibility and failure to claim his child, Jimmy opts for a name that speaks of strength and success. By naming Cholly after a good man, Jimmy believes she has predestined him to follow in his namesake's footsteps. Cholly, however, fails to escape the fact that he is the son of a Samson. His downfall, like the biblical Samson's, is linked to a woman.

Unlike Jimmy, Pilate comes to mother Milkman not because his mother abandoned him, but because Ruth is unable to help Milkman in his quest for personal identity, for she is devoid of such an identity herself. Even though Milkman does not become acquainted with his Aunt Pilate until he is twelve years old, Pilate is just as responsible for him as his other, if not more so. Ruth explains to Milkman the role Pilate played in his conception and his birth: "She saved my life. And yours, Macon. She saved yours, too. She watched you like you were her own" (Song of Solomon 125-26). Growing up in the Dead household has left Milkman emotionally bankrupt. He is selfish and inconsiderate of others. Guitar Bains, his best friend, tells him that "he wasn't serious, and didn't have any fellow feeling—none whatsoever" (296). Pilate, however, guides

him on his journey to selfhood and makes his life meaningful. She teaches Milkman how to "give up the shit that weighs you down" so that he can fly (179). With her help, Milkman learns about his culture and his family history; he learns the value of human life; and he learns that "if you surrendered to the air, you could ride it" (337).

Rhoda Williams, who functions as a community mother, bears similarities to Jimmy and Pilate, both of whom are othermothers. Like Pilate, Rhoda Williams has children of her own. Like Jimmy, she undertakes to rear a child abandoned by his mother. Shortly after giving birth, it becomes obvious that Wild wanted nothing to do with her child; she "would not hold the baby or look at it" (Jazz 170). Although Joe bore no kinship ties to them, Rhoda and her husband, Frank, "took [him] in right away and raised him along with six of their own" (123). Like Jimmy, Rhoda names the child after one of her family members. She names him "Joseph after her father" (123), which signifies that he is an accepted member of the family. Parents generally name their children after their own parents and beloved family members as a way to honor and respect their relatives or to keep their family name alive. That Rhoda would name Joe after her father underscores the fact that she thinks of him in the same light as she does her own.

Rhoda does not attempt to hide the fact that Joe is not her biological child, yet she does not treat him any differently than her own children. Joe recalls that "she never pretended I was her natural child. When she parceled out chores or favors, she'd say, 'You are just like my own'" (123). Therefore, all of the children receive chores and praise in equal measure. Victory, Rhoda's son, alludes to his mother's refusal to favor her biological children over her adopted child. When Joe tells Victory "Your mama ain't my mama," Victory responds, "If she ain't, who is?" (124). Victory's comment can be understood in two ways. Either Victory, whose relationship with Joe is described as being "closer than many brothers" (123), never discerned that they were not blood brothers, never picked up on his mother's comments that Joe was "just like her own," and never observed his mother dole out any preferential treatment, or Victory's response may be a challenge rather than a question. Instead of asking Joe who is, Victory is

challenging Joe's claim that Rhoda is not his mother by daring him to name the person who is more deserving of being called his mother than Rhoda. Regardless of how the question is perceived, his comment suggests that Rhoda has provided Joe with the same care and affection as her own children.

Gaines and Morrison, like individuals in the black community, refer to women who undertake the task of caring for children as mothers. Unlike Collins and other scholars, they do not articulate the bloodmother, othermother, and community mother distinctions. Historically, "neighbors cared for one another's children" and did not distinguish between their biological and adopted children (Collins 120). Saying that the mothers do not make distinctions does not mean that they conceal the child's true parentage. It simply means that the mothers rear their adopted children in the same manner as their biological children, or, as in the case of Rhoda Williams, they rear them alongside their biological children. The adopted children receive the same care, praise, and punishment as the biological children. Just like biological mothers, othermothers and community mothers undertake the task of fulfilling their children's clothing, housing, nutritional, educational, and emotional needs to the best of their abilities. Othermothers and community mothers are as loving, caring, giving, and, at the same time, imperfect as bloodmothers, especially Morrison's mother figures (which I will discuss in detail in Chapter 5). The purpose of including othermothers and community mothers is not to canonize or glorify them for all of the sacrifices they make, but to emphasize the fact that mothering a child is a shared responsibility in the African American community. Motherhood is not limited solely to the biological parent.

Contemporary scholars such as Collins; Niara Sudarkasa, author of The Strength of Our Mothers: African and African American Women and Families: Essays and Speeches (1996); Deborah Gray White, author of Ar'n't I A Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South (1985); and Joyce Ladner, author of Tomorrow's Tomorrow: The Black Woman (1971, 1995) argue that the practice of caring for and mothering other women's children stems from a West African model of motherhood. According to Sudarkasa, "the picture of early African American

families that emerges from the narratives by the Blacks themselves and from the descriptions given by others is that of essentially African family structure, behavior, and values being adapted to the political, economic, and social conditions and constraints imposed by slavery and by the conditions of subjugation under which most 'free' blacks lived" (81).

In West African societies, Sudarkasa writes, extended families generally reside together in "a cluster of dwellings known as a compound" (81). Depending upon the rules of descent, couples move into the compound of the bride or the groom. For instance, if the society followed rules of patrilineal descent (meaning the familial lineage and property is passed through the father line), "the core group of the compound consisted of a group of brothers, their adult sons, and grandsons" (81). These men and their wives and children all live together as an extended family. Each brother and his family resides in their own space, their own dwelling within the compound. According to Deborah Gray White, "the African's definition of family extended far beyond parents and children, or the nuclear family, to aunts, uncles, and grandparents. Since a husband and wife did not alone compose a family there was no reason for them to reside alone together" (66). Husbands and wives generally shared separate spaces within their own dwelling. The husband had his own room and the wife hers. Young children slept with their mother, and older children slept in communal rooms designated for boys or girls (Sudarkasa 83). Within each family's dwelling within the compound, there existed sex-segregated spaces and duties for the men and women.

Even though each husband and wife has a specific space within the dwelling, all of the members of the extended family "cooperated in food and craft production and shared responsibility for the well-being of the entire membership of the compound" (82). Women, through their economic and mothering roles, were vital to the family structure. In addition to attending to their children and their husbands, they were expected to contribute to the household's economic livelihood. Thus, many women worked outside of the home as "farmers, food processors, weavers, potters, etc." (Sudarkasa "Female Employment and Family Organization in

West Africa" 54) Because the progression of the familial line was also important, motherhood was highly valued. Joyce Ladner asserts that "even in the societies where descent was patrilineal or double, there was a high regard for the mother's function as child bearer and perpetuator of the ancestral heritage. This emanates from the value that is attached to the childbearing powers of women" (8). Women were expected to become mothers. A woman's inability to bear children could result in her becoming an outcast or could give a husband grounds for a divorce (9).

In order to enable women to balance the responsibilities of work outside the home and domestic chores, according to Collins, "childcare was a collective responsibility, a situation fostering cooperative, age-stratified, woman-centered 'mothering' networks" ("The Meaning of Motherhood in Black Culture and Black Mother-Daughter Relationships" 45). As a result, "young married women could engage in productive work outside the home because older women assisted with the childrearing and young unmarried women helped with other domestic chores" (Sudarkasa The Strength of Our Mothers 106). Therefore, children were reared and looked after by women who were not their biological mothers. Anyone could discipline a wayward child, and should something happen to the child's mother, another relative or kinswoman would "adopt" the child and oversee its rearing.

In the late 1930s and early 1940s, however, sociologist E. Franklin Frazier and anthropologist Melville J. Herskovits waged a debate over whether black families in bondage bore traces of African influences. Frazier, author of The Negro Family in the United States (1939), argued that the African slave retained only "scraps of memories" of his ancestral habits and customs:

> . . . American slavery destroyed household gods and dissolved the bonds of sympathy and affection between men of the same blood and household. Old men and women might have brooded over memories of their African homeland, but they could not change the world about them. Through force of circumstances, they had to acquire a new language, adopt new habits of

> labor, and take over, however imperfectly, the folkways of the American environment. Their children, who knew only the American environment, soon forgot the few memories that had been passed on to them and developed new motivations and modes of behavior in harmony with the New World. Their children's children have often recalled with skepticism the fragments of stories concerning Africa which have been preserved in their families. But, of the habits and customs as well as the hopes and fears that characterized the life of their forebearers in Africa, nothing remains. (Frazier 15)

Herskovits, author of The Myth of the Negro Past (1941), asserted that, contrary to Franklin's beliefs, many "Africanisms" survived slavery and could be seen in the contemporary lifestyle and culture of black people through their family structure and organization, religion, music, dance, and the arts. The debate continued into the 1960s, and those scholars who entered it took one side or another. Nathan Glazer and Daniel P. Moynihan, authors of Beyond the Melting Pot (1963), argued that "the Negro is only an American and nothing else. He has no values and culture to guard and protect" (53). Sudarkasa notes that "the question of the link between African and African American family organization was never fully explored by Frazier and Herskovits, or the other scholars who subsequently continued the debate" (78).

However, in the 1970s, the publication of such books as John Blassingame's The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South (1972), Eugene Genovese's Roll Jordan Roll: The World the Slaves Made (1974), and Herbert Gutman's The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom (1976), according to Sudarkasa, "greatly expanded our knowledge of the major patterns and variations in types of African American households and wider family groups" (79). Historians' use of plantation records, early census data, and other public documents challenged views of black family life in the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries (Sudarkasa 79):

> Data from various collections of "slave narratives" and those provided by Gutman and others show that consanguineally based extended families persisted among Blacks in America. The political, economic, and social conditions of slavery did not permit the replication of African families, but neither did they prevent the transformation of these institutions to serve the needs of the new environment. In fact, the conditions of slavery fostered the persistence of these groups, which emphasized collective responsibility and reciprocity in the face of adversity. In fact, it was the extended families (not the two-parent households existing in isolation) that enabled Blacks to bear the pain of forcible separation from loved ones; obtain help in bringing up their children, attending their sick, and mourning their dead; form cooperative work groups; "cover" for each other at critical times; plot insurrections and escape from bondage; and generally persevere despite the oppression of slavery. Contrary to Gutman's view, these networks did not develop sui generis in America in response to the conditions of slavery. They were re-creations, albeit with modifications, of groups that had existed in Africa that had served many of the same purposes they would later serve in the United States. (Sudarkasa 83-84)

Thus, the narratives and records reveal that the conditions of slavery necessitated that bondsmen and bondswomen adapt the African model of family to complement their life in bondage. The slave's family and community structure also required that all of the members take responsibility for the well being and safety of the entire group. Sudarkasa demonstrated that there did exist a community amongst slaves, who gained strength and encouragement from one another.

Within the slave community, female slaves established a woman-centered support network, much like the one employed by West African women, that enabled them to cope with

the pressures of field labor and motherhood. Because of the workload slave women had to endure, "neither the slaveowner nor slave society expected the biological mother of a child to fulfill all of that child's needs. Given the circumstances, the responsibilities of motherhood had to be shared, and this required close female cooperation" (White 127). Thus, bondswomen relied upon what Collins describes as "cooperative, age-stratified, woman-centered 'mothering' networks" that were influenced by and modeled after those employed by West African women. With workdays that started before sunup and ended after sundown, female slaves found the task of meeting the slaveowner's and overseer's demands alongside of rearing children overwhelming, a task that few were able to satisfy. Unable to negotiate the amount of work expected of them, the women ensured that their children were looked after and provided for by leaving them in the care of those individuals considered too young or too old for fieldwork. These child caregivers functioned in the same manner as contemporary babysitters or daycare center workers in that they "did not assume the full maternal burden but they did spend as much or more time with a slave child than did the biological mother" (127).

The enslaved woman's support network extended beyond daycare to include foster parenting or adoption (should the mother become leased to another slaver, be sold away, or die). Frederick Douglass recalls that his "first experience of life . . . began in the family of my grandmother and grandfather, Betsey and Isaac Bailey" (The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass 2). While his mother, Harriet Bailey, was leased out to another plantation twelve miles away from her son, Douglass was left in his grandmother's care. Although he was separated from his mother, Douglas was not deprived of motherly attention and affection. In fact, according to Douglass, during the time that he was separated from his mother, he was so well taken care of and provided for that he was ignorant of his bondage/enslavement. Douglass proclaims, "Living thus with my grandmother, whose kindness and love stood in place of my mother's, it was some time before I knew myself to be a slave" (4). In her daughter's absence, Betsey Bailey assumed the

role of mother, and even though Douglass was aware that she was not his biological mother, he held her in the same esteem as he would hold his mother.

Although the slaves sang "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Chile," "the female slave community made sure that no child was truly motherless" (White 128). Because of the female slave support network, "orphans had little difficulty in finding mothers among the women at the quarters" (Frazier 46). According to Deborah Gray White, it was not uncommon for fathers to "act as both mother and father . . ." (128). In the event of the mother's death, sometimes the father oversaw the care of the child(ren). An example of such a situation occurs in Harriet Jacobs's Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl. Harriet Jacobs's father survived his wife, who died when their daughter was six years old. As a result, he took on the mothering responsibilities for Harriet and her brother. As a carpenter, Jacobs's father was "considered so intelligent and skillful in his trade, that, when buildings out of the common line were to be erected, he was sent from long distances, to be head workman" (Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl 5). He instilled in his children the belief "that they were human beings" (10). However, he was unable to spend as much time with his children because of the demands on his time and talent. Therefore, Harriet Jacobs's care was later discharged to her female relatives—her aunt and her grandmother. According to White, " . . . when slaves, as opposed to the master, determined the child care it was usually a woman who became a child's surrogate mother. Most of the time that woman was a relative, usually an aunt or a sister, but in the absence of female relatives, nonkin women assumed the responsibility" (128). The male slaves deferred to the female slaves' opinion about who could provide the best care for children because they both adhered to the gender roles which their West African ancestors followed; both men and women upheld the belief that motherhood was valued and the mother-child bond was central to the development of the community.

Like Douglass's grandmother, Jacobs's grandmother and aunt became her surrogate mothers. Of her aunt Nancy, Jacobs says, "she was my mother's twin sister, and as far was in her power, she supplied a mother's place to us orphans" (145). Nancy was often a source of strength

and encouragement for the young woman. When others discouraged Jacobs from running away, Nancy encouraged her to proceed with her plans. When Jacobs felt that she could not carry on, Nancy urged her to persevere. However, her grandmother, who was charged with the care of Harriet and her brother, William, had a greater impact on Jacobs's life. Upon her daughter's death, Jacobs's grandmother "promised to be a mother to her grandchildren, so far as she might be permitted to do so" (10). Not only did the grandmother assume parental responsibility for the children, she also fulfilled a number of the master's duties. She furnished her grandchildren, as did most slave parents, with religious instruction and emotional support, and she provided them with food and clothing, a duty the slaveowner usually oversaw. Jacobs recalls, ". . . my grandmother, to avoid detaining me, often stood at the gate with something for my breakfast or my dinner. I was also indebted to her for all my comforts, spiritual or temporal. It was her labor that supplied my scanty wardrobe" (11).

In addition to caring for Jacobs and her sibling, the grandmother reared Jacobs's children during the time Harriet spent hiding from her lecherous master in her loophole of retreat. Just as she had done for her grandchildren, Jacobs's grandmother became a mother to her great grandchildren. After learning that her children, recently purchased by their father, had been placed in her grandmother's care, Jacobs states, "I had my season of joy and thanksgiving. It was the first time since my childhood that I had experienced any real happiness" (109). Although she is cooped up in her six by nine by three foot rodent-infested garret that offers no protection from the elements and is unable to talk to or touch her children, Jacobs is comforted because she knows her children are in good hands and they will be well taken care of.

As witnessed in the narratives of Douglass and Jacobs, slave communities resembled extended families and every member was responsible and accountable for the well being of all of its members—kin or nonkin. Female slaves came to one another's assistance out of a sense of duty or obligation. But the feelings of affection they had for one another ought not be dismissed. Many women took in children (whether they were related or not) because either they shared a

close, intimate relationship with the child's mother and felt responsible for its safety or they took a liking to the child and consequently came to regard it as their own. Regardless of the reason, the sense of obligation and the bonds of affection transcended blood lines and, as a result, "simulated a more generalized ethic of care where Black women feel accountable to all of the Black community's children" (Collins 49).

African American literature reveals that the sense of communal responsibility for the well being of all children remained intact after slavery was abolished. Collins asserts that "the relationship between bloodmothers and othermothers survived the transition from a slave community to post emancipation Southern rural agriculture. Children in southern rural communities were not solely the responsibility of their biological mothers. Aunts, grandmothers, and others who had time to supervise children served as othermothers" (122). The reason for this was that even though blacks were free, in the literal sense, the conditions of slavery still remained. The Reconstruction period afforded blacks some protection and comfort, and some blacks even achieved a modicum of political power, education, and wealth. However, the enactment of Jim Crow laws deprived blacks of the social gains they had made. In Southern rural communities, blacks, out of necessity, continued to rely on domestic and field labor for their economic livelihood. Black women and men obtained no more protection than they had in slavery. In fact, many blacks fared worse than they had in slavery because now that they were not considered to be someone's property, their lives were of little significance. According to John Callahan, author of "Lynching," "During slavery anyone doing violence to a slave had to answer to that slave's master; otherwise the full weight of the law could be brought down upon whoever presumed to raise a hand against another man's human property. With the rise of lynching after the Civil War and the cessation of Reconstruction there was no such restraint" (Callahan 465). Without a slaveowner to "protect" them, their lives could therefore be extinguished without fear of consequence. As a result, lynch law ruled, and the safety of the black community depended still, if not more so, on the actions and efforts of its members.

At the turn of the twentieth century, many rural blacks began a mass exodus to cities, fleeing "from the oppressive South into a North that was ostensibly freer" (Griffin 497). After arriving in the North, some blacks sought to lose their Southern ways, namely their style of dress, accent, and form of employment. Yet the extended family networks survived black people's migration from the South to the North. Patricia Hill Collins and bell hooks assert that these networks were more predominant and effective "in small community settings where people know and trust one another" (Collins 144). The inhabitants of Southern rural communities typically maintained a sense of intimacy and trust that people who lived in Northern cities lacked. However, communal mothering efforts did exist and still do exist in Northern as well as Southern cities. African American literature supports the argument that a number of black women retained their sense of communal obligation and continued to guide and protect all black children, whether they were related or not, even after they migrated to cities up North.

Morrison's work confirms that communal mothering occurred in the North as well as the South. Gaines's texts are set in small, close-knit communities in rural Louisiana and often depict characters struggling to eke out a living on the parish plantation while attempting to live unmolested and with dignity. Although Morrison's works are studied in Southern literature classes, many of Morrison's texts are set in areas outside of the South. The Bluest Eye, Sula, and Beloved are set in Ohio, which, before the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, was considered a Mecca by fugitive slaves who knew that if they made it to Ohio, a free state, their freedom would be ensured and they could not be captured and returned to their master. The action in Song of Solomon and Jazz occurs in Detroit, Michigan, and Harlem, New York, respectively. Yet in both novels the characters have ties to rural communities in Virginia. While Jazz portrays Joe and Violet Trace's migration from the South to the North, Song of Solomon deals with Milkman Dead's journey to the South to (re)connect with his family's past and legacy. Tar Baby is set outside of the United States in the Isle de las Chevaliers; Paradise is set in Oklahoma. But Morrison's portrayals of communal mothering in places such as Harlem, Michigan, and

Medallion, Ohio, underscore the fact that extended family networks exist in the North as well as the South.

The slave narratives and memoirs of African Americans not only corroborate the claim that extended family networks survived emancipation, the 20th century, and the great migration North; they also support the claim that African American fiction writers often provide an accurate depiction of the times that their works concern. African American fiction writers often rely on historical documents and narratives to inform their literary portrayals. For instance, Morrison's Beloved is a fictional treatment of the life of Margaret Garner, a slave woman who killed her infant daughter and attempted to kill her other three children rather than have them returned to slavery because she determined that "they will not live like that . . ." (Bouson 133, Moyers 272). Also, Morrison's Paradise "is based, in part, on her readings about the migration of ex-slaves into Oklahoma in the post-Civil War period" (Bouson 192). While conducting research on black settlements in Oklahoma, Morrison discovered "Come Prepared or Not at All," a newspaper column which ran from 1891 to 1892 advising blacks interested in emigrating out west to bring enough resources to last for two years. According to J. Brooks Bouson, author of "Quiet as it's Kept": Shame, Trauma, and Race in the Novels of Toni Morrison, "after reading an account describing how two hundred freedmen and their families were turned away from an all-black town by other ex-slaves because they lacked such resources, Morrison became 'interested in what on earth that must have felt like, to have come all that way and look at some other Black people who said you couldn't come in'" (192)

Likewise, Gaines relied heavily upon historical documents and slave narratives to make his characterization of Miss Jane Pittman, in The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman, as accurate and realistic as possible. In a 1976 interview with Dan Tooker and Roger Hofheins, Gaines states, "When I was writing this book, I did a lot of research. I did a lot of reading in history, by black as well as white historians. I read a lot of interviews with ex-slaves, the WPA interviews with ex-slaves in the thirties" (103). As a result, Gaines's depiction of Miss Jane

Pittman seems so honest and accurate that some people fail to realize that the work is a novel, that Miss Jane was not a person but a fictional character.

Because of the extensive research conducted by Gaines, his portrayal of Miss Jane's relationship with Ned mirrors historians' assertions that slave women, in the absence of other family members, guaranteed that no child was ever motherless. In the same manner that slave women took in children whose mothers were sold away or died, Miss Jane adopts Ned after his mother, Big Laura, and sister are killed during a raid by "patrollers" (The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman 70). The manner in which Miss Jane comes to assume responsibility for Ned is simple; she asks "him if he wanted to go to Ohio with [her]" (23). From that moment on, Jane becomes Ned's guardian. Although she is but a child herself and is no more than five or six years older than Ned, Miss Jane takes her job seriously. When the white man at the children's home accuses her of "acting like you his mama" (36), Jane responds, "I can't be his mama because I ain't no more than 'leven or twelve . . . . But I ain't go'n let nobody mistreat him neither" (36). In order to provide Ned with the best life possible, Miss Jane sacrifices her personal happiness. She refuses to take a lover and settle down with a man because she wants to protect Ned and ensure that no one causes him harm—physically or psychologically. She explains, "Ned was by himself in this world, except for me, and I didn't want no man and no children spiting him just because he was an orphan" (77). Although Jane does not go to school herself, she makes certain that Ned receives an education. She takes a job working in the field so that she can pay fifty cents a month to send him to school (59). She does not go to school because, as she explains to the teacher, " . . . when I come out of the field at night I was tired, and long as Ned was getting a learning I was satisfied" (66).

At first, Miss Jane takes care of Ned out of a sense of duty or obligation. Big Laura had protected her from Brown, the slow-wit, and Miss Jane feels as though she is returning the favor and honoring her debt to the deceased woman by taking care of her son. In time, Miss Jane's feelings for Ned deepen and she comes to view him as her own. While observing Ned read from

the school primer, she has an epiphany. Miss Jane realizes that Ned is alive because of her efforts and that though she had always thought of him as being Big Laura's son, she now considers him her child: "And while he pointed to the words Ned spoke them out. I stood there listening and smiling. Before then I doubt if I had ever looked at Ned like he was my own. I had always looked at him like he was a little boy that needed me. But listening to him read I knowed if it wasn't for me Ned wouldn't be here now. And I felt like I had born him out of my own body" (66).

Ned's feelings for Miss Jane are reciprocal; he loves and cares for her as much as she loves and cares for him. Even though Ned is constantly preoccupied by thoughts of his biological mother, his feelings for Miss Jane are not diminished: "He never said it, he never talked about her (he used to call me mama) but I knowed he was thinking about her all the time" (73). As a testament to the depth of his relationship with Miss Jane, Ned maintains contact with her after leaving home, continues to call her mama (even after starting a family of his own), and sends her "three or four dollars every time he wrote" (79) to supplement Miss Jane's income. He even names his daughters, Jane and Laura, after his adoptive and biological mothers. By honoring Miss Jane in the same way he honors Big Laura, he shows that his two mothers—the one who gave birth to him and nurtured him during the first five or six years of his life and the other who took him in, raised him, and educated him—are equally important in his life.

Community mother-son and othermother-son relationships occur frequently in the literary works of Gaines and Morrison. In researching the topic of mother-son relationships, I discovered that these relationships do not occur exclusively in the fiction of Gaines and Morrison. There are many African American fiction writers who depict women living in both the North and the South taking on the child-care responsibilities of one another's children, often rearing those children alongside of their biological offspring. Gaines's In My Father's House (1978) and Morrison's Sula (1974) in juxtaposition with Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man (1952), Langston Hughes's "Thank You, M'am" (1959), and Gloria Naylor's The Women of Brewster Place (1982) support

my claims that Gaines's and Morrison's portrayals of mother-son relationships are realistic and in keeping with their literary predecessors and contemporaries.

In Invisible Man, Mary Rambo demonstrates that communal mothering occurs in the North, but is more commonplace in the South. A transplanted Southerner, Mary Rambo attempts to recreate in 1940s Harlem the close-knit feeling of a small Southern community. Even though "[she] ain't never laid eyes on [him] before . . ." (Ellison 252), Mary takes the ailing Invisible Man home and mothers him. She nurses the ailing young man back to health, feeds him, and provides him with a place to stay, even when he is unable to pay his room and board. Her decision to take in a stranger in need of assistance is not out of the ordinary for Mary, for she has made a habit of aiding individuals who are down on their luck. Mary tells the Invisible Man, "You take it easy, I'll take care of you like I done a heap of others, my name's Mary Rambo, everybody knows me round this part of Harlem . . ." (252). She is able to take a complete stranger into her home and trust that he will not do her harm because she has maintained her belief that community members are responsible for one another's well-being.

Aware that the close-knit feeling found in many rural areas in the South does not exist as often in places like Harlem Mary tells the Invisible Man, "I'm in New York, but New York ain't in me, understand what I mean? Don't get corrupted" (255). Her statement reveals that she understands that living in the North "corrupts" blacks in that it causes them to forget their roots and their feelings of communal responsibility. Mary instructs the Invisible Man that the future of black people depends upon individuals like himself, individuals recently arrived from the South who have yet to be influenced negatively by the environment up North: "And I'll tell you something's else, it's the ones from the South that's got to do it, them what knows the fire and ain't forgot how it burns. Up here too many forgits. They finds a place for themselves and forgits the ones on the bottom" (255). Living in Harlem has given people who were once the victims of Jim Crow legislation a slight gain in terms of financial security, physical safety, and employment opportunities, and, as a result, they have been lulled into a false sense of security.

Because blacks do not encounter overt racism in the North as they did in the South, they falsely believe that they do not need to rely upon one another for assistance, strength, and encouragement.

Like Mary Rambo, Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones in Langston Hughes's "Thank You, M'am" acts as a community mother to a young man, Roger, whom she has never laid eyes on before their chance encounter. Set in an undisclosed city in the North, "Thank You, M'am" tells the story of a woman reaching out to a young boy, despite the fact that they meet because he "tried to snatch her purse" (Hughes 1640) in order to purchase a pair of blue suede shoes. Roger's dirty face convinces Mrs. Jones that he suffers more from parental neglect and hunger than some serious flaw in character. Roger is in need of guidance, not punishment. Rather than discipline the wayward youth, she attempts to mother him by taking him home, cleaning him up, feeding him, and giving him the money to buy the blue suede shoes. Mrs. Jones's charity has a much more profound effect on Roger: "the boy wanted to say something other than 'Thank you, M'am,' to Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones, but although his lips moved, he couldn't even say that as he turned at the foot of the barren stoop and looked up at the large woman in the door" (1642). Mrs. Jones's prediction that Roger will remember her when she is finished with him (Hughes 1641) leads one to believe that her generosity and kindness are likely to deter the young boy from committing any future crimes and may also cause him to want to reciprocate her generosity by coming to the assistance of someone else in need. Their mother-son relationship is compressed into a brief chance encounter, yet Mrs. Jones capitalizes on the moment by teaching Roger how to behave, how to determine right from wrong, and how to act in the best interests of the community at large. Through her own deeds, Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones instills in Roger an understanding of communal responsibility and lays the foundation for its dissemination (through his possible future behavior) into her community.

In Sula, Eva Peace does what Mrs. Jones hopes Roger will do; she repays the community women who assisted her by acting as an othermother and community mother to those individuals

in need of assistance. Eva, whose name is a derivation of Eve, the mother of all mankind, is described as "the creator and sovereign" (Sula 30) of her home on Carpenter's Road. Perched upon her throne, "a wagon on the third floor," she spends her time "directing the lives of her children, friends, strays, and a constant stream of boarders" (3). After her husband abandons her, leaving her to care for three young children with very little money and even less food, she is forced to rely upon the assistance of the women in her community. These women are willing to help because they understand that the purpose of the community is to protect and serve its members. Mrs. Suggs alleviates that burden placed upon Eva by taking care of the children until Eva is capable of doing so once again. Until then, Eva can go off and leave her children in the care of a neighbor when her mothering duties become too much for her to bear, and she can rest assured that her children will be well taken care of. When Eva does return to reclaim her children and her duties as a bloodmother, it is after she has become emotionally and financially prepared to do so. However, the community is structured so that when a person needs help, he or she receives it, and when he or she becomes stable or is in a position to provide help, he or she is expected to come to the assistance of persons in need. After getting on her feet, Eva repays the kindness of Mrs. Suggs and Mrs. Jackson by serving as a community mother to others.

As a community mother, Eva's home is open to relatives and strangers alike. Her home constantly experiences an influx of "cousins who were passing through, stray folks, and the many, many newly married couples she let rooms to with housekeeping privileges . . ." (37). In addition to the many roomers, guests, and relatives, there "were the children Eva took in" (37). The deweys are three such children. Eva assumes responsibility for them "[i]n 1921, when her granddaughter Sula was eleven" (37). After her oldest daughter dies, Eva takes on yet another mothering role. She becomes an othermother to Hannah's twelve-year-old daughter, Sula. It is Eva who helps send Sula off to college and who sends her money "[w]hen [she] needed a little change . . ." (92). Eva lives up to her name, for she is the consummate bloodmother, othermother, and community mother.

Eva Turner in Gloria Naylor's The Women of Brewster Place also readily and easily opens her home to strangers in need of help without expectation of financial or personal gain. From her front porch, Eva hollers to Mattie Michaels, "where you headin' with that pretty red baby? You lost, child?" (Naylor 30). Although she does not know the young woman who obviously appears to be walking around lost with a baby and a suitcase, Eva casually invites the young woman to reside with her: "Since you done already picked up your valise, you might as well come on in and get that boy out the night air. Got plenty of room here. Just me and my grandbaby. He'll be good company for Lucielia" (32). Eva Turner and Mattie Michael quickly forge a community mother-daughter relationship.

At first glance, The Women of Brewster Place might not seem significant to a study of black mother-son relationships. However, Mattie Michaels is mother to a son, Basil, and Eva's offers of assistance are extended to Mattie and Basil. In fact, it is actually Basil who first attracts Eva's attention. Although Basil is not related by blood to Eva, she comes to love and treat him in the same manner that she treats her granddaughter, Ciel. When the two get into trouble, Eva chastises them equally. She calls Basil a "little red devil" and Ciel an "evil, narrow-tailed heifer" (36). Then, she banishes both children from the kitchen: ". . . I just want you both out of my kitchen. Out! Out!" (36). Eva and Mattie rear Basil in tandem, even though Mattie remains with her child. Either woman can and will supply him with the things he needs (love, support, guidance, food, shelter) and either can mete out discipline. Basil's relationship with his two mothers—his bloodmother and his community mother—is no different than that shared by a significant number of boy children in the African American community who reside in households along with several generations of women. The household of women bears a striking resemblance to the collective manner in which West African women assisted each other with childrearing and domestic chores.

Unlike the previous texts discussed, Gaines's In My Father's House takes place in the South. Like Mary Rambo, Virginia Colar owns and operates a boarding house. Mary Rambo

takes Invisible Man into her home without hesitation; in fact, she actually insists that he comes home with her. Virginia Colar, however, is reluctant to board Robert X in her home because he tests her feelings of communal responsibility. Although communal mothering occurs more frequently in small rural Southern communities like St. Adrienne, the setting of the novel, Virginia hesitates because she does not know whether she can trust this young man. He is not a part of the St. Adrienne community; therefore, he is a stranger to her. His parents and extended family members are unknown to her, and she has no means by which to judge his character other than his physical appearance, which makes her even more reluctant to board him. Virginia sees before her a "sickly young man" (3-4) who looks as though he "could have just been released from the state pen" (4). In the end, Virginia acquiesces and allows Robert X to board in her home because even though he is not a member of the St. Adrienne community, he is a member of the larger, all-encompassing black community. Despite her doubts about the young man, she feels somewhat responsible for him. If she does not take him in, "where else would he go? Uptown to one of those back rooms of that white motel? Would they let him in? By law they were supposed to, but couldn't they say they didn't have any vacancy either?" (4). Despite the fact that she tries to act as though "she was doing him a favor by taking him in on a day like this" (5), she finds him infiltrating her thoughts, and, in spite of herself, she is overtaken by the need to do him even more "favors": "She thought about her tenant upstairs in number four, and she wondered if he was hungry. She didn't serve food at the house, but she had cooked much more than she would ever eat. If she ate soup everyday for a week, there would still be some left over" 98). Virginia tries to justify her actions and downplay the significance of offering him soup by rationalizing that she has cooked more than she can eat. Yet, she does not offer soup to any of the other boarders, only Robert X. Virginia blames her "weakness" on her conscience: "It was her conscience bothering her again, she told herself. It wasn't satisfied that it had made her let him in the house, but now it was trying to make her feed him, too" (8). She finds herself taking him food because she knows it is the right thing to do, but she overlooks the fact that her conscience is driven by a larger

power—her obligation to the entire black community. Even though she does not know this black man, her conscience will not allow her to turn her back on him and leave him at the mercy of the white motel operators. Even though Virginia is not successful, as are Mary Rambo and Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones, at shaping her communal son's life, she does make an effort to mother Robert X.

My goal in this chapter has been threefold. First, I have argued that the title "mother" is not appropriate only for those women who give birth to a child. Second, I have attempted to widen the definition of mother to include any and all women who take on a mothering role, be it short term foster care or long term adoptive care. Finally, in showing how the African American community (through my analysis of the slave narratives, memoirs of African Americans, scholarship, and fictional works) has embraced this broader definition of mother, I have tried to establish that Ernest Gaines's and Toni Morrison's portrayals of the relationships between boys and men and the women who care for them are honest and accurate depictions of black life. In accomplishing these objectives, I hope to widen the scope of my study of black mother-son relationships in the works of Gaines and Morrison so as to include bloodmothers, othermothers, and community mothers.

CHAPTER 3

EVERYTHING ERNEST J. GAINES NEEDED TO KNOW ABOUT BEING A MAN HE LEARNED FROM AUGUSTEEN JEFFERSON, OR HOW GAINES'S RELATIONSHIP WITH AUGUSTEEN JEFFERSON INFLUENCED HIS PORTRAYALS OF BLACK MOTHER-SON RELATIONSHIPS

"Unless you include her, you can't write about me at all" (Porch Talk 66), says Ernest J. Gaines of his late maternal great aunt, Augusteen Jefferson. The author acknowledges, "I loved my aunt very, very much. I think I loved her more than I've ever loved anyone" (Blake 137). Jefferson, says Gaines, "had the greatest impact on my life, not only as a writer but as a man" (Rickels 121). From her he learned "'the importance of standing,'. . . even though she never walked a step in her life" (Lowe xv). Gaines's relationship with Jefferson has been the subject of a number of personal essays--"Miss Jane and I" (1978), "Auntie and the Black Experience in Louisiana" (1982), "Bloodline in Ink" (1989), "The Autobiography of Mr. Ernest J. Gaines" (1990), and "A Very Big Order: Reconstructing Identity" (1990)—and Jefferson served as one of the models on which Gaines based his most famous literary figure, Miss Jane Pittman. Karen Carmean, author of Ernest J. Gaines: A Critical Companion, asserts, "From a biographical perspective, a critic might look closely at Gaines's life, recalling his Point Coupée childhood, especially the role his Aunt Augustine [sic] played in his life" (76). Thus, it is imperative that the Gainesian scholar or critic look at the author's relationship with his aunt and the way in which their relationship influences his craft and his literary portrayals of mother-son relationships. Also, the Gainesian scholar or critic can no longer dismiss or overlook his mother figures but must include them in order to understand his fiction. Because of his relationship with Jefferson (and the other black women in his community), Gaines casts mother-son relationships in a

positive light. His mother figures are strong black women dedicated to the survival, safety, and development of their male charges. His son figures are young boys and men on the verge of manhood looking to affirm their humanity and dignity in a world which would deny them both. In Gaines's fiction, the mother-son relationship, which is sometimes fraught with conflicts and tension, is a loving and harmonious one.

Ernest James Gaines was born to Manuel and Adrienne Gaines on January 15, 1933, in Point Coupée Parish, Oscar, Louisiana. He is the oldest of thirteen children (seven of whom Adrienne Gaines would have with Manual Gaines and six with Ralph Colar). When Gaines was about eight years old, his parents separated, "and the absence of his father would contribute in part to the genesis of one of his major themes, sons searching for fathers" (Babb 1). Shortly after Gaines's parents separated, Adrienne Gaines moved to New Orleans to find employment. From the age of eight until he was fifteen, Gaines was reared by his maternal great aunt, who suffered from an undiagnosed disease that left her unable to walk. Despite being disabled, Augusteen Jefferson managed to perform a number of household chores and simultaneously rear Gaines and six of his younger siblings single-handedly. Gaines recalls how Jefferson

> crawled over the floor as a six-month-old child might do. She had the strongest pair of arms. She could whip hard. I had to go out and break the switch, bring it to her, kneel down, and get my whipping. She cooked for us. In winter, she sat on a little bench beside the wood stove, where they cut the wood. "Bring the wood there, light the fire," she would say. And she would lean over her little bench and put the wood into this little stove. She could wash. She'd sit on this bench and lean over. We had these old wash boards—you know those old wash boards?—and she'd just wash, wash, wash, with an old bar of soap. There was no washing powder then. And our clothes: she also patched our clothes, sewed our clothes, she baked cakes and this sort of thing. But that was not even enough for her.

> She would, in the evening, when work was over, when she'd cook food and all that sort of thing, she'd crawl over the floor, over the porch out into the garden to work. It's that kind of spirit Miss Jane has. It's like Aunt Fe's strength. (Ingram and Steinberg 50)

The only activity Jefferson's disability prevented her from performing was visiting others. Therefore, Gaines remembers, as a child, being surrounded by older people who would come to visit his aunt. He listened to their stories, and he "learned about storytelling by listening to these people talk" (Desruisseaux 116).

The oldest child, Gaines was forced to grow up rather quickly and had to assume some responsibility for his family. In order to supplement the family's income, Gaines went to work in the fields at a young age: "I went into the fields when I was about the age of eight, or maybe nine. I think my first job was picking up potatoes—white potatoes—we called them Irish potatoes. I worked for about 50 [cent] a day, and stayed there until I was fifteen. So by the time I left for California, I knew a lot about the work and life on a plantation" (Fitzgerald and Marchant 7). Being the "man of the house" was a difficult task and entailed much responsibility. Gaines learned that being the "man of the house" meant more than assuming financial responsibility; it also meant pitching in and helping with the household chores and looking after his younger siblings at home. Being a man at such a young age was physically demanding: "It was hard and tough being the oldest child. I had to go to the swamps to cut wood for the stove as well as the fireplace. When you're a 12 year-old kid trying to pull a saw for half a day, it's about the most cruel thing you can do to somebody" (Berry 286). By looking to Jefferson as an example, Gaines found the strength and discipline to perform the arduous tasks assigned to him. Gaines states, "I never heard her complain a day in her life about her condition. I suppose there were times when she did, but I never heard it. I was the oldest; I had to learn not to complain. Just do the job, do it as well as you could, but don't complain" ("Auntie and The Black Experience in Louisiana" 21).

Although his childhood would be described as difficult by some, Gaines has stated that his experiences as a child helped him to become the man that Jefferson would want him to be.

In 1948, at the age of fifteen, Gaines left his beloved aunt Augusteen, the woman whose work ethic inspired him to become a writer: ". . . she showed me, without the use of her legs, that I could do almost anything with those twenty-six letters if I would only work hard enough at it" ("Auntie and the Black Experience in Louisiana" 21). Gaines joined his mother in Vallejo, California. Adrienne Gaines had remarried, and she and her husband, Ralph Colar, a Merchant Marine, were living in California. There Gaines would be able to get a proper education, for in Louisiana the education black children received was separate from and unequal to that received by their white counterparts. Gaines "attended classes five months a year in a small church that doubled as a schoolhouse. Unlike white children who had nine-month academic years, matriculation for black children stopped for seasonal planting and harvest" (Berry 284). Although Gaines dearly missed Jefferson and Louisiana, he believes that leaving when he did was "the best thing that ever happened" to him (Lowe 176).

His experiences in California proved valuable in further shaping the future writer. Afraid that Gaines would get into trouble loitering in their neighborhood, Ralph Colar, whom Gaines describes as being "a very strong man, a very handsome man, a very powerfully built man" (Porch Talk 84), ordered him to find a better way to spend his time. Thus, Gaines came to discover the Vallejo Public Library, which "was his first experience in a library, since their use in the South was reserved for whites only . . ." (Carmean 4). Here he was introduced to writers such as Willa Cather, John Steinbeck, William Faulkner, Guy de Maupassant, Anton Chekhov, Ivan Turgenev, and Tolstoy. These writers influenced Gaines's literary style and technique, but their works left him longing for his native Louisiana and the people who reside there. In their books he was unable to find "writing that addressed his experience and the experience of rural black Louisiana" (Babb 2). So, at the age of sixteen, Gaines wrote his first novel, A Little Stream, a book set in Louisiana about the ill-fated love affair of a fair-skinned girl and a dark-skinned boy.

Gaines submitted the novel to a New York publisher, but the manuscript was returned. A Little Stream would later provide the plot outline for Catherine Carmier, Gaines's first published novel.

In 1950, two years after moving to California, Gaines returned to Louisiana for a visit. The following year, he graduated from high school and began taking classes at Vallejo Junior College. In 1953, Jefferson died. Gaines was unable to return for the funeral because the family could not afford the cost of the trip: "I didn't come back then. I couldn't; I didn't have any money" (Porch Talk 130). That same year he graduated from Vallejo Junior College and was drafted into the Army. In 1957, Gaines graduated from San Francisco State College, where he had enrolled in 1955 on the GI Bill, with a bachelor's degree in language arts with an emphasis on creative writing. Gaines received the Wallace Stegner Creative Writing Award and entered Stanford's creative writing program in 1958. While at Stanford, he drew the attention of Dorothea Oppenheimer, who became his literary agent, reader, patron, and close friend, until her death in 1987. With Oppenheimer's assistance, Gaines's literary career began to flourish; he published "Just Like A Tree" (1962), "The Sky is Gray" (1963), Catherine Carmier (1964), Of Love and Dust (1967), Bloodline (1968), The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman (1971), In My Father's House (1978), A Gathering of Old Men (1983), and A Lesson Before Dying (1993).

Since leaving Louisiana in 1948, Gaines has not reestablished permanent residency there. He currently divides his time between Florida and Louisiana, spending half the year in the house the University of Southwestern Louisiana granted him the lifelong use of in exchange for his teaching one semester out of the year there. Still, memories of his aunt Augusteen and of Louisiana continue to "drive" his literary works (Rowell 86). Both have had a lasting impression upon him:

> I didn't know when I was leaving how close I would be to her. I knew how much I loved her then, but I didn't know that thirty-nine years later I would still feel a very closeness to her and to the land—I mean to her and to our patch of land. I don't want people to think I'm so desperately in

> love with Louisiana or the South, as much as I am with that postage stamp in that area. That's the thing I'm talking about. (Porch Talk 131)

As a result, the literature of Ernest J. Gaines is always set in his native Louisiana (in or around the fictional town of Bayonne), and it often revolves around male protagonists who are mothered by aunt figures. The parallels between Gaines's childhood and his texts, however, do not end here.

Gaines's childhood experiences color the way he structures his family units in his texts, most especially his earlier works. Manuel Gaines abandoned his family when Ernest was eight years old. In his fiction, it is interesting to note that both the mother and the father are present when the male protagonist is younger than eight years of age. Take, for instance, Gaines's short story "A Long Day in November," the first story in his collection, Bloodline. Sonny, the male protagonist, is six years old. His mother and father, Amy and Eddie, are both present in the household, even though when the story opens the couple is on the verge of separating because Amy feels that Eddie is neglecting the family and spending too much time "running up and down the road in that car" (17). However, the next story in Bloodline, "The Sky is Gray," centers on eight-year-old James, who must become the man of the house because his father has been drafted into the Army to fight in World War II. Readers are left with the impression that James and his family are uncertain as to if and when the father will return: "I wonder when we go'n see him again. I wonder when. Look like he ain't ever coming back home . . . " (93). Also, Etienne Martin, the son in In My Father's House, is no more than eight years old when his father, Phillip Martin, allows Johanna to pack up the children and move to California—another parallel. In the same way that Gaines was reared by his maternal great aunt his older male protagonists are also reared by othermothers, (grandmothers, aunts, nananes or godmothers who oversee the childrearing responsibilities of other women's children). Jackson Bradley (Catherine Carmier) and Grant Wiggins (A Lesson Before Dying) are reared by aunts, Charlotte and Tante Lou,

respectively. Marcus Payne (Of Love and Dust) is reared by his grandmother, Miss Julie Rand, and Jefferson (A Lesson Before Dying) is reared by his godmother, Miss Emma.

The educational and childhood experiences of Gaines's protagonists are similar to his own. In a 1969 interview with Gregory Fitzgerald and Peter Marchant, Gaines states, "In each story I've myself gone through much of the same experience as these kids have, not all but much of it. This was in me all the time, but I had to find a way to bring it out" (11). The school that little Sonny attends is based upon the one Gaines attended as a child: "I had, personally, the experience of the little school [Sonny] goes to in my story, the house he lived in, the quarters he walked in, the heater in the little school, the bench that he had to sit on because he had no desk. I had all this experience" (11). During James's trip to Bayonne to see the dentist, he and his mother encounter segregated facilities and racist practices similar to the ones Gaines and his mother experienced on a similar trip to the dentist:

> Yes, I had a toothache when I was a child at that age, and I had to ride the bus, just as he rides. At that time, on a bus in the South, you had a little sign hanging over the aisle and it said "White" on one side and it said "Colored" on the other side, and you had to sit behind that little sign. I also went to a Catholic school in this little town, which I call Bayonne in the story. I also could not eat uptown. There was no place for me to eat; whether it was cold or sleet or rain; and there was no place to eat. There was no place to warm a child eight years old. To do it, a mother had to take him back of town, which was about a mile, ¾ of a mile, something like that, and there was no transportation unless someone picked you up when they saw you walking by. You have that in the story. I also knew about the dentist's waiting room, the cluttered little place that might be full of people waiting to have dental help. Of course, there were all black people in here; the whites were sitting someplace else. So I had gone

> through all that. This is why I knew what a child would experience. As a writer, I was interpreting the feeling of this child at the time I myself was 30 years old, but I did know the experiences that he would have gone through. I knew the things that he was going through, yes. (12-13)

As an adolescent, Gaines staged plays for his church community. He recalls, "when I was about twelve or thirteen, I put on a little play in church, and I'd act as writer and director and make-up man and everything else" (Laney 57). Similarly, Jimmy Aaron also puts on a play in The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman. His male protagonists also go north to California to be educated. Catherine Carmier opens with Jackson Bradley returning to Louisiana after having completed his college education in California.

Gaines's body of literature often depicts a community of women working together. When asked why the men are absent in his earlier works, Gaines responds, "The older men are not in the earlier books because they were not in my life as a child. They were there, but they were not in the immediate surroundings." As a child, Gaines's relationship with men was, as he describes it, "tenuous." This was due in part to the fact that he had very little interaction with male figures as a child: "As I said, our relationship was a tenuous one. I saw them, and we talked and did things, but they were not in the household. My father and mother were separated, and my stepfather was in the merchant marine, so he wasn't there in the household" (Porch Talk 39). It is not until A Gathering of Old Men, which comes later in Gaines's literary career, that readers of his fiction discover a community of men, for it is not until later in Gaines's life, only after his moving to California, while serving in the military, entering college, and returning to Louisiana for visits, that he began to develop friendships with the men on whom he bases his male characters.

Despite these parallels, Gaines insists that his works are not autobiographical. Gaines, who writes of and from his experiences as a boy and young man, asserts, "I don't write only about things I've done . . ." (Doyle 153). He insists that he writes about subjects that appeal to all

people—especially the black and white youth of the South (Saeta and Skinner 251-52). As a writer, his "aim in literature is to develop character so that you pick up the book, you will see something you feel is true, something not seen before, that will develop your character from that day forward" (Saeta and Skinner 252). Thus, Gaines's works often focus on the themes of surviving with dignity, reconciling or bridging the distance between the past and the present, the importance of family and community, redefining manhood, determinism, and sons in search of fathers. The father's "absence and its effects on his children" (Desruisseaux 113) is one theme that recurs most frequently in his works. Although Gaines "had a very close relationship" with his stepfather (Porch Talk 62), he laments the lack of a relationship with his biological father. Gaines asserts that the absent father is a far too common occurrence in the black community. His novels and short stories focus on the societal forces that keep the father and son apart. Gaines states, "I wanted to see on paper the true reason why those black fathers left home—not because they were trifling or shiftless—but because they were tired of putting up with certain conditions" ("Miss Jane and I" 28).

According to Valerie Melissa Babb, author of the Twayne Series' Ernest Gaines, "The historical antecedents of the black father-son relationship influence all of Gaines's father-son pairs. The severing of paternal lineage during bondage manifests itself in the gap he sees between fathers and sons in the present" (18). When African slaves were brought to America, slaveholders separated families and tribal kinsmen. If the slaves could not communicate with one another because they all spoke different languages, slaveholders believed that they could prevent slave insurrections and thereby protect their property and their interests. By separating the families and tribal kinsmen, slaveholders altered the structure of the black family unit. In Africa, an individual could belong either to a patrilineal or matrilineal society, depending upon his descent line. For example, in a matrilineal society, one would trace one's lineage to one's siblings and one's common female ancestors through one's mother. In a patrilineal society, however, one would trace one's line of descent through one's father. Under the institution of

slavery, however, all children born of slave mothers traced their lineage through their mothers, not their fathers. If a child were born to a slave woman, even if his father were not enslaved, the child was a slave. Consequently, black fathers were effectively denied their parental rights and were left unable to protect black women and their offspring. Families were torn asunder, and neither mother nor father could do anything to prevent it.

Even after the abolition of slavery, black fathers and sons were still unable to bridge the gap between them. Gaines reasons that black men have been unsuccessful at reclaiming their sons because racist practices have rendered the black father powerless and denied him the opportunity to acquire and hold positions of authority. Because the black son observes his father in a subservient position, he is unable to respect or learn from his father. In an interview with Mary Ellen Doyle, Gaines reasons,

> The father and son were separated when they were brought to this country over three centuries ago. The white man did not let them come together during slavery, and they have not been able to reach each other since. Despite the revolution, the Black father is in a position of non-respectability, and the white is still in control. The Black man is seldom the owner, still is not the public defender in court, not the judge. The young Black man almost always sees a white in these positions, not an older Black man, not his father. You can always hear a professional football player say the most important male in his life was his coach—usually white; that was the father figure who would stand by him in trouble. We expect the same in the military, a white officer. So the son cannot and does not look up to the father. The father has to look up to the son. That is not natural. And the cycle continues, and continues, and continues. A few of our black fathers made it, but the majority do not—and I doubt they will in our time. (163-64)

The Civil Rights movement was an attempt to liberate the black masses, redistribute the imbalance of power, and give blacks equal social, economic, career, and educational opportunities. The movement enabled blacks to achieve equal rights to a certain extent. However, it failed, in Gaines's opinion, to improve the black father-son relationships: "Sitting at a counter with whites does not bring father and son together. Just because they are sitting there does not mean they are communicating" (Doyle 163). Billy, the young black militant, expresses these same sentiments in In My Father's House: "Just because I can eat at the white folks' counter with my daddy, just because I can ride side him in the front of the bus don't mean we any closer" (166). Phillip asks the young black militant about his relationship with his father. Billy describes his relationship with his father as "'bout average" (165). He elaborates: "I don't bother him, he don't bother me" (165). Billy and his father are unable to bridge the distance between them because Billy does not respect his father, a forty-five-year-old semi-retired janitor recovering from a massive heart attack, who is "frustrated over all the things [he] wanted to be but couldn't be" (166).

After talking with Billy, Phillip, the Civil Rights leader of the community, seems shocked to learn that the father-son relationship continues to be in a state of disrepair and that the events of the 1960s did nothing to improve upon it. The damage done to fathers and sons during their years of separation has yet to be repaired. Despite the possibility of getting a better job and a better education, Billy recognizes that he and his father are still not free and that society is still beset by a number of ills. Frustrated with the plight of blacks and disillusioned by their seeming apathy, Billy plans to instigate a one-day war during which his army of followers will redress the wrongs done to blacks by setting the country afire. Billy explains to Phillip Martin, "Burn it down, you destroy Western Civilization. You put the world back right—let it start over again" (162).

While the father-son relationship is an important theme in Gaines's fiction, most scholars focus exclusively, almost to the point of blindness, on Gaines's portrayal of father-son

relationships and "the importance of father-son lineage in the formation of male identity" (Babb 15). However, mothers play an integral role in Gaines's literature. Like his portrayals of father-son pairings, Gaines's depictions of mother-son relationships are steeped in history. In an interview with Fred Beauford, Gaines explains why mothers and sons are always together in his texts: "Son and mother have always sort of been there. Because let us take for example the white father who rapes the Black woman. No matter what happens, the child was the product of the mother. The father never had to look after the child. The mother had to look after that child. That is why the boy and the mother are always together in my books" (22). With the exception of Miss Jane Pittman, Gaines's women characters tend to be overlooked, relegated to the ranks of secondary, inconsequential characters, or they are erroneously viewed as emasculating matriarchs with limited influence over their male charges. If the Gainesian critic or scholar wants to write about Gaines, he or she has to pay attention to Augusteen Jefferson. Similarly, if he or she wants to write about Gaines's male protagonists, he or she has to pay attention to Gaines's mother characters.

Gaines's mother characters are drawn in the form of the mythical strong black woman, or matriarch, whom scholar Trudier Harris argues "has earned criticism historically as well as in literature." The black matriarch shares living accommodations with several generations of her family and is actively involved in their lives, to the point that conflict often arises as a result. She is a God-fearing, deeply religious woman who "exerts her moral influence over [her white employers] as often as she exerts it over her own family." Often a domestic worker, she is strong enough "to endure the [physical demands] and indignity of manual labor, particularly domestic work . . . ." Physically, the black matriarch tends to be large in stature for, according to Harris, "her physical size is commensurate with her moral strength" (Harris 484).

Gaines's older mother figures, Aunt Charlotte, Miss Julie Rand, Aunt Fe, Aunt Lou, Miss Jane, Angelina Bouie, Tante Lou, and Miss Emma, have all worked as cooks, laundresses, and field workers at some point in their lives. They are deeply connected to the church and are

often attending church services or singing their "'termination for Heaven" songs ("Just Like a Tree" 248). The walls of their homes are adorned with ancient calendars with "pictures of Jesus Christ" (Of Love and Dust 10). Aunt Charlotte hangs a calendar with a picture of "Christ kneeling in the garden of Gethsemane" (Catherine Carmier 99) over the mantelpiece in Jackson's bedroom. The mothers are constantly trying to convince their male charges either to join, as is the case with Miss Jane and the young Jimmy Aaron, or renew their ties with the church. Like Jackson Bradley, who no longer "believe[s] in that bourgeois farce" (Catherine Carmier 100), the male characters distance themselves from the church because they do not believe that this particular institution is capable of offering a suitable solution to the problems which ail their community.

The mothers are not passive; they assert themselves in their own and their employers' households. The mothers remind their employers of the service they have provided them and demand favors in exchange for their years of service. An example is Miss Emma (A Lesson Before Dying), who was the cook on the Pichot family plantation. She goes to Henri Pichot to seek permission for Grant Wiggins to visit her godson, Jefferson, in jail. Miss Emma accepts Jefferson's fate, but she wants him to die like a man: "The law got him, Mr. Henri . . . . And they go'n kill him. But let them kill a man. Let the teacher go to him, Mr. Henri" (A Lesson Before Dying 22). Realizing that her request is unusual, one not likely to be granted under normal circumstances, Miss Emma reminds Henri Pichot of the years of service she has given his family. Miss Emma states, "I done done a lot for this family over the years," and "Tell [the sheriff] what I done done for this family, Mr. Henri. Tell him to ask his wife all I done done for this family over the years" (22-23). She formally addresses her former employer, referring to him as Mr. Henri even though she is older than he. Miss Emma promises to return the next day to beseech him once more for permission for Grant to visit Jefferson. Although she appears to be humble and complacent, her language suggests otherwise. Her request is presented as a question, "please," but it is apparent that she will not take no for an answer. Even though she has been

summarily dismissed, for 'Henri Pichot had started to raise his glass, because for him the conversation was over," Miss Emma does not leave, but turns and asks, "When?" She will not be easily dismissed. Miss Emma threatens, "I'll be up here again tomorrow, Mr. Henri. I'll be on my knees next time you see me, Mr. Henri" (23). Miss Emma subverts the notion of the selfless servant who happily and faithfully performs services for her employers because making them happy brought her great joy. She expects to be repaid for her years of service: "This family owe me that much, Mr. Henri. And I want it. I want somebody do something for me one time 'fore I close my eyes. Somebody got do something for me one time 'fore I close my eyes, Mr. Henri" (22).

Textual descriptions of Gaines's mother figures imply that they are solidly build, sturdy, and strong. Gaines uses terms like "boulder," "cypress," "oak," "immovable," "stone," and "heavy" to describe his mothers (Carmean 136). In "Just Like a Tree," Aunt Fe's rootedness in the community is compared to that of a tree. Aunt Clo says that Aunt Fe is "a heavy old tree—been there a long time, you know—heavy" (236). Aunt Fe has been amongst the people for so long that, as Leola states it, her "name's been amongst us just like us own family name. Just like the name o' God. Like the name of town—the city. Aunt Fe, Aunt Fe, Aunt Fe, Aunt Fe" (227). Leola tries to convince Louise, Aunt Fe's only surviving relative, that "moving her from here's like moving a tree you been used to in your front yard all your life" (227). Aunt Fe has mothered and cared for all of the people who have assembled to bid her goodbye. Uprooting Aunt Fe, Aunt Clo asserts, will leave a void which the entire community will feel: "You get a big hole in the ground, sir; and you get another big hole in the air where the lovely branches been all these years. Yes, sir, that's what you get. The holes, sir, the holes. Two holes, sir, you can't never fill no matter how hard you try" (236). The tree analogy appears again in A Lesson Before Dying in the description of Miss Emma and Tante Lou, who are both "large women" (3). When Grant drives the two women to Henri Pichot's house, he observes that they take up the back seat of his 1946 Ford, "filling it completely" (16). During Jefferson's court trial, Miss Emma "became as

immobile as a great stone or as one of our oak and cypress stumps. She never got up once to get water or go to the bathroom down in the basement. She just sat there staring at the boy's clean-cropped head where he sat at the front table with his lawyer" (3). That Miss Emma could be so unmovable, so unshakable while she awaits a jury decision that she knows in all likelihood will result in her godson's death suggests that she is incredibly strong in body and in faith.

These descriptions, however, do no refer solely to the women's physical size. The mothers stand firm and courageous in their convictions, and they are not easily persuaded to change their minds. Rather than be uprooted and transplanted to foreign soil, Aunt Fe dies. She tells her closest friend, Lou, "No, I ain't going nowhere" ("Just Like a Tree" 248) and then she lays down and dies. Tante Lou and Miss Emma are also not to be dissuaded. While waiting for the answer to Miss Emma's "request" that he visit Jefferson in jail, Grant says that "they sat there like boulders, their bodies, their minds immovable" (A Lesson Before Dying 14). Even though the two women give Grant the opportunity to make his own decision concerning their proposition, Tante Lou has clearly made up her mind that Grant will fulfill Miss Emma's request: "'You going with us up the quarter,' my aunt said, as though I hadn't said a word. 'You going up there with us, Grant, or you don't sleep in this house tonight'" (14).

The nature analogies Gaines uses in describing his mothers could also be symbolic of their connection to the land. The mothers are active in the community and are often the only relics, the only connection the young people have to the past and the land. In Gaines's novels, the Cajuns have managed to wrest away control of the majority of the land, and they are "running things now" (Catherine Carmier 61). With their new farm machinery, the Cajuns are tearing down and plowing up any and all evidence that the blacks were ever there. Babb asserts, "For black farmers the land gives sustenance, but it is also the only legacy they can leave to future generations. As they raze the land, the Cajuns also raze African-American familial continuity, leaving the black farmers nothing but reflections on their loss" (48). The loss of the land and farming as a means of financial support and sustenance has left the black farmers dependent upon

the government and the financial assistance it gives them. Unable to support themselves and their families, many of the young "people are leaving here; not coming back" (Catherine Carmier 5). Those who are able to leave are "going to Baton Rouge, New Orleans. Some who have money go up North" (77). Like the farmers, the mothers view the land as their birthright, their legacy (Babb 48). The mothers want their sons to remain on the parish plantation and effect change. It is their hope that their sons will establish roots in their communities and develop the same connection to the land as they have. If their sons leave, they fear that the work and accomplishments of their ancestors will be razed by the Cajuns.

In Gaines's literary world, the mothers hold the family and community together. They are what Marcia Gaudet, author of "Black Women: Race, Gender, and Culture in Gaines's Fiction," calls "the conservators of culture and facilitators of community" (157). According to Valerie Babb, they "provide the nurture that enables individual, familial, and communal survival" (77). Unfortunately, some critics and scholars mistakenly view Gaines's mothers as being stifling, possessive, and controlling. One reason may be that "Consistently in [Gaines's] canon, men seek while women do. His women provide the steadying influence that balances the restlessness, rebelliousness, or resignation of the men in his fiction, and it is they who are the catalysts for subtle but certain change" (Babb 20). The women's activity is mistakenly viewed as being indicative of their desire to control, to head up the household, and thus push the men into subservient positions in the family. In Gaines's literary world, the men are rendered inactive not by the women, but by the world in which they live. Their manhood is constantly challenged by white society. They are unable to fulfill the traditional roles prescribed to men—that of breadwinner and protector. As sharecroppers and farm hands on the various parish plantations, their livelihood is dependent upon their complacency, their submissiveness to a regime which demands that they remain in a state of extended adolescence. Psychologists William H. Grier and Price M. Cobbs, authors of Black Rage, counter, "The simplistic view of the black family as a matriarchy is an unfortunate theme repeated too often by scholars who should know better. If a

man is stripped of his authority in the home by forces outside that home, the woman naturally must assume the status of head of household. This is the safety factor inherent in a household which includes two adults and it by no means suggests that the woman prefers it that way" (61). Scholars discount the fact that Gaines's women, if given a choice, would rather not head up the households, but do so out of necessity. With the exception of Alma, in In My Father's House, all of Gaines's mother characters are single mothers. When the mother's husband or mate leaves, she turns to her oldest son to become the man of the house. She expects her son to help her care for the younger children and to supplement the income the family loses because of the father's absence.

Aunt Charlotte, in Catherine Carmier, is a good example of a woman who heads up her household out of necessity. The men in her family, for whatever reason, have shirked their responsibility to the family. Jackson is the last surviving male heir to the Bradley family throne. Thus, Charlotte invests all of her energy and time into preparing Jackson to take his rightful place as the head of the family. Aunt Charlotte tries to impress upon Jackson the importance of his role in perpetuating the family line. She tells Jackson, "In ever' family they ought to be somebody to do something. We ain't had that somebody in this family yet. All the others, they been drunks, gamblers—and your pa, there, even 'fore you was born he had packed up and left your mon . . . . But I just want you to know . . . you all they is left, Jackson. You all us can count on. If you fail, that's all for us" (Catherine Carmier 98). Like Gaines's other mother characters, Charlotte's actions are simply an attempt to ensure the survival of future generations.

William Burke, author of 'Bloodline: A Black Man's South," believes the mothers' position as head of household indicates a desire on their part to control and dominate. Burke's essay, published in College Language Association Journal in 1976, is perhaps the most scathing discussion of Gaines's women characters. Burke's review of Bloodline is a misogynistic attack on the women characters. He writes that Gaines's first two stories, "A Long Day in November" and "The Sky is Gray," "[portray] a tough matriarchal society which all but destroys the

possibility of masculinity for black males" (546). Burke launches an attack against Amy's mother, Rachel, who he feels blunts Eddie's masculinity. Rachel never approved of Amy, with her "long silky curls," marrying Eddie, "a yellow nigger with a gap . . . 'tween his teeth . . ." ("A Long Day in November" 18). When Amy leaves Eddie, Rachel attempts to persuade Amy to enter into a relationship with Freddie Jackson, who she feels will offer Rachel and Sonny a home and financial security, so Amy will not have to "go out in that field cutting cane" (31). Eddie, although he works, has been neglecting his family, leaving Amy to rear their son and "[do] all the work while he rip and run up and down the road with his other nigger friends" (31-2). Even though Eddie begs Sonny to "always love your daddy" (15), he does not, at the beginning of the story, take any pains to ensure that he and Sonny will have a healthy father-son relationship.

Granted, Rachel interferes in Amy and Eddie's marriage, and her actions are meddlesome. Yet one cannot help but sympathize with both Rachel and Eddie because it is obvious that they both truly have Amy and Sonny's best interests at heart, even if their actions belie that occasionally. However, Burke refuses to acknowledge that Eddie is as much to blame for the problems he and Amy experience. Burke holds Rachel and Madame Touissant (the hoodoo woman who advises Eddie to burn his car if he wants Amy to return home) responsible. In his essay, Burke resorts to name calling, referring to Rachel as "shrewish," "old war-horse," and "man-eating" (546, 547). Octavia, the mother in "The Sky is Gray," also does not escape Burke's wrath. Burke accuses Octavia of being complicit in white society's "breaking down of [James's] innocence and courage" (550). He attacks Octavia's mothering, claiming that "she seems cruel in eroding her son's gentleness and innocence, however necessary their tempering may be" (550). He completely disregards the fact that Octavia is placed in a compromising position: she can either teach her son about the harsh world they live in, or she can allow James to discover this fact on his own. Octavia's decision is a difficult one to make, but as a mother she would much rather teach him herself, for she knows she will temper her actions with love and compassion, whereas the world will feel no compulsion whatsoever to do so.

Burke's essay is one-sided. In it, women are the bane of society and the men the saviors. He views the last three stories in the collection, "Three Men," "Bloodline," and "Just Like a Tree" as representing a passing of the torch of sorts. He argues that the latter stories suggest that a shift from a female to a male dominated society is about to occur. The black matriarch, who "lived hand in hand with the decaying white paternalism" (556), is about to be overthrown by the young male protagonists. Proctor Lewis, Copper Laurent, and especially Etienne, the budding civil rights leader, represent the new era, one which "will be difficult, but [it] will be informed with a masculine dignity which the past lacked" (558). Burke is hopeful that Proctor, Copper, and Etienne will be able to escape "the woman-ridden world" they inhabit (546). The future Burke foresees excludes feminine influence and involvement, which he describes as having been "massive and consoling" in the past (558). By advocating a shift from a female to a male dominated society, Burke overlooks the necessity of having a community in which the men and the women have equal say in the decision making. He fails to see that replacing female involvement and influence with male involvement and influence will not sufficiently remedy what ails the black community. Inherent in Burke's essay is the belief that black women, not white society, are responsible for black men's feelings of impotence. Therefore, Burke misses the fact that Amy tries to establish a partnership in her home by making Eddie play an active and equal role in Sonny's development.

Critics like Burke, who view Gaines's mother figures as emasculating or controlling, attempt to impose their views of black motherhood on Gaines's characters. They discount Gaines's feelings toward and his experiences with black women. Gaines's portrayals of mother-son relationships may not reflect all black men's and women's experiences, but they do reflect his own. According to Marcia Gaudet, "It would seem that female narrators are a reflection of the male author's experiences and relationships with his life rather than true reflections of women's experiences. Gaines has been extremely successful in creating older female narrators, and his comments in interviews suggest that these are versions of the older women in his life who

were of great importance to him in his formative years . . . ." (157). He has the utmost respect for women, and he does not view them as matriarchs or shrews. Gaines's women characters are based upon women in his life. Octavia's character takes her strength from Gaines's mother: "I think the person I had in mind as my mother was in 'The Sky is Gray.' [Octavia] was somewhat like her . . . . An incredibly strong person. Both she and my maternal grandmother were extremely strong people" (Porch Talk 65). Miss Jane is a compilation of a number of women Gaines has known, but her source of strength is Augusteen Jefferson. Gaines recalls,

> She [Augusteen Jefferson] had great moral strength. I know the kind of burden she carried trying to raise us and I feel any character I wrote about has to have a burden. The main character has to have a heavy burden, one that can knock the average person down; sometimes it does but he has to get up. This is the philosophy I have, if I have any at all, because of the struggle of my aunt, the struggle of my race, the struggle of people in general. Any person who's worth a goddamn must really struggle. (Carter 82)

As a result, Gaines's male protagonists are often confronted with conflicting choices. Do the sons leave the parish in search of a better life and better conditions, or do they remain and work for the betterment of the people there? Do they live for themselves, neglecting the needs of the community at large, or do they compromise their own personal goals and fulfill their mothers' wishes? The mothers persist in their efforts to make their sons' journey to manhood easy and to help them realize their purpose in life and their duty to the community. Despite resisting their mothers' efforts at first, the sons eventually come to realize that the mothers have their best interests at heart.

However, Gaines is not alone in revering the black mother. Many black men talk about their mothers in similar terms, referring to them as strong black women who sacrificed

themselves and their possessions for the betterment of their children. Rapper TuPac Shakur pays homage to his mother in his song "Dear Mama":

> Cause through the drama, I can always depend on my mama
>
> And when it seems that I'm hopeless
>
> You say the word that can get me back in focus
>
> When I was sick as a little kid
>
> To keep me happy there's no limit to the things you did
>
> And all my childhood memories
>
> Are full of all the sweet things you did for me
>
> And even though I act crazy
>
> I got to thank the Lord that you made me
>
> There are no words that can express how I feel
>
> And I appreciate how you raised me
>
> And all the extra love that you gave me.

TuPac's dedicatory song praises his mother for her strength of character, her concern, and her sacrifices. Despite the fact that some black men have accused their mothers of being emasculating and controlling, Gaines and Shakur are not alone in their praise of their mothers.

Black women writers, however, are apt to portray mother-son relationships in a different light. Citing Gloria Wade-Gayle's essay "The Truths of Our Mothers' Lives: Mother-Daughter Relationships in Black Women's Fiction," the editors of Double Stitch: Black Women Write about Mothers and Daughters (1991) argue, "Historically, one of the most pervasive images of Black women in America has been that of the 'superstrong, resilient mother who is devoted, self-sacrificing, understanding and wise,' her love 'enduring, unconditional and without error'" (Bell-Scott et al. 139). Black women writers such as Toni Morrison, for instance, recognize the problems inherent in romanticizing the myth of the strong black woman. They recognize the dangers and imminent health problems that result from being too strong for too long. Toni

Morrison's works, which I will look at in depth in later chapters, reveal the toll that living up to such an unattainable and unreasonable expectation has taken on the black woman. As a result, her mothers are scarred. They are a curious blend of nurturers, caregivers, culture bearers, murderers, and abandoners. Sometimes, even, they are incapable of being loved and returning love.

Because of his experiences, Gaines recognizes that it is a difficult task for women to rear male children. The times during which Gaines's novels are set, mainly 1940s Louisiana, are hard, cruel times to rear a black male child. The 1940s Jim Crow South means segregated facilities, blatant racism, and discrimination. The living conditions on a Louisiana parish plantation during this time are not much different from conditions during the time of slavery. Most of Gaines's characters are or have been employed as sharecroppers. Under the system of sharecropping, blacks were constantly kept underfoot, in debt, and under the scrutiny of white rule. Gaines insists that the mother's actions are a reaction to the times in which she lives: "It's the harsh world upon her that makes her react to all things as she does" (Porch Talk 66). The duties of the black mother are several. Gaines states that the first duty of a mother who loves her child is "To show us how to live, to show us how to survive" (Porch Talk 65). It is important to note that the primary job of any mother is to ensure the survival of her offspring, but the black mother's task is even more arduous. For her, survival consists of more than simply providing food, shelter, and clothing. Because she knows the difficulties, barriers, and dangers that await her children, especially her male children, the black mother must prepare her children for these obstacles, no matter how cruel or dehumanizing they may be. Psychologists Grier and Cobbs assert,

> Every mother, of whatever color and degree of proficiency, knows what the society in which she lives will require of her children. Her basic job is to prepare the child for this. Because of the institutionalization of barriers, the black mother knows even more surely what society requires of

> *her* children. What at first seemed a random pattern of mothering has gradually assumed a definite and deliberate, if unconscious, method of preparing a black boy for his subordinate place in the world.
>
> As a result, black men develop considerable hostility toward black women as the inhibiting instruments of an oppressive system. The woman has more power, more accessibility into the system, and therefore she is more feared, while at the same time envied. And it is her lot in life to suppress masculine assertiveness in her sons. (62-63)

Gaines's mothers attempt to teach their sons how to survive with dignity. Because mothers are powerless to offer their sons protection, they must resort to being duplicitous and cunning. Tante Lou does not want Grant to be subjected to the indignity of entering the Pichot family's backdoor. As a child, Grant often helped his aunt and Miss Emma with their chores at the Pichot house. He was constantly entering through the back door, Grant says, to "bring in wood for the stove, to bring in a chicken I had caught and killed, eggs I had found in the grass, and figs, pears, and pecans I had gathered from the trees in the yard" (18). However, before Grant leaves for college, Tante Lou tells him, "Me and Em-ma can make out all right without you coming through that back door ever again" (18-19). His leaving for college signals that he has reached physical maturation; he is now a man, and Tante Lou and Emma do not wish to be complicit in white society's efforts to humiliate and humble Grant. His leaving for college also signals that Grant will never have to work for the Pichots or depend on them for his economic livelihood. Powerless to grant him permission to enter through the front door like a respected guest, Tante Lou devises a plan whereby Grant will not be forced to demean himself. She simply forbids him from visiting her at work. When she and Emma ask him to accompany them to the Pichot house after Jefferson's trial, Grant becomes angry with Tante Lou, for his going to the Pichot house means he will have to enter through the rear of the house. Grant asks the two women, "Am I supposed to go in there too?" (17). Since leaving for college, he "had not been in Pichot's yard,

let alone gone up the back stairs or through that back door" (19). Grant angrily reminds Tante Lou, "It was you who said you never wanted me to go through that back door ever again." To which, Tante Lou replies, "Do I have to keep reminding you, Grant, this ain't just another day?" (17). Grant feels that Tante Lou and Emma are asking him to compromise his integrity. He feels as though the two women are conspiring against him and trying to suppress his masculinity. He fails to see what the two women are trying to accomplish by bringing him and Jefferson together. Although he is being subjected to the humiliating experience of entering through Pichot's back door, his actions will ultimately lead him to a larger reward. The women plan for Grant to teach Jefferson how to die like a man, which Grant does, but Jefferson shows Grant how to live like a man.

The second duty of the black mother entails teaching her child about the world he is to inhabit and providing him with the necessary skills to protect himself and subsequent generations. Grier and Cobbs state,

> As they mold their lives together and form a matrix from which children grow, the next most important function of a family, second only to protection and survival, comes into focus: to provide an accurate interpretation of the world to its children. Children must above all be taught what the world is like, how it functions, and how they must function if they are to survive and eventually establish their own families. (Grier and Cobbs 85)

One has to wonder how a mother explains to her child the prejudice and degradation he can expect to encounter in the world. How can a mother find the words to express that there are those who would harm him simply because of the color of his skin?

Octavia, the mother in "The Sky is Gray," has a difficult time putting into words the horrors that James can expect to encounter in the world. As a result, she is described as being reticent, a woman of few words. Surprisingly, of Gaines's mothers, Octavia has received the

most negative criticism for what readers perceive to be her coldness, her separation of heart and head, and her toughness when interacting with her son, James. Students and scholars often view her treatment of James as cruel and loveless, and they do not understand her need to be strict with James. To understand Octavia's plight, the reader needs to be aware that she does not coddle James because it is her duty to prepare him for the hostile world that awaits him. According to Grier and Cobbs,

> In the black household the man faces greater than usual odds in making his way. The care and rearing of children falls even more heavily on the wife; she is the culture bearer. She interprets the society to the children and takes as her task the shaping of their character to meet the world as she knows it. This is every mother's task. But the black mother has a more ominous message for her child and feels more urgently the need to get the message across. The child must know that the white world is dangerous and that if he does not understand its rules it may kill him. (Grier and Cobbs 61)

With her husband off fighting in the war, Octavia is left the sole provider for herself, her five children (of whom James is the eldest), and Auntie. Knowing all too well that living in the Jim Crow era South where the slightest action can be misperceived as an act of defiance or disrespect, Octavia understands the urgency of making sure that James is aware of his surroundings. Although her actions seem harsh, James clearly loves his mother. In the story, he states several times how much he loves her and how he plans to "pick plenty cotton and get her a coat" during the summer ("The Sky is Gray" 107).

Octavia has in mind the kind of man she wants young James to become—a strong, silent man capable of providing for his family. She has a long list of "don'ts" to which he must adhere. As James tells the reader, Octavia does not like for him to put his arm around her because "She says that's weakness and that's crybaby stuff, and she don't want no crybaby round her. She

don't want you to be scared, either" (84). Octavia also does not have any tolerance for unnecessary conversation: "She don't like for you to say something just for nothing" (88). The redbird scene in the story displays the pressure Octavia is under. Having to rely solely on the income Octavia earns from working in the fields has left the family experiencing lean times financially. Meat is a rarity, whereas bread, syrup, and beans are a staple at their house. Ty, James's brother, gripes, "I'm getting tired of this old syrup. Syrup, syrup, syrup. I'm go'n take with the sugar diabetes. I want me some bacon sometime" (88). So, when James and Ty discover the redbirds ensnared in their traps, Octavia orders James, who had planned to "play with them and let them go" (89), to kill them. When James says that he cannot, Octavia beats him for not obeying her. The trapped redbirds do not just offer the family the chance to have some meat, but they also provide Octavia the opportunity to instruct James in the art of procuring food for the family.

James later discovers that his mother reacted harshly because she is concerned about the family. She wants him to be able to provide for and protect the family in the event that something happens to her: "Suppose she had to go away? That's why I had to do it. Suppose she had to go away like Daddy went away? Then who was go'n look after us? They had to be somebody left to carry on. I didn't know it then, but I know it now" (90). The redbirds do not yield much sustenance for the family, but the experience of providing his family with a meal gives James's self-confidence and pride a boost: "They is so little. I 'member how I picked the feathers off them and cleaned them and helt them over the fire. Then we all ate them. Ain't had but a little bitty piece each, but we all had a little bitty piece, and everybody just looked at me 'cause they was so proud" (90).

The trip to the dentist's office in Bayonne removes Octavia and James from the safety of the parish, away from the people with whom they have established a community. In Bayonne, the two are without protection and must rely heavily on Octavia's cunning and physical strength—this is revealed by the fact that she carries a knife with her and wields it against the

man in the restaurant who asks her to dance. During the trip, Octavia and James encounter a number of segregationist practices. On the bus, they are forced to ride in the back of the bus "pass the little sign that say 'White' and 'Colored' . . . " (91). In Bayonne, James notices the confederate flag flying from the courthouse, the school for white children, and the cafés which serve only whites. The dentist Octavia takes James to, Dr. Bassett, is not as skilled as the other dentists in town, but he is the only one who will see black patients. While in town, Octavia admonishes James to "keep [his] eyes in front where they belong" (93) and to walk directly in front of her. Octavia warns him not to stare at the white people eating, and when James "butt into that white lady, . . . [she] jerks [him] in front and tells [him] to stay there" (93). Octavia acts in this way because she knows that blacks are "disciplined" and killed for not deferring to white people, for failing to appear meek and humble, and for not showing them the proper respect. She is simply trying to teach James how to navigate his way through this racist environment without having to explain the ugly truth.

Even though he is too young to understand her actions, Octavia teaches James by example the art of masking and being duplicitous. In town, there is nowhere for her to take James to warm himself. All of the establishments that blacks are able to patronize are in back of town—almost a mile's walk from the center of town. In order to warm James, Octavia takes him into the hardware store and pretends she is interested in buying an axe handle, even though she has no money. James does not understand her motives, but he appreciates the temporary warmth. James informs the reader,

> Me, Mama and the white man start to the back, but Mama stops me when we come up to the heater. She and the white man go on. I hold my hands over the heater and look at them. They go all the way to the back, and I see the white man pointing to the axe handles 'gainst the wall. Mama takes one of them and shakes it like she's trying to figure how much it weighs . . . . Then she gets another one, but 'fore she shakes it or

> anything, she looks at me. Look like's she's trying to say something to me, but I don't know what it is. All I know is I done got warm now and I'm feeling right smart better. Mama shakes the axe handle just like she did the others, and shakes her head and says something to the white man . . . . She tells me come on and we go on out and start walking again. (104-05)

This scene indicates the depths to which Octavia will go to provide for her child. It is also a wonderful example of her cunning and duplicity. By pretending to be interested in purchasing an axe handle, Octavia buys enough time for James to stand by the heater and warm up. She attempts to show James how to maneuver his way around a trying situation and keep his dignity intact.

Octavia's primary concern is teaching James how to survive with dignity. She refuses to accept food from Helena and Alnest, the elderly white couple, even though she and James are both hungry. When Helena asks Octavia if they have eaten, Octavia replies "Yes, ma'am," although all she could afford to buy the two of them for lunch is "three little old cakes" and a glass of milk for James and a cup of coffee for herself (113). Certainly, this meager offering of food is not enough to satisfy their hunger. Yet, she refuses to accept Helena and Alnest's food because, as she tells Helena, "We don't take no handout" (113). Octavia and James partake of the elderly couple's food only after Octavia and Helena agree that "the boy'll have to work for it" by moving the elderly couple's garbage cans (113). While eating, James looks at his mother and notices, "She's eating slow like she's thinking. I wonder what's the matter now. I reckon she's thinking 'bout home" (115). But it is quite possible that Octavia is trying to mask the true extent of her hunger. She eats slowly because she does not want the elderly couple to learn of her poverty or think her incapable of providing for her child. While James may not quite understand the reasoning behind his mother's actions, these lessons make it is hopeful that he will become a man she will be proud of and will someday understand and utilize the knowledge and skills she

attempts to impart to him during this trip. Octavia's sentiments are expressed in the last line of the story: "You not a bum," she says. "You a man" (117).

In addition to teaching her son how to survive and function in the world, the black mother must also teach him to respect his black brethren, to work for the betterment of his community, and to assist those in need. This is why Aunt Charlotte wants Jackson to return to the parish and teach the children. This is why Tante Lou and Miss Emma conspire to bring Grant Wiggins and Jefferson together. This is why Miss Julie Rand "cons" Jim Kelley into helping Marcus Payne. Although the black mother-son relationship in Gaines's literature is sometimes beset by difficulties and conflicts, all in all, it is a healthy and loving relationship. There are still those scholars who argue that the mothers are incapable of influencing the actions of the older male protagonists. Marcia Gaudet recognizes that Gaines's "aunt figures are often sources of strength and wisdom," but she feels that " they can be a stifling influence, especially when trying to protect the boys or men from danger, real or imagined" (140). Gaudet goes on to say that "the older women generally seem to have a confidence and sense of place within their community that the men lack. They create a sense of continuity and cohesiveness among their people. Nevertheless, there are important limitations, in Gaines's view, in what they can offer" (141). Gaudet makes a rather interesting point here. Gaines's mothers are limited in what they can offer because Gaines does not wish to diminish the importance of the father in the black family unit. To make his mothers capable of providing all of their sons' needs would lessen the father's importance. Even though Gaines dearly loved his Aunt Augusteen Jefferson and values all that she has taught him, he continues to wrestle with the fact that he never developed a relationship with his father because Manuel "was never there when [Gaines] was growing up" (Porch Talk 62). The student of Gaines's work, then, must realize that the mother and the father, not one or the other, both need to be present in the family unit.

CHAPTER 4

"TRAIN A CHILD IN THE WAY THAT HE SHOULD GO AND HE SHALL NOT DEPART FROM IT": THE MOTHERS' THREE-STEP PLAN FOR TRANSFORMING SONS INTO MEN IN THE LITERARY WORKS OF ERNEST J. GAINES

Because the son is the central character in Ernest J. Gaines's fiction, the plot usually revolves around the son's quest to understand the importance of community and family, redefine manhood, learn to survive with dignity, and locate his father. Critics often overlook the role the mother plays in assisting the son in his quest to become a man. Although they are drawn in the image of the mythical black matriarch, Gaines's mother characters subvert the notion that they produce daughters reared in their mothers' likeness, who mature into women who are controlling, domineering, and physically superior to their weakened and emasculated brothers. On the contrary, the mothers focus all of their attention on their sons, to the point of excluding or ignoring the needs of their daughters. Consequently, it looks as though the daughters are left to stand on their own without the benefit of their mothers' guidance. Scholar Marcia Gaudet argues, "It is significant that such a sense of community among women is much more evident among the older women in Gaines's fiction. Young women in general seem to be isolated. There are no strong mother-daughter relationships, just as there are no mature father-son relationships" ("Black Women: Race, Gender, and Culture in Gaines's Fiction" 155). However, the mothers allow the daughters to fend for themselves because, according to Gaines, they do not encounter the same discrimination on the parish plantation as do the men, whose lives are in constant jeopardy because they are often in competition with the white men. Gaines states:

> The women in their work did not come in conflict with the outer world as much as the men did in their work. The men competed with the white

> man, and there could be conflicts there. The black man competed with the white man as sharecropper and when he went into town, whereas the black woman very seldom competed. She was just a worker there. She was a worker in the big house, and she was a worker in the field. She did not have to—as I have [shown the men doing] in A Gathering of Old Men—compete [by] racing to the derrick to unload the sugarcane, or go into the cotton gin to unload the cotton. In my world, it was not a competitive thing between the black woman and that outer world. She just did what she was supposed to do. (Gaudet and Wooton 40)

Even though the men attempt to assert their manhood by competing with the white man, the parish plantation eventually wears even the best of the men down, forcing the men either to accept the conditions on the parish or leave. Over time, many of the sons grow complacent, accepting the conditions, even though they may not like or agree with them, and live "life quietly so [they] can die peacefully as the Lord will allow [them]" (The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman 226). Those sons, however, who cannot accept the conditions, leave for nearby cities or head up North in search of better living conditions, better pay, and an environment that is more hospitable towards blacks. The young mothers eventually follow the men to the cities and places up North after the burden of living without a mate and the difficulties of rearing a child (or children) on the pay earned from working in the fields become too much to bear. Those who are most in need of assistance—the elderly, the weak and complacent, and the very young—are left behind.

As a result, the father figure's absence, which makes life difficult for the mother and son in Gaines's texts, is largely felt in the home and the surrounding community. Physically, the mother and son are surviving, but their emotional needs are not being fulfilled. The mother figures recognize the importance of having a mother and father in the household. With the biological mother and father gone, the older mother figures are forced to rear the children and

maintain the family unit and the community. Faced with the realization that they will eventually die and that the young men with any sort of drive and ambition will eventually leave the parish in search of a better way of life, the mothers understand that their family, their community, and the patch of land that their families have lived and worked on for years are in danger of becoming forgotten. Gaines's mothers realize that the future depends on the children, most especially the sons; they must make their sons see the importance of remaining in the parish and fighting for the preservation of their families and community. The conditions on the parish plantation are harsh and stifling and offer little opportunity for blacks; thus, anyone who thrives there has to be strong. Therefore, the primary goal of Gaines's mothers is to bring their sons to manhood safely and to equip them with the skills and knowledge needed to be fathers, husbands, and leaders in the community.

Gaines's fiction supports King and Mitchell's claim that "African-American literature suggests that it is the mother who is the link to, the filter through which knowledge comes and the rite of passage is initiated" (King and Mitchell 26). His literary works reveal that his mother characters employ a three-step plan to complete the sons' transformation to manhood. In step one, the mothers choose "the One," the boy who shows promise of becoming a man and a leader in the community. In step two, the mothers redefine manhood and teach the One what is required of him in order for him to become a man. Finally, in step three, once the One reaches physical maturation the mothers complete his transformation by enlisting him to serve as a surrogate father figure for a troubled youth or young adult in his community.

Out of necessity, Gaines's mothers undertake this long and involved procedure to train their sons how to become men. The burden of rearing children and maintaining a home has started to take its toll on the younger mother figures and, as a result, they are not faring well under the pressures and responsibilities of single motherhood. In Gaines's literary world, the older mother characters (Aunt Charlotte, Miss Julie Rand, Aunt Fe, Aunt Lou, Miss Jane, Angelina Bouie, Tante Lou, and Miss Emma) are strong—physically, emotionally, and

spiritually. They believe in a higher being and remain hopeful that He will deliver a brighter day if they only hold on and continue to have faith. Gaines's younger mother characters attempt to emulate the actions of the older women, but the younger mothers do possess the same strength of character as the older mother figures. The young mothers are not as religious as the older mothers. In fact, there is no mention of the younger mothers even going to church, unlike the older mothers, who are constantly attending services or singing their 'termination for heaven songs. Therefore, the young mothers lack the faith and hope that the older women find in their religion. The young mothers, however, have inherited their mothers' lives and responsibilities. Like the older women, the young mothers are physically strong. They, too, are employed as domestics and field laborers. Octavia ("The Sky is Gray") works in the fields. Before becoming the cook at the big house, Pauline Guerin (Of Love and Dust) also worked as a field laborer. Likewise, Johanna Rey (In My Father's House) worked in the fields while living in Louisiana, but later finds employment working as a domestic when she moves to California. These women are single mothers attempting to rear families without the assistance of a husband or mate. As a result, it is possible to see the adverse affect of single motherhood on young mothers, especially Octavia and Johanna Rey.

Although Octavia is married, she has lost her husband, who has been drafted to fight in the war. With her husband gone, Octavia is now the head of a household of seven. She has the sole burden of providing for herself, Auntie, and her five children (James, Ty, Val, Louis, and Walker) out of the wages she earns working in the fields. In her husband's absence, Octavia works hard to maintain the family unit, but the toll of such an undertaking is beginning to consume her. Octavia appears to be approaching her breaking point. Underneath her cool and reticent exterior lies a rage ready to erupt. Octavia's anger and frustration are evidenced in her interaction with James. When the boy refuses to kill the red bird, Octavia whips him instead of explaining what she has ordered him to do. The more James protests, the angrier Octavia becomes and the intensity of the beating increases, forcing Auntie to intercede on James's behalf.

As the beating progresses, it seems as if Octavia is taking out her frustration with her situation on James: "She started hitting me 'cross the back. I went down on the ground, crying . . . . But she hit me and hit me and hit me" (90). Octavia transfers her anger with society onto James. This is why James pleads with Auntie not to tell Octavia about the toothache that has been plaguing him "'cause I knowed we didn't have any money, and it just was go'n make her mad again" (85). James takes note of Octavia's anger and frustration, which are clearly evident in her tone of voice: "'You hungry?' she says. She says it like she's mad at me, like I'm the cause of everything" (106). James correctly identifies his mother's emotions; however, he incorrectly identifies their sources. Octavia's anger, frustration, and rage are directed at society, the country which forces her and her children to go without a father, money, and adequate food, clothing, and medical treatment. Sadly, James is too young to understand, and Octavia is too angry to explain.

According to James, Octavia has not always been so unhappy and angry. In fact, Octavia's change in demeanor coincides with her husband's departure. Before the war, Octavia was a much more pleasant person who appeared to be more easygoing. James reveals that the father's absence has brought about a change in Octavia: "She always goes to bed early now. 'Fore Daddy went in the Army, she used to stay up late. All of us sitting out on the gallery or round the fire. But now, look like soon's she finish eating she go to bed" (87). Most likely, Octavia is exhausted from the physical strain of field labor and also misses the companionship of her husband. Octavia does not have much to smile about. She is constantly preoccupied with the family's precarious financial state. The trip to the dentist's office to have James's tooth extracted is bound to upset the family's budget. An unexpected expense of this nature means that the family will have to sacrifice some other essential item—most likely food or clothing. Before Octavia can even decide to take James to the dentist, she has to make certain that she has enough money to cover the cost of the dental fees and transportation to and from the dentist. With the change, she is able to purchase a meager amount of salt pork with which to season the family's dinner of beans. Octavia's budget allows little room for error or unforeseeable expenses. She has

just "enough to get there and get back. Dollar and a half to have [the tooth] pulled. Twenty-five for me to go, twenty-five for him. Twenty-five for me to come back, twenty-five for him. Fifty cents left. Guess I get a little piece of salt meat with that" (87). After the two are forced to leave the dentist's office while it closes for lunch, Octavia, faced with yet another financial dilemma, must revise her insubstantial budget once again. Unable and unwilling to allow her child to suffer from cold and hunger pangs, Octavia is forced to reallocate her funds so that she can afford to pay the dentist's fees, get the two of them home, buy James lunch, and, with the quarter that now remains, buy food for the family. Octavia demonstrates that she is quite talented when it comes to creative budgeting by stretching three dollars to accommodate the transportation, medical, and nutritional needs of seven people. Before buying James's lunch, Octavia has to give serious thought to her decision:

> Mama gets out the handkerchief and count up the money. Both of us know how much money she's got there . . . . She stirs the money round with her finger. Most of the money is change 'cause I can hear it rubbing together. She stirs it and stirs it . . . . She takes a quarter out the handkerchief and ties the handkerchief up again . . . . She flips the quarter over like she's thinking. She must be thinking 'bout us walking back home . . . . She turns 'way from the heater right fast, like she better hurry up and spend the quarter 'fore she change her mind. (109-110)

Octavia's halting actions reveal her anxiety about spending the money. Even though the family, in all likelihood, experienced financial hardship when the father was present in the household, chances are that every penny did not have to be accounted for. During the trip to the dentist's office, James reminisces about taking a family trip "to Baton Rouge once—me, Ty, Mama, and Daddy. But that was 'way back yonder, 'fore Daddy went in the Army" (93). With the father's income, the family was able to incur some frivolous expenses and do some things just for fun. James describes these times as happy ones and wishes for his father's return so that things can

return to the way they once were: "I used to like to be with Mama and Daddy. We used to be happy. But they took him in the Army. Now, nobody happy no more . . . . I be glad when Daddy comes home" (110).

Although Octavia clearly misses the companionship and support of her husband, she does not seclude herself away completely from other people like Johanna Rey (In My Father's House). Octavia avoids engaging in conversation with the other women she encounters on the bus and in the dentist's office. She responds to the women's queries, but does so in a manner that is not rude or offensive yet that certainly does not invite further discussion. When the woman in the dentist's office asks Octavia if she is from Bayonne, Octavia simply responds, "Down the river." James informs the reader, "And that's all she's go'n say, 'cause she don't talk much" (95). Because she has Auntie in the home to assist her with the rearing of the children, she is not devoid entirely of a woman-centered support system. Johanna, on the other hand, relocates herself and her three children to California, away from her family and friends and the children's father, Phillip Martin. Outside of the elderly couple who own the store and the Greek family for whom she works, Johanna spurns making any efforts at developing friendships and support systems.

Consequently, of all the young mother characters, Johanna, in In My Father's House, fares the worst and her children suffer greatly as a result. Johanna's decision to leave Phillip because he refuses to accept responsibility for his family by making her an honest woman and legitimizing her children shows her strength. However, the decision to leave Phillip apparently exhaustsJoanna of all her remaining strength because she is left physically, emotionally, and mentally bankrupt. Once in California, Johanna begins to unravel. Evidence of her physical exhaustion can be witnessed in her physical appearance. She ages prematurely, and the beauty for which she was once known and admired has been replaced by a worn and haggard countenance. When Chippo sees Johanna again for the first time he cannot "believe it was her" (188). He has to exercise restraint in order to look Johanna in the face: "but I did all I could to keep looking straight at her. It hurt me to see her like this. 'Cause I remember how pretty she

was when she left from home" (189). Chippo tells Phillip that even though Johanna is younger than he is "her hair was grayer than [his] is now. She had lost teeth. Her skin loose, sagging. She looked ten, fifteen years older than she ought to be" (188).

Even though Johanna and Phillip have not had contact with one another for more than twenty years, Phillip dominates Johanna's thoughts and actions to the point that she is unable to rear her children effectively. Short of providing for her children financially, Johanna seems incapable of offering anything more. Sadly, she makes unwise decisions concerning her social and sexual life. Her whole existence is tied to her unrequited love for Phillip Martin. Although Phillip is the only man she has ever loved, Johanna takes a succession of lovers, "never one too long. Two, three months, then he had to go. Be a long time when there wasn't one. Then another one—two, three months, then he was gone. The reason, none of them could be number one. She let them know that from the start. Number one was still in Louisiana. They could stay a while if they wanted to, then they had to get out" (195). The men serve a temporary purpose—to ease Johanna's loneliness. She is obsessed with Phillip and is ever hopeful that he will come to reclaim her and her children. Chippo explains to Phillip that after twenty years, Johanna still has "deep, deep love for [him]. Up till a month ago, she thought [Phillip] might knock on that door any moment to take her back" (185). Johanna's behavior sets a bad example for her children in terms of how a relationship between a man and a woman should be, and she exposes her children to a number of harmful situations. Johanna's poor choices in partners ultimately destroy her family. One of her lovers, Quick George, a pool hustler who wasn't above committing any number of illegal activities "from pushing dope to pimping to robbing the church" (195), rapes her teen-aged daughter, Justine. Consequently, Antoine, Johanna's youngest son, avenges the crime committed against his sister by killing Quick George, and he is sentenced to serve five years in prison. He and his sister blame their mother for ruining their lives, and they refuse to talk to Johanna.

Overburdened and tired of having to go it alone, Octavia and Johanna need help and they need it quickly. But the mothers allow the two women (and the other daughter characters) to tread water because, even though the daughter is in danger, the son is in a more precarious state. If the daughters can simply hold on, Gaines's mothers plan to rear sons who will as men be capable of standing strong in the face of oppression and adversity, who will be able to stand beside them and share the responsibility of rearing children and taking care of the household. Aware that their daughters and grandsons are in dire straits, the mothers attempt to teach their sons how to be men and to reunite the mother and father, husband and wife, and father and son. Thus, the first step Gaines's mothers take is to embark on a search to find "the one," the leader amongst the boy children.

Step One: Choosing "the One"

According to Ernest Gaines, the process of selecting "the one" is a common practice and does not occur solely in the black community. Gaines asserts

> Well, in any family, any family of five or six, the mother and father or the older people pick out a person in that family to do—to carry on the work, in case something happens. In a place like the Quarters where I lived, those old people, without you knowing, will concentrate on you, and they will choose you. And not only one person will choose you, but a second one will choose you to do a thing. For example, I used to write letters. Now there were a couple of other guys who could have written the letters for them as well, but they wanted me to do it, and I would do it, and they would give me little gifts of cakes and things like that. Not that I was chosen as "the one," but from observing these things, yes, a community as well as a family—or a country—will choose somebody to represent them. (Lowe 304)

The One in Gaines's fiction is a messianic figure. He is the anticipated deliverer of his people—either his family or his community. As the title suggests, each family and community has one individual who becomes the chosen One. In the family unit, it is up to him to carry on the work and ensure the survival of his family members. In the community, the One is expected to head up the movement for social equality. Because he possesses the courage of his convictions, he is not afraid to die for his cause.

Generally, the One is chosen at a young age. After being selected, he is trained to assume his rightful position as head of his family or the leader of the community. The women encourage the One to find religion and to further his education. For, it is the mothers' hope that the One will become either a preacher and save souls or a teacher and educate the children. Although such designated leaders all join the church as youths, they grow disillusioned with organized religion after they leave the parish to be educated. As the One, he is expected to effect change. However, most of the preachers in Gaines's fiction tend to be conservative. They try to quell most acts of rebellion and civil disobedience because they fear that the white people will retaliate. Therefore, the chosen One usually pursues a career in education. In addition to providing children with a solid education, he also teaches the adults, especially the men, by example how to survive with dignity in the parish plantation. Although Gaines states in the passage quoted above that the mother and father pick the person, in his fiction only the mothers, not the fathers, are involved in selecting the One. Even though Gaines's quote only discusses one way of selecting the One, the mothers in his literary works have three methods from which to choose: 1) process of elimination, 2) birth order, and 3) intuition.

Selection based upon process of elimination involves choosing a child because he is the only candidate available. Needless to say, this method of selection tends to be the least successful because it is very difficult to make a child, or person for that matter, into something that he does not want to be. Charlotte deems her nephew Jackson the One through process of elimination. She explains to Jackson that the future of their family depends on him: "You all they is left,

Jackson. You all us can count on" (Catherine Carmier 98). Charlotte, "who has lived for Jackson, pinning all of her hopes on her great nephew" (Carmean 27), expects him to perpetuate and protect their family lineage. It is her dream that Jackson "go [North] to be educated, and then return to the South to work" as a teacher in the parish (Catherine Carmier 93). When the novel opens, Jackson is returning to the plantation after having graduated from college. Charlotte is overjoyed by his return because "now he can teach" (18). However, Jackson does not intend to remain in the parish, for ten years in California have, according to Valerie Melissa Babb, "enable[d] him to discern the blatant injustice done to the black farmers of his community and what appears to be their complacent acceptance of a race and caste hierarchy that relegates them to servitude. The one observation fills him with anger; the other, with hopelessness" (Babb 51). Jackson has acquired more than book learning; he has also learned that the North "had its faults as well as the South. Only the faults there did not strike you as directly and as quickly, so by the time you discovered them, you were so much against the other place that it was impossible ever to return to it" (Catherine Carmier 91).

As a result, Jackson holds the land, the people, and the way of life on the parish plantation in contempt. When Jackson surveys his surroundings, he wonders, "How can anyone stay here? Just look at this place. Everything is dying up, everything is half dead" (102). Even though he asserts that "he probably loved her more than he did anyone or anything else" (27), he cannot honor Charlotte's wish that he return to Louisiana and pursue a teaching career. Jackson views returning to the South as a fate worse than death. In his mind, returning to the parish is equivalent to surrendering. He tells Madame Bayonne, his grade school teacher, "I cannot bow" (80). Unfortunately, Jackson fails to understand that Charlotte wants him to return so that he can work for change and make life on the parish better. She wants him to stand tall and teach the children, and perhaps the adults—those who would be willing and brave enough to follow his example—to do so, too. She has no intention of seeing him bow. Even his feelings toward the people he once lived amongst have changed. No matter how hard he tries, Jackson "could not

make himself feel about Brother as he did before" (64). Brother, Jackson's childhood friend, senses the change in Jackson almost immediately. He can tell that "there was something different about him—something Brother could not put his finger on at the moment" (17). Brother has a difficult time coming to understand that Jackson holds his former friend in contempt because Jackson feels that Brother, who never left the parish and never went to school, has accepted life on the plantation without question and has bowed down.

Although Charlotte has chosen Jackson as the One, "there is little evidence that the community has selected [him]" (Carmean 27). Charlotte throws Jackson a welcome home party, and she assures him that she did not take any pains in planning the party because, as she tells Jackson, "They [the people down the quarters] the ones wanted you to have it" (Catherine Carmier 31). The people are, in fact, interested in meeting "Jackson—for Charlotte's sake at least" (71). And, Olive Jarreau and Mrs. Viney are genuinely happy to see him once again. Excited to have one of the community's own return to teach, Olive Jarreau tells Jackson, "I hope [the school's] somewhere close so you can teach my great-grandchildren" (65). However, for the most part, the people appear to be in attendance more so for Charlotte's sake than out of any particular affection or respect for Jackson.

In fact, the community members' actions suggest that Jackson is not their choice for leader. The community people are uneasy, and "they did not know what to do around him. He had to make the first move. If he held out his hand, they took his hand. If he spoke to them, they spoke in return. If he smiled, they did also"(66). But Jackson is equally tongue-tied around them: "once Jackson had spoken to them and had shaken their hands, he was as lost for words as they were" (67). Jackson spurns their company, preferring to be in the company of Madame Bayonne, whom "the people, though they respected her very much, looked upon as an eccentric old woman from whom they kept their distance" (71). In the same way, the community members respect Jackson, but they do not know how to relate to him. After all, "he had been educated, not they. They did not know how to meet and talk to educated people" (67). Jackson does not exude

the warmth and charisma expected of a leader. During his visit, Jackson continues to distance himself from the community folk and eventually his relationship with Aunt Charlotte becomes strained. Clearly, Jackson's inability to relate to them and his departure from the parish at the novel's end suggest that in actuality he is not the One, the leader for which Charlotte had hoped.

Selection based upon birth order often meets with no more success than Charlotte's decision to make Jackson the One simply because he's the only family she has remaining. The logic in making a child the One because he is the oldest child is flawed. The oldest child in a family is not always the best or most competent candidate. Parents often expect older children to serve as role models for their siblings by virtue of the fact that supposedly with age comes maturity and wisdom. Yet, this is not always the reality. When selecting the One, mothers should take into consideration the child's personality, intelligence, and capability. Selection based upon birth order, however, totally disregards these important qualities and traits. As a result, the outcome varies from case to case. This explains why Johanna's decision to make Etienne the One ends in disaster; whereas,Octavia's choice to make James the One is successful.

By making Etienne the One, Johanna forces responsibility upon him that he is not fully capable of handling. After leaving Phillip, Johanna tells Etienne that "he was the man of the house. The man of the house . . . . She told him that till [Phillip] came back to them he was go'n be the man of the house" (In My Father's House 194). As the man of the house, Etienne must protect his mother and sister and help his mother financially. At the time, Etienne, "a scared, confused little boy" (194), is no more than eight years old. Etienne proves to be capable of supplementing the family's income. While his younger brother and sister go to the YMCA after school for games and exercises, "Etienne had to work, help bring money in the house" (193-94). But his strength and courage, his ability to be a man, is tested when his sister, Justine, is raped. As the man of the house, he is supposed to exact revenge upon the man guilty of committing this heinous crime against his sister. Instead of fleeing the house in search of Quick George, "Etienne sat on the bed and took [Justine] in his arms, rocking and crying" 196). He would rather let the

police and criminal justice system right this particular wrong. "This for the law," he says (196). However, Antoine feels that because "Etienne was the oldest, the man of the house, it was his job to do it" (196).

Johanna heaps an incredible amount of responsibility on Etienne by placing him in a position he should not have been given in the first place. Her definition of a man contrasts sharply with Etienne's personality. In her mind, a man is the breadwinner and protector of the family, but Etienne's actions demonstrate that he is a nurturer. His first instinct is not to kill Quick George, but to comfort and tend to his sister. Etienne's failure to live up to his mother's definition of a man should not and does not, in actuality, make him any less of a man. Yet Etienne believes that it does and barricades himself in his room, which the elderly black couple call "a crypt" (199). The room is furnished to resemble a prison cell or a monk's room; it has "a narrow bunk, a little chest of drawers, nails against the wall to hang his clothes—that was all" (198-99). Etienne retreats to his bedroom as a form of punishment, rarely coming out except to wash his plate and walk the streets late at night. Chippo tells Phillip that he believes "[Etienne] went in there out of guilt. He wasn't the man of the house no more, and he didn't want act like he was" (199). Instead of helping him become a Man, the ordeal leaves Etienne "an empty vessel at best, . . . both broken and discarded" (Carmean 84).

On the other hand, Octavia has clearly made the right choice in selecting James as the One. Like Etienne, James "ain't no more than eight" ("The Sky is Gray" 90), and he also helps supplement the family's income by picking cotton in the summer. However, unlike Etienne, James is undaunted in his position as "man of the house" and he readily accepts the challenge. In fact, he is proud of the confidence and trust Octavia has in him. His declaration that Octavia can rest easy when she leaves him in charge of the house is tinged with pride: "she know I'm go'n look after them [his siblings] and look after Auntie and everything else. I'm the oldest and she say I'm the man" (83-84). One can almost envision James thumping himself on the chest, grinning from ear to ear while speaking. As the oldest, the One, James is charged with the task of

being a role model for his younger siblings: “I got to set a good sample for the rest. I can’t ever be scared and I can’t ever cry” (84).

James is most likely to be successful as the One because he takes a liking to the young nihilist in the dentist’s office. In Gaines’s texts, those boys who are selected to be the One must demonstrate a willingness to learn and further their education; inevitably, they are often teachers or educated to become teachers. James observes that the young nihilist “looks like a teacher or somebody who goes to college. He’s got on a suit, and he’s got a book that he’s been reading” (95). James admires the young man from afar and declares, “When I grow up I want to be just like him. I want clothes like that and I want keep a book with me, too” (100). His admiration of the young nihilist, who preaches that “Words mean nothing. Action is the only thing. Doing. That’s the only thing” (101), suggests that James has the desire to learn and will one day go on to fight for the betterment of his family and community.

In comparison, James’s younger brother Ty, who is the next to oldest child, complains often and appears to be ill-suited for the task. When Auntie wakes the children on the morning of James’s dental visit, “Ty got up grumbling” (87). With Octavia and James away, as the next to oldest child, it would seem that the job of watching those at home would fall to Ty and that he would relish the opportunity to be in charge. However, Ty does not want the responsibility, for he views it as an inconvenience. James recounts, “Ty came back there grumbling and mad at me. ‘Got to get up,’ he say. ‘I ain’t having no teefes pulled. What I got to be getting up for’” (88). Ty is incorrigible and constantly finds himself in trouble with Octavia, Auntie, and Monsieur Bayonne. James states that Octavia “don’t want you to be scared, either . . . . Ty’s scared of ghosts and she’s always whipping him” (84). Contrary to James, who admits to being afraid of the dark but conceals this information from his mother, Ty makes no attempt to hide his fears or act brave. Ty is not likely to become a man because, even though men have fears, they do not allow those fears to paralyze them and prevent them from acting. In addition, Auntie has to chastise and cajole him for overstepping the bounds by talking out of turn and forgetting to show

his elders—Octavia, Auntie, and Monsieur Bayonne—the proper respect. Ty runs afoul of Auntie when he complains about the quality and quantity of the food with which Octavia provides the family. After complaining that the food is inadequate, that it will not make him strong, Auntie warns, "I don't know much 'bout your strength, . . . but I know where you go'n be hot at you keep that grumbling up" (88). Because he is a child, it is difficult to determine whether Ty is simply ignorant of the fact that the times are hard and that Octavia is doing the best she can or just chooses to ignore it. To him, everything is a joke and he is "always trying to make somebody laugh" (106). Probably the most damning evidence against Ty is Monsieur Bayonne's prediction that "Ty wasn't go'n ever 'mount to nothing" (108). As an outsider, someone who is not a member of the family, but instead a community member, Monsieur Bayonne's claim is symbolic of Ty's rejection by the community at large. In all likelihood, Ty is not the One, for the boy children who successfully reach manhood, who become leaders in the community, are all given the community's stamp of approval.

Such is the case with James, who receives the community's approval because his reverence for his mother is obvious to all who witness the two together. In the dentist's office, one of the women compliments Octavia on James's behavior: "'You got yourself a little man there,' the lady says" (99). James treats his mother with the utmost respect and admiration. As the two board the bus, which has segregated seating, with the back seats reserved for the black patrons, James scans the bus for seats in the colored section. Since there is only one seat available, James stands because, as he puts it, "I want my mama to sit down herself" (91). Octavia does not have to remind him to be chivalrous or mindful of her needs, for he is always thinking of her. Even though he is but a boy, James takes seriously his duty to protect his mother. When the man at the café steps out of line with Octavia, James is ready to defend her honor: "I go up to the little man to hit him, but Mama makes me come and stand 'side her. The little man looks at me and Mama and goes back to the counter" (111). Unlike Johanna, Octavia does not <u>need</u> James to protect her. She is quite capable of taking care of herself, as she demonstrates to

both the man in the café and to James. Despite the fact that Octavia tells James that he is the man of the house, she never relinquishes control over her family. By making James the man of the house, Octavia intends to teach him how to take care of himself and the others should anything ever happen to her, and perhaps his own family one day. James accepts the position of "man of the house" and works hard to please his mother. He harbors no feelings of ill-will towards her. In fact, he says "I love my mama" at least four times in the story (84, 99). At the end of the story, Octavia affirms that James is the One: "'You not a bum,' she says. 'You a man'" (117).

Incidentally, the process of selecting the One based upon intuition is similar to the method Gaines describes in the passage quoted at the beginning of this section and that is employed by Miss Jane and the community women in The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman. Selection based upon intuition, unlike birth order and process of elimination, proves to be the most successful method because the pool from which the One is chosen is not limited to a particular family and the act of choosing is not relegated to a single mother. This very method of selection also relies heavily upon communal participation and takes into consideration those very traits of the boys—intelligence, capability, and personality—that the other methods disregard.

Through this method of selection, the mothers first act upon their intuition. The women search the newborn boy child's face hoping to feel some sensation or to witness some clue that would reveal that this child may be their future leader. Miss Jane states, "Anytime a child is born, the old people look in his face and ask him if he's the One. No, they don't say it out loud like I'm saying it to you now. Maybe they don't say it like I'm saying it to you now. Maybe they don't say it at all; maybe they just feel it—but feel it they do" (199). When Jimmy is born, the women begin to suspect, based upon their feelings, their intuition, that he could be the One: "We felt it more. In here, in here. People never say things like that. They feel it in the heart" (200-201). One by one, the women come to recognize that Jimmy could be the One. It is Lena, Jimmy's maternal great aunt, "his mama's daddy sister" (200), who is the first to look to Jimmy and ask, "You the One, Jimmy? You the One?" (199). Soon after, Miss Jane begins to "watch"

Jimmy to see if he is the One, and the other community women begin to follow suit. However, the women do not confer with one another, do not ask one another if he is the One, for they cannot put into words what they feel, which is no more than a gut reaction: "No, we never said nothing to him about it, we never said nothing to each other about it—but we felt it" (202). Like intuition, this indescribable and elusive feeling will be readily recognized upon sight because it is something for which they have searched for a long time.

Even though the women feel that Jimmy Aaron is the One, they do not declare him to be so right away. Unbeknownst to him, Jimmy Aaron must next prove himself through his actions and deeds. The mothers put Jimmy Aaron through a series of tests comparable to those performed by Hercules, except instead of testing Jimmy Aaron's physical strength, the mothers look to see how intelligent and capable a person he is and whether his personality suits them and is befitting of their future leader. Jimmy Aaron must first prove that he has the potential to become one of the boys who will go on to receive a college education. Anyone who is going to be their leader has to be educated. On the parish plantation, children are educated up to middle school age, for there is no high school for the black children. Thus, anyone who wishes to receive a high school education must either move to the city (New Orleans) or go North. (Most of Gaines's protagonists go North.) Sending a child to college is a communal effort on the parish plantation. According to Miss Jane, everyone helps out should the child need assistance: "You help them when they needs it. Books if they can't buy their books. Give them money if they need to get somewhere. If you don't have it yourself, you go to the church, you go to the white people, but you do everything in your power to help him. That you owe him who you make the One" (217). The child must pass this first test because educating a child requires a great sacrifice of time, energy, and money, and the women want to ensure that they yield a good return on their investment. Jimmy is no more than six when he passes the first test by demonstrating that he is able to count and recite the alphabet. Having shown that he is a fast learner and that mentally he is beyond his peers, the women are impressed by his accomplishment: "When we found out he

could count to a hundred by ones, twos, fives, tens, and we found out he knowed all his ABCs, we used to make him recite for us any time we went down there" (202). In the end, this knowledge is a mixed blessing; they are proud of his intelligence but are "sad because if he was the One he was go'n have to leave sooner or later" (203). Left to depend on the kindness of strangers and the faith that God will protect and care for him, the mothers must trust that he will return to them.

After the first test has been passed, the mothers are confident that Jimmy is the One, yet they still do not inform one another or even him, for that matter, of their decision. Instead, the mothers continue to "watch" him. Miss Jane recalls how she and the other women would monitor Jimmy Aaron's every move in order to keep him safe: "We used to watch him passing by in the road on his way to school. If it was cold and we saw that sweater not buttoned, we would say, 'Get that thing buttoned there, Jimmy.' If we saw him trying to break ice in that ditch with the toe of his shoe, we would tell him to cut that out before he caught a death of cold" (203). The women are simply interested in protecting their future leader. They continue to test him, too. Jimmy Aaron must now prove that he is capable of living up to the expectations and plans that the mothers have for him by performing certain tasks. During this segment of the test, a clear parallel exists between the process that Gaines describes and the method employed by the women in The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman. Just as the older people concentrated on Gaines, Miss Jane and the community women concentrate on Jimmy Aaron, and, upon learning that he is capable of reading and writing, draft him to read the Bible and the newspaper and to write letters for them: "When he learned how to read we made him the reader down here in the quarters. And by the time he was nine he could read good as anybody down here except the schoolteacher. He used to read and write our letters for us, and he used to read the newspapers, too" (203). Like Gaines, who was rewarded for his efforts with "little gifts of cakes and things like that" (Lowe 304), Jimmy receives "tea cakes and clabber" (The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman 203) from Miss Jane in exchange for reading the comic strips to her. By choosing Jimmy Aaron to perform

these chores, the women are giving him their approval; they are voting for him, saying in their own way that he is the person they choose to be the One.

As the letter writer in the Quarters, Jimmy Aaron is very talented. His letters bring a small measure of happiness to women who have not witnessed nor experienced much happiness in their lives. The women like his letters because he is able to capture their thoughts and feelings and put them into words on paper. Without having to be coached or prodded, he appears to "[know] how to say just what [the women] wanted to say." Miss Jane explains, "All you had to do was get him started and he could write the best two-page letter you ever read. He would write about your garden, about the church, the people, the weather. And he would get it down just like you felt it inside. I used to sit there and look at him sitting on my steps writing and water would come in my eyes" (204-05).

In the Quarters, the houses lack basic amenities like running water, electricity, and gas: "There ain't no hyphen down there and no lectwicity. Not even a pump in every yard. Just that well side the road" (201). Therefore, communicating with family and friends who do not reside in the Quarters is not as simple as picking up the telephone and placing a call. Because they lack other viable options, the women must rely upon letter writing as their means of keeping in touch, and they can trust Jimmy Aaron to report the latest events truthfully, accurately, and intelligently. Two pages may not seem like much, but for someone who is uneducated or illiterate, unable to read or write, being able to share news and local happenings with a distant loved one means a great deal, even when the events are as mundane, as unimportant, as a discussion of the weather and one's garden. Jimmy Aaron understands, however, that these trifles are all that these old women have and he works hard to make certain that the letters are well-written and capture the voice of the person for whom he is writing.

Jimmy Aaron ingratiates himself with the women, especially Miss Jane, because "he wasn't nothing but a child, and he didn't know we had already made him the One, but he was already doing things the One is supposed to do" (204). The third and final test screens him to

determine whether his personality is befitting that of the One, who must be in possession of a laundry list of personality traits; the One must be charismatic, selfless, inventive, giving, compassionate, considerate of others, determined, and attuned to the needs and desires of those who would follow him. Jimmy Aaron's treatment of Miss Jane demonstrates that he is clearly in possession of all of these traits. Without being prompted, Jimmy makes it his job to keep Miss Jane in good spirits. Miss Jane is a big fan of Jackie Robinson and the Brooklyn Dodgers because they "was for colored people" (203). In her mind, Jackie Robinson is Heaven sent, a gift from God to help colored folks survive the hard, lean years that followed the second World War: "Now, after the war He sent us Jackie" (204). A win for Jackie and the Dodgers is a triumph for all blacks, a testament to their faith, endurance, and skill. According to Miss Jane, she is such a fan that "It made my day just to hear what Jackie had done . . . . If the Dodgers had won, if Jackie had done good, my day was made. If they lost or if Jackie hadn't hit, I suffered till they played again" (204).

Knowing that Miss Jane's happiness is dependent upon the outcome of a baseball game, upon the success of Jackie Robinson and the Dodgers, Jimmy Aaron embellishes the scores. Miss Jane comes to discover that "Jimmy was telling [her] lies. He knowed how much [she] liked Jackie and the Dodgers and on them days when [she] wasn't feeling too good he would tell [her] Jackie had stole two bases when Jackie hadn't stole a one. Would tell [her] Jackie had got three or four hits when Jackie hadn't got near the first base" (204). To compensate for the little white lies he told Miss Jane to make her happy, "on them days when Jackie got a bunch of hits and stole a bunch of bases he would take couple of them back to make up for the others he had given him earlier" (204). Why would Jimmy, who was nothing but a child at the time, go through such pains, such great lengths to fudge the scores on a mere baseball game just to make a woman who is nearly a centenarian happy? The answer is simple: Jimmy Aaron recognizes the worth of the community elders and truly cares about what Miss Jane and the women think and how they feel.

Miss Jane and the community women make a good solid decision when selecting the One, thanks to their screening process, which allows them to confirm their feelings and intuition. Because of their screening process, their Herculean tests, the women avoid making an ill-advised selection. Without it, they might have chosen Coon's son as the One. Although Coon's son is able to read and write letters, he is no Jimmy Aaron, which the women promptly learn during the summer he fills in for Jimmy Aaron:

> One summer [Jimmy Aaron] stayed in New Orleans with his mama, and we got that ugly boy there of Coon to read and write for us. That boy was ugly as a monkey and had ways twice as bad. He had a little ugly brown dog that used to follow him everywhere, and the children here in the quarters used to call the dog Monkey Boy Dog. The dog's name was Dirt, but the children wouldn't call him Dirt; called him Monkey Boy Dog.
>
> But that boy was something else. What was in that paper, that's what he read. He didn't care how bad you felt. He came to your house to read what was in the paper, he didn't come there to uplift your spirits. If Jackie stole a base, he read that. If Jackie didn't steal a base, he read that, too. The people used to tell him that old people like me needed her spirit uplifted every now and then. "Can't you make up a little story at times?" they used to tell him. He used to say, "I ain't no preacher. Let preachers tell them lies." Oh, he was evil, that boy. Same when it came to writing your letters. Wrote what you told him and nothing else. When you stopped talking, he stopped writing. "I don't know your business if you don't know it," he used to say. "I come here to write your letter, not think myself crazy." One time I told him: "Can't you say something about my garden?" He said: "Say what about it? Say it out there? I can say that if

> you want me to. You want me to say, 'My garden still here?'" "Can't you say, 'Beans dry' or something," I said. (I always like to fill both sides of the page when I write a letter, you know.) He said: "If you want people in New Orleans to know your beans dry, I'll go on and write your beans dry. Don't make me no never mind." (205)

Coon's son is ugly physically and has a personality to match. The women's disdain for him is evident in Miss Jane's description of him—"that ugly boy there of Coon" (205). No mention is ever given of the boy's birth name, which seems to be of little consequence. He is simply referred to as "that boy," which is understandable given that his coarse comments to the women show that he holds them and their position as elders in the community in complete disregard. Lazy, unimaginative, spiteful, surly, and downright rude, his personality leaves something to be desired. The behavior of Coon's son makes it "pretty clear to everybody in the quarters that he wasn't the One" (206).

Step Two: Redefining Manhood

After selecting the One, the next step Gaines's mothers take is to redefine black manhood or masculinity and to teach their sons how to conduct themselves accordingly. In Gaines's texts, all boys become "men," but only a small percentage of the boys become "Men." Boys who become men reach physical maturation, find employment, settle down, and have families, but they eventually abandon the women and children because they can no longer tolerate life on the parish. They may dislike the conditions of the parish plantation, but men do not cause any disturbances for fear of punishment at the hands of the white citizenry. The male characters in A Gathering of Old Men, the majority of whom are septuagenarians and octogenarians—Chimley is seventy-one-years old, Mat seventy-two-years old, Cherry seventy-four-years old, and Mathu eighty-two-years old—have, with the exception of Mathu, who "was the only one [who] ever stood up" (31), lived their entire lives in fear. In all of their seventy- and eighty-some odd years they "had never knowed . . . where a black man had killed a white man in this parish" (28). They

have never stood up for themselves and their families, never confronted the white men who did them wrong out of fear for "what happened after these fights, these threats, how the white folks rode" (29).

As a result, the men feel castrated because of their inability to provide for and protect their families; men (lowercase) silently suffer the indignities committed against themselves and their families. The protagonists in A Gathering of Old Men have a catalogue listing of wrongs committed in which "[they] had all seen [their] brother, sister, mama, daddy insulted once and didn't do a thing about it" (97). The men have stood by and watched helplessly as their sisters and daughters have been raped and sexually exploited by the Boutan clan and other white men on the parish. Clatoo's sister is sent to the state penitentiary for "defend[ing] herself by chopping [Forest Boutan] half dozen times with a cane knife" after he attempted to rape her. Even though Clatoo's sister did not kill Forest, "she was sent to the pen for the rest of [her life], where after many years she died insane" (25). Jacob's sister Tessie, who "was one of them great big pretty mulatto gals who messed around with the white man and the black man," is killed because "the white man wanted her all for themselves, and they told her to stay away from the niggers" (45). When Tessie refused to listen, they "ran her through the quarters out into that St. Charles River—Mardi Gras Day, 1947" (45). Unlike their white male counterparts, Clatoo and Jacob are not able to protect their sisters. Were they to defend their sisters' honor, the two men would be killed. Thus, they are forced to watch helplessly as their sisters are sexually violated, imprisoned, and murdered.

As with their womenfolk, the men are also unable or unwilling to act against senseless violence committed against their sons and brothers. Angered by the sight of a black man in a military uniform, Fix Boutan and his crew mercilessly beat Unc Billy's son, who had just returned home from fighting in World War II. Unc Billy's son is beaten so badly that he goes insane and is hospitalized in Jackson, unable to recognize his parents and his own humanity. Unc Billy reveals, "He don't even know me and his mama no more. We take him candy, we take him

cake, he eat it like a hog eating corn. . . . Just put his head in the cake and eat it like a hog eating corn. His mama slice him a little piece and hand it to him, he let it fall on the table, and eat it like a hog eating corn" (80). Tucker's brother Silas, "the last black man round here trying to sharecrop on this place" (93), is killed after he wins a race he "was supposed to lose" (97). On the parish, a black man is never supposed to beat a white man at anything, especially not if the black man is driving two mules and his opponent, the white man, is driving a tractor. Despite the odds against him, Silas wins the race by arriving at the derrick first. To punish him for not knowing his place, the white men "took stalks of cane and they beat him and beat him and beat him" (96). Afraid that the men would turn on him, Tucker "didn't do nothing but stand there and watch them beat [his] brother down to the ground" (97).

The men cannot afford their family members protection, nor can they seek protection in the criminal justice system, for receiving a fair trial is an anomaly for a black person on the parish. Gable's sixteen-year-old son becomes a victim of the criminal justice system when he is sentenced to death "in the 'lectric chair on the word of a poor white trash. They knowed what kind of gal she was. Knowed she had messed around with every man, black or white, on that river. But they put him in that chair 'cause she said he raped her. Even if he did, he was still no more than sixteen years old, and they knowed he was half out his mind" (101). To add further insult to injury, Gable and his wife receive a call from the jail informing them that they "could have [their son] at 'leven, 'cause they was go'n kill him at ten. Told us we could have a undertaker waiting at the back door if we wanted him soon as it was over with" (101). For the white citizenry, black life on the parish is of so little consequence that they fail to show blacks respect even in death. Having fulfilled its objective, the state wants to rid itself and its property of the young boy's corpse expeditiously. The racist and cold-hearted nature of the parish's criminal justice system is further revealed in its failure to recognize that Gable and his wife are grieving over the death of their son.

The men are equally helpless in protecting and defending their own honor. All of their lives they have behaved "just like frightened little bedbugs . . ." (15). Chimley and Charlie Biggs, as do the other men on the parish, simply want to be recognized and respected as men. Their attempts to be acknowledged as such are either ignored or countered by abuse. Given his nickname because of his dark complexion, Chimley "didn't mind his friends calling him Chimley, 'cause he knowed [they] didn't mean nothing. But he sure didn't like them white folks calling him Chimley" (40). Despite "always telling them that his daddy had named him Robert Louis Stevenson Banks, not Chimley" (30), Chimley cannot make the white men acknowledge his manhood or respect his wishes. Instead, he is forced to live with a moniker which, coming from the lips of a white person, is degrading to him. As his surname suggests, Charlie Biggs has a very large and intimidating physique: "He was about six seven, he weighed around two hundred and seventy-five pounds, he was jet black, with a round cannonball head and his hair cut to the skin; the whites of his eyes were too brown, his lips looked like pieces of liver. His arms bulged inside the sleeves of his denim shirt, and his torso was as round as a barrel . . . . He was the quintessence of what you would picture as the super, big buck nigger" (186). Despite his size and physical appearance, Charlie, who is fifty years old, has been avoiding confrontation for "forty-four, forty-five years," since he was six years old. Charlie asserts, "That's all I've ever done, all my life, was run from people. From black, from white; from nigger, from Cajun, both. All my life. Made me do what they wanted me to do, and 'bused me if I did it right, and 'bused me if I did it wrong—all my life. And I took it" (188-89).

Fear of retaliation by the white folks paralyzes the "men." They erroneously believe that if they stay in their place, do not get out of line, go with the flow, that they will be safe from violence and abuse. Even when the other men decide to take a stand, Reverend Jameson, the parish's spiritual leader, refuses to join them out of fear of what will happen to the community members. Jameson attempts to discourage the men from participating in what he feels to be a dangerous and unnecessary act of rebellion. Standing up now, he feels, is not going to change

history or soothe old wounds: "Y'all think that'll make up for all the hurt? That's what you think?" (55). Instead, Jameson believes, and correctly so, that their actions will simply incur the wrath of the white citizenry.

What Reverend Jameson and the other male protagonists in A Gathering of Old Men fail to realize at first is that their silence will not protect them. On the contrary, the "Men" in Gaines's text understand that their silence, their failure to act is viewed as complicity. Men, however, are not afraid to fight for change. In Gaines's texts, the men—those who cower in the face of difficult situations—are nothing more than grown boys doomed to live an extended adolescence or youth forever, and the Men—those who attempt to survive with dignity—die prematurely. Gaines explains his reasoning by stating, "My heroes just try to be men; but because the white man has tried everything from the time of slavery to deny the black this chance, his attempts to be a man lead toward danger . . . . So whenever my men decide that they will be men regardless of how anyone else feels, they know that they will eventually die" (O'Brien 31). The Men (uppercase) willingly risk their lives for they understand that a "man is better dead than living without self-respect and self-esteem" (King and Mitchell 15).

Joe Pittman, Ned, Jimmy Aaron (The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman), and Charlie Biggs (A Gathering of Old Men) demonstrate that the only way to survive is with dignity, and, consequently, all four Men are slain. Joe Pittman, dubbed Chief because of his superior horse breaking skills, dies attempting to break an irascible stallion that he knows will, in all probability, be the cause of his death. (Miss Jane foresees Joe's death and warns him against the stallion.) Even though Joe is aware of the danger that accompanies horse breaking, he refuses to change professions, to give up his trade, because he is good at it, and, as a horse breaker, "[he] don't take orders from a soul on earth" (89). Joe philosophizes that he cannot quit because "That's what life's about, doing it as good as you can. When the time come for them to lay you down in that long black hole, they can say one thing: 'He did it good as he could.' That's the best thing you can say for a man. Horse breaker or yard sweeper, let them say the poor boy did it as good as he

could" (89-90). Ned, too, must die because he refuses to defer to the white citizenry's demands and threats. Even though he is aware that his actions jeopardize his safety and that of his family, Ned continues in his efforts to build a school for the black children. He even goes so far as to deliver publicly, out in the open for all to see, his speech laced with the teachings of black nationalism in which he exhorts his followers to "show them, warriors, the difference between black men and niggers" (112). Outraged by his rebelliousness, the white citizenry hire Albert Cluveau to kill Ned. Like Joe Pittman and Ned, Jimmy Aaron is struck down while asserting his masculinity. He, too, knows that his outspokenness will most likely end in his death, and he, too, refuses to be silenced. Active in the Civil Rights movement, Jimmy Aaron "had met Reverend King, he had gone to his house, he had gone to his church, he had even gone to jail with him" (223). Jimmy Aaron returns to the parish to help organize the people in protest against the racist customs and practices that force blacks to live separately and unequally. On the morning that he plans to have "a girl to drink from the white people's fountain," Jimmy Aaron is killed, shot by someone who does not intend for him to carry out his protest. For Joe Pittman, Ned, and Jimmy Aaron being a "Man" translates into never backing down, never giving up, even if it means sacrificing one's life.

Although Mathu's threat to do Charlie physical harm should he run from Beau Boutan is the catalyst for Charlie's decision, Charlie does eventually come to stand up for himself. He is, however, killed by one of the men in the lynch mob organized by Fix Boutan. Charlie's debut as a Man is short-lived, but for the people on the parish the memory of him standing up for himself will live forever. Emboldened and impressed by Charlie's valor, the men all pay homage to their fallen hero: "I leaned over and touched him, hoping that some of that stuff he had found back there in the swamps might rub off on me. After I touched him, the rest of the men did the same. Then the women, even Candy. Then Glo told her grandchildren they must touch him, too" (A Gathering of Old Men 209-210). The men and women view Charlie's decision to stand tall, to defend himself, as a model for how they should conduct themselves—with pride and dignity.

To a certain extent, all of the men, Joe Pittman, Ned, Jimmy Aaron, and Charlie Biggs, serve as teachers and role models for those in their community. Although their bravery is not likely, in the literal sense, to "rub off" on those they leave behind, it does "rub off" figuratively in that the people usually follow their example and stand. After Jimmy Aaron's death, the people honor his memory by going to Bayonne to participate in the demonstration he organized. When Robert Samson, the plantation overseer, threatens to evict those individuals, young and old, who participate in the protest, some of the people become discouraged and return home, but those encouraged by Jimmy Aaron defy Samson by going to town even though they are uncertain whether they will have homes to return to: "Let's go to Bayonne, even if we got to come back here to nothing" (245). From Jimmy Aaron, the people learn to put their dignity and pride before their need for physical and material possessions. Their decision to risk being homeless demonstrates that they have come to understand that they will never be able to live comfortably, happily, and peacefully until their humanity is recognized.

Gaines's mothers want their sons to be Men and to follow in the footsteps of men like Charlie Biggs, Jimmy Aaron, Joe Pittman, and Ned. However, in teaching their sons how to conduct themselves, the mothers stress to their sons that they must temper their aggression, pride, and refusal to bend with a measure of humanity. Traditionally, men are expected to be the providers, protectors, and breadwinners in the family; as the head of the household, men should control those under their power. Gaines's fiction is a prime example of art imitating life. His male characters readily accept this definition of manhood and attempt to live by its guidelines. Richard Majors and Janet Mancini Billson, authors of Cool Pose: The Dilemmas of Black Manhood in America, assert that "Even in the face of crushing poverty, most black males have accepted the basic masculine goals of wanting to raise and provide for a family" (Majors and Billson 16). According to Majors and Billson, "Outlets for achieving masculine pride and identity, especially in political, economic, and educational systems, are more fully available to white males than to black males. This in turn restricts the black man's ability to achieve in family

systems, to take care of a wife and family, or to be a present and supportive father" (Majors and Billson 31). Historically, the attempts of black men to provide for their families have been hampered by "underemployment, seasonal and inconsistent employment, low pay, and being the last hired and first fired . . ." (Majors and Billson 32). Whereas black women were not without employment opportunities as domestics, field laborers, and as factory workers in northern cities, black men often found it difficult to gain employment.

On the parish plantation in Gaines's fiction, the Cajuns are taking over the land and, in the process, are denying black men the only work they know how to do, thus denying them the ability to provide for their families. In Catherine Carmier, the men in attendance at Jackson's homecoming party gather outside in Charlotte's yard, "reflecting [upon] the fate the Cajuns and their machines had bestowed upon them and their children" (62). Unable to depend upon farming for their economic livelihood, the men are forced to leave the parish in search of employment elsewhere—Baton Rouge, New Orleans, and cities up North—because they "ain't doing nothing but starving here" (61). Their failure to live up to the traditional roles of breadwinner, protector, and provider leaves them feeling less than men, even though their socioeconomic position makes it exceedingly difficult for them to fulfill these roles. In fact, their efforts to assert their "masculine pride and identity" by fulfilling these roles are often met with psychological, financial, and physical opposition. Ironically, E. Franklin Frazier, author of The Negro Family in the United States, "found that black males had thoroughly internalized the traditional norms of American patriarchy" (Majors and Billson 31). This is ironic because the realities of black men's lives prevent them from fulfilling these traditional roles.

Tragically, buying into or accepting the traditional, white-male-oriented definition of manhood ultimately affects black male-female relationships adversely. The men erroneously believe that asserting their "masculine pride and identity" requires that they control and dominate others. Following his decision to stand, not to "crawl under the bed like [he] used to" (A Gathering of Old Men 28), Clatoo asserts his masculinity by ordering his wife around. When she

asks him what is going on, why he is getting his gun out, Clatoo tells her, "'Go somewhere and sit down, woman,' I said. 'This men business'" (A Gathering of Old Men 36). By ordering her around and not telling her what is going on, he treats his wife in the same manner as the white men treat him; he treats her like a child. Clatoo dismisses his wife's importance in their union, her humanity, and her womanhood. On the contrary, when the men are incapable of asserting themselves or achieving their manhood, they take their aggressions and hostilities out on their wives. Majors and Billson assert that "Many black men feel that, even though they may not be able to control how society treats them, at the very least they should be able to control 'their women'" (17). Thus, many black men adopt the belief that they are the kings of their castles. Because they cannot control those things that occur outside of their homes, they become downright tyrannical at home, as is apparent in Clatoo's behavior. Their feelings of frustration and inadequacy often manifest themselves in violence (i.e., domestic abuse).

Statistics show that domestic abuse tends to be more prevalent in black families. In fact, according to Murray Straus and his colleagues, authors of Behind Closed Doors: Violence in the American Family (1980), "wife abuse is almost four times as common among black families as compared to white families. Black husbands are three times more likely than white husbands to hit their wives or engage in domestic violence" (Majors and Billson 17). Frustrated by their inability to "get ahead" or garner respect and recognition in the workplace and society in general, black men sometimes turn to violence as a means to gain control over a situation over which they feel that they are losing control. Clatoo, who has abused his wife for years, does so because, despite all of his labor and toil, he cannot see where he is improving the quality of life for himself and his family, but can witness everywhere around him how his efforts benefit others, namely the white folks. When his wife questions the sudden change in him and questions his decision to take a stand, Clatoo responds to her by saying:

> "What's the matter with me? Woman, what's the matter with me? All these years we been living together, woman, you still don't know what's

> the matter with me? The years we done struggled in George Medlow's field, making him richer and richer and us getting poorer and poorer—and you still don't know what's the matter with me? The years I done stood out in that back yard and cussed at God, the years I done stood out on that front garry and cussed the world, the times I done come home drunk and beat you for no reason at all—and woman, you still don't know what's the matter with me? (A Gathering of Old Men 37-8)

Clatoo's feelings of inadequacy have caused him to turn against his wife. Instead of recognizing that she has struggled alongside of him, he mistakenly transfers his anger at society onto her, forcing her to suffer and bear all of his anger and pent up frustration.

Despite racism and discrimination, some black men continue to believe that their masculinity can be (re)claimed through beating white men at their own game. The men fail to realize that trying to compete with the white man, trying even to play the white man's game, is futile and will end in disaster. The economic conditions of the parish, coupled with the fact that the whites control the land, the money, the people, and the criminal justice system, will not allow black men to triumph over white men. Black women, on the other hand, do not compete with white society, not because they did not come into contact with that outer world as Gaines suggests, but because they understand and accept that the realities of their lives would never allow them to fulfill society's definition of womanhood. Hence, black women define black womanhood according to their own dictates.

Aware of the dangers of internalizing the white-male-oriented definition of manhood (i.e., loss of self-esteem and abusive behavior), the mothers attempt to provide their sons with an alternative model of manhood, one that encompasses and embraces black men. Although A Gathering of Old Men does not seem significant in the study of mother-son relationships, it does yield significant insight into Gaines's definition of manhood. The men in the novel are rather old when they finally learn the rules of conduct by which men should live, yet they demonstrate that

it is never too late to become a Man. What the men, and young boys, come to learn is "that being a man does not depend upon diminishing the worth of others. It does, however, mean demanding recognition of one's worth—even when defense of personal dignity leads to violence. Most of all, manhood includes taking responsibility for one's actions and a willingness to face the consequences of these actions" (Carmean 101). While Gaines's model of manhood does not subvert the more traditional model, it does allow for the incorporation of what are deemed to be feminine values. N. Cazenave, author of "Black Men in America: the Quest for Manhood" (1981), "found the black male to be more traditional in the way he embraces typical masculine values: aggressiveness, competitiveness, success at work, protection of his family, and self-confidence. But he is also more likely than the white male to place a heavy emphasis on warmth, gentleness, and standing up for his beliefs" (Majors and Billson 33). Therefore, it is possible to argue that Gaines's definition of manhood is realistic. What I find most interesting is that Gaines's expectations for his male characters bear a striking resemblance to those to which black mothers hold their sons. According to Joyce Elaine King and Carolyn Ann Mitchell, authors of Black Mothers to Sons: Juxtaposing African American Literature with Social Practice, black mothers, like Gaines's mother figures, "expect [their] sons to demonstrate: (1) responsibility through reciprocity; (2) honesty and loyalty through mutuality and deference: and (3) faith and compassion through inner strength and self-control" (38).

As a result, the community in Gaines's literature acts as an extended family in which each and every individual is a member. Each person, bound by loyalty and honor, is personally responsible for the prosperity and safety of his or her family, community, and heritage. Everyone is due courteous respect, and everyone must respect the opinions and wishes of one another. Most importantly, everyone has the same relationship to one another. Theoretically, no one person is more important than another. Some may shine more than others, but in the black community a person's self-worth, humanity, and importance are measured by the way he or she treats others, not by "material rewards, status or competitive success" (39). In selecting the One

and teaching him how to be a Man, the mothers have to make certain that they make him understand that he is not better than the others just because he has been singled out. However, in singling this child out, he is given preferential treatment, which does not always translate into better treatment. Although the child is given more time and attention than the others, he is watched and his actions are monitored because the mothers hold him to a higher set of standards than they do his peers. When Jimmy Aaron is caught fooling around with Eva, he is punished while Eva gets off unscathed. Miss Jane explains the reasoning for the difference in punishments: "We all wanted him to get the whipping. We didn't care if Eva got it or not. What did any of us care about Eva? We all knowed what Eva was go'n turn out to be. And we knowed what we wanted out of him" (The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman 210). The women's treatment of Jimmy Aaron and Eva is more a matter of do as I say and not as I do. Their preference for Jimmy Aaron over Eva is clear, although as children, the two may mistake the mothers' leniency with Eva as a token of their favoritism for the girl.

Because of the contradiction between what they teach and what they do, the mothers find themselves in the unenviable position of having to "teach [their] sons that they are not lesser beings than whites and that 'being better' does not mean that they are 'better' than their black peers with whom they should maintain positive, reciprocal relationships" (King and Mitchell 40). Miss Jane and the women do not allow Jimmy Aaron to fight the other boys on the plantation, not even to defend himself. According to Miss Jane, "If we saw him fighting, we chastised him no matter who was wrong. He wasn't suppose to fight these here in the quarters, he was suppose to stand up for them. You see, we had already made him the One" (The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman 203). Jimmy Aaron should not fight his peers because the women expect him always to respect and look out for his peers, regardless of whether they do the same for him. As the One, he must set an example for how they should behave. By chastising Jimmy Aaron, the mothers try to teach him that "'being better' means maintaining a reciprocal commitment to the collective black community and family . . ." (King and Mitchell 40).

Jimmy Aaron proves to be an apt pupil. Unlike Marcus Payne (Of Love and Dust), he is aware that on the parish plantation an individual's actions can both positively and negatively affect the entire community. As made clear by Jimmy Aaron's living as a Man, a triumph for one is a triumph for all. However, should one person willfully act in a manner that goes against social custom and white rule, everyone, not just that individual, will be punished. Having grown up in Baton Rouge, Marcus Payne does not fully understand the delicate situation of the black community on the parish plantation when he first arrives. In order to exact revenge on Bonbon, the plantation overseer who works him unrelentlessly, Marcus plans to seduce Louise, Bonbon's wife. Marcus knows that pursuing any sort of romantic or sexual relationship with a white woman will result in his death. Raised in the South, Marcus has undoubtedly heard tales of many cases in which black men were lynched for merely being accused of conducting themselves improperly in front of a white woman. Raised in the South, Marcus has undoubtedly heard tales of how the whites, who viewed the deflowering and sullying of white womanhood as one of the black man's gravest and most heinous transgressions, retaliated against the perpetrator and his family and community alike. In the event that Marcus managed to reach adulthood in the South without having learned that any relationship with a white woman would kill him, Jim Kelly forewarns Marcus of the awful fate that awaits him and some unfortunate community members: "[Bonbon] would lynch you. He would burn you alive. Him and his brothers would burn you alive. You and half of the people around here" (Of Love and Dust 122). Even after learning that his actions will negatively affect so many, Marcus persists in his plan. His decision to proceed with his act of seduction testifies to Marcus's complete disregard for his own safety and that of the other blacks in the parish and reveals that he cares about no one but himself.

It is not that Marcus is as callous as one would believe. It is that he has lost his ability to have faith in others and in God. Once "a good little Christian" (249), Marcus no longer has faith in God because he feels God did not protect him. After his mother died, Marcus's "daddy put [him] with [his] nan-nan and he took off somewhere" (250. Forced to grow up quickly, Marcus

takes a job where he is taken advantage of by the older men who extort money from the young boy. Marcus prays to God for protection, "Jesus, please make Big Red stop taking my money," but his prayers go unanswered. He decides to defend himself against his extorter and is incarcerated. In jail, his problems continue; the older men threaten to do him harm unless he pays them off with cigarettes. Marcus loses faith in God because he feels that God's power is limited to or reserved for grave matters such as cures and resurrections: "Jesus healed the sick and raised the dead, but He didn't stop people from taking your money. That wasn't a miracle—not even a little miracle" (251). Feeling as though he can depend upon no one but himself, Marcus vows never to be dependent upon anyone: "When they let me out of jail, I promised myself I was go'n look out only for myself; and I wasn't go'n expect no more from life than what I could do myself. And nobody in this world need to expect no more from me than that" (253). Marcus fails to see that even if he distances himself from the community, it can still be held accountable for his actions. Jim Kelly tries to explain to Marcus the fallacy in his outlook: "'You can't make it like that, Marcus,' I said. 'They got the world fixed where you have to work with other people'" (253).

Although Jimmy Aaron has also "lost his faith in God," he remains aware that "advancement or success for African Americans requires that [they] identify with group interests not just individual self-interest" (King and Mitchell 40). Before staging his demonstration, Jimmy Aaron goes to the church and asks the church elders and members for their assistance. Even though he is no longer a member of the church and he no longer believes in God, he still respects their faith. He still views the people as his brethren. His faith in God has diminished but not his faith in the people. Jimmy Aaron tells the congregation, "I left the church, but that don't mean I left my people. I care much for you now as I ever did—and every last one of you in here know me" (225). He goes to them because he realizes that the success of his plan is dependent upon their participation.

Jimmy Aaron goes to the congregation in hopes of benefiting from their physical and spiritual strength. It is their very faith in God that has given them the strength to endure the harsh conditions on the parish. He states, ". . . I'm here because you are strong. I need you because my body is not strong enough to stand there all by myself. Some people carry flags, but we don't have a flag. Some carry guns, but we know it would be nonsense to even think about that. Some have money, but we don't have a cent. We have just the strength of our people, our Christian people. That's why I'm here" (225). In the African American community, the church is the pillar of strength. It was responsible for the grassroots movement of the civil rights era. Long before the advent of Martin Luther King, Jr., the African American Christian tradition gave birth to "the language of liberation and empowerment" (Fontenot 146). The church and its members serve as paradigms of strength and conduct for the young demonstrators who look to the institution as their link to their community, their history, and their heritage. Even though they, like Jimmy Aaron, may not follow its teachings, they acknowledge its power and their need for those very foundations that many of them have cast off. Jimmy Aaron tells the congregation, ". . . We still need your strength, we need your prayers, we need you to stand by us, because we have no other roots" (The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman 227).

The most telling part of Jimmy Aaron's speech to the congregation is his comment that "we need you to stand by us." Jimmy Aaron also goes to the congregation because his actions will affect everyone in the parish, and out of deference and respect, he owes it to them to ask for their blessings. Because of the risk and danger which surround the demonstration, Jimmy Aaron is bound by honesty and loyalty to warn his community that "some of us might be killed, some of us definitely going to jail, and some of us might be crippled the rest of our life" (226). Despite the danger involved in his protest, Jimmy Aaron is intelligent enough to know that his demonstration will not succeed, will not obtain its desired effect, if the community members do not take an active role. Because of its position and power in the black community, the church is the most logical place to go to first for support. It alone has the power to make or break a

movement. Jimmy Aaron and his fellow demonstrators cannot run the risk of alienating the church, and his decision to inform the church of his plans and to solicit help reveals that he is concerned about and respects his community's wishes. Through his actions, Jimmy Aaron reveals that Miss Jane and the community women have provided him with an intimate understanding of the inner-workings of the parish community.

Step Three: Finding the One a Male Role Model

Although the mothers outline in step two how their sons should conduct themselves as Men, the transformation process is not complete until the third step, which brings fathers and sons together. The mothers do this by having the One act as a surrogate father figure for a troubled youth or young adult in his community. In Gaines's fiction, the young boys are more receptive to their mothers' instruction than the young men. As children, the sons are eager to please and do their mothers' bidding. However, as the boys mature and reach college age, the mothers begin to encounter resistance and, at times, hostility when they try to direct their sons, thereby giving birth to the battle of wills between the mother and son. When the boys leave the parish to further their education, they begin to cast aside their mothers' instructions. Being away from the plantation opens the sons' eyes to the stifling environment they left behind and causes the young men to long for a place far away, free of racial prejudice and hatred. Upon learning that in the North racism and discrimination still thrive, only "they don't come dressed in white sheets with ropes" (Catherine Carmier 81), the young men lose faith and grow disillusioned. Although the North, plagued by covert racism, is not what it promised to be, the young men feel that they are better off there and come to believe that it is impossible for them to return to the parish, for they could never live there as Men. Therefore, the mothers' wish for them to return and become teachers and leaders in the community becomes a burden, an albatross around their necks. The sons respond to their entrapment, as they envision it, with anger, resentment, and hostility.

Marcia Gaudet, in "Black Women: Race, Gender, and Culture in Gaines's Fiction," views the sons' resistance to their mothers' attempts to define manhood as a sign of the mothers'

limited ability to maintain a lasting influence on their sons. Gaudet states, "Although mothers and aunts try to train their youngsters in general, older men cut themselves off from female influence. Thus Gaines's women, despite their strong sense of self, have only limited ability to influence men in making decisions and in establishing their sense of identity and manhood. A clear exception to this pattern is depicted in 'A Long Day in November'. . . " (150). Gaudet's claim that the women are powerless to direct and mold their sons suggests that there exists a gap between the two, that cannot be eradicated. To a certain extent, Gaudet is correct. The mothers are limited in their ability to control and direct the actions of their older male charges, but they are not powerless as Gaudet presupposes.

Gaudet's assessment overlooks the Oedipus complex. Under normal circumstances, the adolescent boy must begin to distance himself from his mother and begin to emulate the actions of his father. However, in Gaines's fiction, the father figures are, more often than not, absent from the home. Sadly, there does not exist a community among the young boys and the older men (in the same way that there are no strong mother-daughter relationships). According to Gaines, the two groups live independently of one another, seldom coming into contact with one another except, perhaps, in the workplace, where there is little to no time for idle chatter. Thus, the adolescent boy has no adult male role models.

As a result, the father's absence fills the son with a sense of worthlessness and incompleteness. The sons, seized by the feeling that something is missing, become consumed by the need to find this indescribable object that they cannot name. Because his father is not present in the home, Etienne/Robert X believes that his life is insignificant and matters to no one: "'My soul don't feel good,' he said as he stared down to the alley that ran alongside the building. 'Like garbage, broke glass, tin cans. Any trash'" (In My Father's House 25). Etienne equates himself with discarded waste because he erroneously believes that since his father abandoned him, no one else cares about him. Philip Martin's desertion of Etienne causes him to believe that he is beyond

help. When Shepherd suggests that he see a doctor or seek the help of someone to help rid him of his ailment, Etienne replies, "Nobody can do nothing . . . " (25).

Etienne's walking the streets at night, wandering aimlessly, is very similar to Jackson Bradley's quest to find the elusive place where he will feel whole and at home. Madame Bayonne tells Jackson, "You were always searching. Always wanted to find something strong—something you call concrete. Always" (Catherine Carmier 80). Jackson admits that he has been searching, "Yes searching" (80), but for what he does not know. He seems to think that he will find this indescribable object in either a geographical location or an emotional or mental state: "Then maybe it's some place else" (80). Jackson concedes, "I'm not looking for paradise, Madame Bayonne" (81). What he thinks he is looking for is a place where he can live with dignity and truth, a place where he can "make something out of a senseless world" (81). Yet Jackson's travels have shown him that this place is not the parish and that it is not in California or up North.

He fails to realize that what he is searching for is not a place or thing. Jackson's statement to Madame Bayonne is telling: "I'm like a leaf,' Madame Bayonne, 'that's broken away from the tree. Drifting'" (79). His statement reveals that he is searching. Like a leaf pulled from a tree, Jackson has no roots and feels severed from a larger being. That being is his community, his family, but most specifically his father. A leaf broken away from a tree is forced to drift, for it has no control over its movements and does not have strength or weight enough to counter the wind. However, as a person, Jackson, unlike a leaf, can reattach himself to his roots. By finding the larger part of himself, his roots, he will end his drifting. Jackson and Etienne falsely believe that their salvation will come from a place and they do not realize that they are looking for a father figure to guide them and show them the way. Their fathers will restore to them their feelings of self-worth and show them how to live with dignity and truth regardless of where they happen to reside.

Careful scrutiny of the mother-older son relationships reveals that the mother is fully aware of what the sons need and knows how to go about providing for them. The mother's influence is limited because she does not want to undermine the importance of black men in her sons' lives. Women can teach young boys how to be humane and how to treat people accordingly, yet the mothers' teachings do not stick, do not become real until the sons see it in practice by other men. This is why the men stand only after they witness another man's efforts to survive with dignity. Despite the fact that they see their mothers live with dignity on a daily basis, it does not become a reality to them until they witness for themselves that men can live in the same manner. Vesting the mothers with the power to control and dominate their sons would, indeed, make them emasculating matriarchs, women who control the black household. Gaines's work subverts the notion of the black matriarch and shows that the mothers play an integral role in bridging the gap between fathers and sons—one of Gaines's major themes.

By bringing fathers and sons together, Gaines underscores the importance of familial and communal responsibility. His mothers teach that the responsibility for the family and community should not be shifted from the mothers' shoulders to the fathers,' but should become a shared responsibility. Traditionally, men entered the job force, and women ran the affairs of the house and reared the children. However, Gaines's mother characters seek to modernize parental roles by encouraging their mates to assume more childrearing responsibilities. For example, Amy in "A Long Day in November" wants more from her husband, Eddie; she wants him to play a more active role in the rearing of their son. Because he has been neglecting his family, Amy leaves Eddie. This decision, in the end, solidifies her family and offers Sonny the chance to see his father reclaim his manhood by being a good father and role model. The young boy is given a valuable lesson that will prove advantageous as he matures, for "as Sonny's parents separate and his father makes him part of his quest to regain his wife's affection, Sonny watches Eddie reconstruct paternal identity through an awareness of self, family, and the true meaning of being a man" (Babb 17). The two are reunited after Eddie demonstrates that his family comes first by

burning his automobile and promising to take on more familial responsibility. By agreeing to help Sonny with his homework and his prayers, Eddie, who "never says his prayers" (78), becomes involved in overseeing his son's education and moral training. By establishing a schedule whereby both she and Eddie assist Sonny with his schooling, Amy ensures that the child will have the opportunity to bond with his mother and his father: "'I'll take you over it again tomorrow morning,' Mama says. 'Don't let me forget it now.' 'Uh-uh.' 'Your daddy'll carry you over it tomorrow morning,' Mama says. 'One night me, one night you'" (76). In doing so, Amy deliberately lays the foundation for Eddie and Sonny to establish a loving and harmonious father-son relationship. She provides Sonny with a paradigm on which to model himself. Both Eddie and Sonny benefit from Amy's arrangement because they have the opportunity to spend time with each other, and they learn together that being a man requires more than assuming financial responsibility for one's family. Amy and Eddie's future together is uncertain. Because Eddie is now making an effort to be there for his family financially, physically, and emotionally, one assumes that Eddie and Amy will make it, that the family will grow and prosper. However, given that most of Gaines's father figures "abandon" their families by the time the eldest son turns eight (Sonny is six), it is impossible to predict whether Eddie will honor his promise to Amy and Sonny. Yet Eddie's understanding that he needs to be a part of his son's life, that his preferring to spend time with his friends has distanced him from his son, who readily admits in the beginning of the story that he loves his mother more, may help him realize that he cannot afford to be an absent father.

Amy is not a trendsetter. She is not unusual in her efforts to promote a strong and loving relationship between her son and his father. Although Eddie is one of the few biological fathers present in the home, he and Sonny are not the only father-son pairs in Gaines's texts. Carl Wooton and Marcia Gaudet, authors of Porch Talk, detect that Gaines often has "somebody who at least attempts—even if he doesn't always succeed—to act as a kind of surrogate father" (61). In fact, Gaines, in responding to Wooton and Gaudet, agrees that father-son pairs frequently

appear in his works: "Oh yes, you do have the surrogate father come up on the scene. You have that all the time, in everything, in every book" (62). Just as Gaines's mother figures are often not related to the child biologically, so, too, are the father figures. The definition of a parent in Gaines's work is anyone who nurtures and provides for a child. The fact that he places a surrogate father in every book underscores how he values the importance of the father in the family unit.

Unfortunately, as Wooton and Gaudet note, the father-son pairing is not always successful. In Catherine Carmier, Jackson Bradley and Raoul Carmier seem an unlikely father-son pairing. Raoul, a Creole who remains faithful to an outmoded belief system, despises blacks whose complexions are darker than his. He refuses to associate with anyone on the parish—blacks and whites—and forbids his family from doing the same. However, the two are paired together because they have been searching for one another—Raoul, whose only son died in a lumber accident, is searching for his son, and Jackson, whose father has disappeared, is searching for his father. Instead of embracing him and taking him under his wings, Raoul rejects Jackson. He tells the young man, "I'll fight you till I'm dead" (237). The fight that ensues results in the symbolic death of both men. Valerie Babb asserts, "Instead of a polemic message, Gaines leaves readers with a profound sense of loss, not because of lost innocence but because of lost opportunities" (38). Raoul's spirit and pride are the driving forces that enable him to persevere and continue to work the land regardless of the odds against him. After the fight, his spirit is crushed. At first he refuses to accept the loss, but in the end he gives up: "He would not believe that he was beaten. There was too much left for him to do. There was a crop to get in; there was Catherine. How could he possibly fall? What would become of everything he did" (Catherine Carmier 241)? Jackson, in turn, defeats the man who, as a surrogate father, could teach him how to survive with dignity on the parish and could end the young man's search for the father figure who eludes him. Instead, the novel ends with Jackson preparing to leave the parish, doomed to continue his search to find what is missing in his life. Gaines accepts the blame for Raoul and

Jackson's failure to form a bond: "In my first novel, Catherine Carmier, Raoul is looking for a son, and I know I failed there, because they fight and there's a separation there. And Jackson's probably looking for a father, as [is] Marcus in Of Love and Dust" (Porch Talk 60-61).

Etienne and Philip Martin's reunion also ends in a "profound sense of loss." The father and son are reunited after twenty years, but their reunion ends in disaster. Philip reaches out to his son, hoping to forge a relationship with him, but Etienne, whose self-esteem has suffered greatly, feels unworthy of being loved. Angry and hurt, Etienne rejects his father in the vain hope of making him suffer just as he has. Feeling emasculated because of his father's desertion of the family, Etienne tracks Philip down, hoping that he will be able to "sew back [his] nuts by killing [his] father" (In My Father's House 99). Etienne comes to understand that killing his father will not restore his manhood. But he lacks the forethought to see that establishing a relationship with his father will be a step towards reclaiming his manhood. Etienne falsely believes that it is too late for them to make amends and salvage their relationship. He tells Philip, "I don't need nothing from you any more" (105). These words imply that the young man once desired to know his father, but that this is no longer the case. He passes up the opportunity to correct the past and establish a relationship with the father, for whom he longed. Having given into despair, Etienne takes his own life. He denies himself the chance to get to know his father, who, by his own admission and by his deeds, is a changed man. An upstanding citizen and the leader of the St. Adrienne civil rights movement, Philip now understands the necessity of fathers standing tall and accepting responsibility for their families. When he learns of Etienne's death, Philip becomes grief-stricken and falls, torn between picking up the pieces of his shattered life and returning to his old, carefree, and irresponsible lifestyle. The one thing that comes out of this disastrous reunion is that Philip Martin, having lost one son, is given another chance to redeem himself. It may be too late to save Etienne, but he can still save his son, Patrick, "from going to the trestle" (213).

The most successful father-son relationships in Gaines's works occur when the mothers arrange the pairings. Out of fear that Raoul will hurt Jackson, Charlotte tries her best to keep the two apart. As a child, whenever Charlotte learned that Jackson had been on Raoul's property, "Charlotte would whip him if she knew he had been down there, because she knew how Raoul felt, and she was afraid that Raoul would hurt him if he ever caught him there" (Catherine Carmier 75). Philip Martin and Etienne's meeting also fails because the female influence is missing. Johanna, who is aware that Etienne has gone in search of his father, refuses to deal with the situation because her long unrequited love for Philip has clouded her judgment and prevents her from taking the necessary steps to ensure the development and safety of her children. Philip chooses to keep his wife, Alma, unaware that Etienne is in town. In the same way that Gaines does not want to undermine the importance of the father in the family, he does not want to downplay the significance of the mother's role. According to Gaines's model of the family unit, everyone has a role to play. This reinforces the notion that no one person is better or more important than another. Philip tries to prove his manhood by shouldering all of the responsibility, and he shuts Alma out, minimizing her significance in his life. Alma tells Philip that her biggest complaint is that "you don't come to me. You go in that room. You go out there in the yard. I'm here—but you never come to me" (71). After his fall, Philip goes to his wife and tells her, "I'm lost, Alma. I'm lost" (214). Alma comforts him: "'Shhh,' she said. 'Shhh. Shhh. We just go'n have to start again'" (214). By stating "we," Alma means that in rebuilding their lives and family together, both she and Philip (the mother and the father) will be involved.

Of Love and Dust and A Lesson Before Dying offer the two most successful father-son pairings in Gaines's canon. Successful pairings, which tend to follow a formula and play themselves out in a very similar fashion, work because the mothers choose father figures who demonstrate that they have the qualities of positive role models. The selection process for the father figures does not differ much from the method the mothers use to choose the One. Aunt Emma and Miss Julie Rand select Grant Wiggins and Jim Kelly to act as father figures because

their occupation and character make them suitable candidates for surrogate fatherhood. As the parish teacher, Grant Wiggins is revered. The fact that he is college-educated makes him a highly respected individual. He has managed to attain something that the white folks cannot take from him—knowledge. As one of the parish's own, Grant's college education is also significant in that, in all likelihood, he was probably selected as the One during childhood. His obtaining a college degree was possible through the efforts and assistance of the people of his parish community, who take a special interest in furthering the education of the boys they choose to be the One.

Although Jim Kelly has only an eighth grade education and works as the tractor driver and mechanic in the fields, he is chosen for surrogate fatherhood because he is well respected and his reputation for trustworthiness and good manners precede him. Josie's chastisement of Kelly for behaving like the other men on the parish reveals much about his character: "'I woulda thought you knowed better,' she said. 'You starting to act like the rest of them around here'" (Of Love and Dust 91). Josie's comment suggests that Kelly has distinguished himself from the other men by his actions. His "starting to act like the rest of them" leads one to believe that Kelly normally leads an exemplary life and that his current behavior, his current transgression, is a rarity. Though he is thirty-three-years old, he refrains from drinking alcohol in front of Aunt Margaret and Bishop: "I wanted a beer instead of lemonade, but I changed my mind and took lemonade, too. I didn't think drinking a beer around them would have looked right" (44). Kelly is ever mindful of how he conducts himself and is respectful of his elders. Miss Julie Rand chooses Kelly, a total stranger to her, because, just by looking at him, "she knew [he] would look after Marcus . . ." (15).

After establishing that Grant Wiggins and Jim Kelly make suitable father figures, Aunt Emma and Miss Julie Rand solicit the men's help in teaching their sons, Jefferson and Marcus, how to be men and survive with dignity. Both of the young men have had run-ins with the criminal justice system and are serving jail sentences. Marcus, who killed a man in a bar room

fight over a woman, has been bonded to Marshall Hebert's plantation to work off his debt to society. Although Marcus has been spared from the state penitentiary, which "can kill a man" (11), working on the plantation can be just as rigorous. The only difference is that, as Miss Julie Rand explains, on the plantation "you got the open air, and you got people who care round you" (11). It is Miss Julie Rand's intention that Kelly "look after Marcus up there" (11). Aware that Marshall Hebert and Bonbon intend to break him, Miss Julie Rand wants to protect her grandson. Given Kelly's character, she is confident that he will teach Marcus the ropes and make certain that her willful grandson stays out of trouble. That means Marcus will have to learn how to take orders. Jim Kelly, a veteran of the workings of the parish plantation, is expected to show Marcus how to adjust to his surroundings without relinquishing too much spirit and pride.

Likewise, Miss Emma desires for Grant Wiggins to show Jefferson how to stand as a man in the face of a grave situation. Convicted of a crime he did not commit, Jefferson has been sentenced to death by electrocution. Attempting to save his life, Jefferson's attorney strips the young man of his humanity by characterizing him as nothing more than an animal. In his closing argument, the attorney pleads to the jury to be merciful and find Jefferson innocent of the crimes brought against him:

> Gentlemen of the jury, look at him . . . look at this . . . . I implore, look carefully—do you see a man sitting here? Look at the shape of this skull, this face as flat as the palm of my hand—look deeply into those eyes. Do you see a modicum of intelligence? . . . . What you see here is a thing that acts on command. A thing to hold the handle of a plow, a thing to load your bales of cotton, a thing to dig your ditches, to chop your wood, to pull your corn . . . . Gentlemen of the jury, this man planned a robbery? Oh, pardon me, pardon me, I surely did not mean to insult your intelligence by saying 'man'—would you please forgive me for committing such an error? . . . .

> He is innocent of all charges brought against him.
>
> But let us say he was not . . . . What justice would there be to take this life? Justice, gentlemen? Why, I would just as soon put a hog in the electric chair as this. (A Lesson Before Dying 7-8)

On numerous occasions, the attorney refers to Jefferson as an animal. His drawing the jury's attention to the young man's skull and hands suggests that he subscribes to nineteenth-century beliefs about race that sought to justify enslaving Africans on the basis of their physical traits. Supposedly the size and shape of the African's head reflected his inferiority, and the strength of his limbs demonstrated his aptitude for physical labor. Therefore, mentally and physically, Africans were lesser beings and better suited for the arduous labor and dehumanizing effects of enslavement. The attorney's defense is that a hog's life has more significance than Jefferson's. At least the hog can be slaughtered and used to nourish people. Jefferson, on the other hand, is of such little consequence that it would make no difference whether he lived or died, and to take his life would be a waste of a precious commodity—electricity.

Despite the attorney's impassioned plea, Jefferson's life is not spared. Miss Emma realizes that she cannot save his life, but she can make certain that his living was not in vain. Therefore, she plans for Grant to restore Jefferson's humanity and teach him how to be a man. Just twenty-one-years old, Jefferson has never had the chance to assert his masculinity. He is robbed of his life before he even has the chance to demonstrate to Miss Emma that he is, indeed, a man. He has no children of his own; thus, he is unable to prove that he is a good father. Miss Emma simply wishes to see him stand as a man before he dies, even if it is while he makes his fateful trip to the electric chair: "'I don't want them to kill no hog,' she said. 'I want a man to go to that chair, on his own two feet'" (15). Miss Emma enlists the help of Grant and of Reverend Ambrose because she feels that as the parish's educator and spiritual leader; they will restore his humanity—one to teach him how to walk to his death, with pride and dignity, the other to save his soul and get him into Heaven.

As to be expected, the men—fathers and sons—are resistant to one another and to the mothers' efforts to bring them together. At first, Marcus is distrustful of Jim Kelly, for he suspects that the latter is a "whitemouth," an informant for the white people. Marcus refuses to heed Kelly's advice, and when he does speak to Kelly, his tone is usually accusatory. Marcus tells Kelly, "Just 'cause I'm eating your food don't say I trust you" (30). When he first meets Miss Julie Rand, Kelly can tell by the way that she looks at him that she plans to saddle him with a huge, unnecessary burden: "I just didn't feel comfortable with her looking at me like that. Old people look at you like that for two reasons. One, when you've done something wrong. The other is when they want you to do something for them. The thing they want you to do usually turns out to be a burden. The heavier the burden, the longer they look at you. And Miss Julie looked at me a long, long time" (15). Convinced that Miss Julie Rand, whom Kelly describes as "a little old gangster," has taken advantage of him, Jim is equally wary of Marcus. Kelly feels as though the old woman "stuck" him with Marcus, whom Kelly holds in contempt because the young man seems nonchalant about having committed a murder. At times, Kelly is so angered by Marcus's actions and comments that he comes close to assaulting him. Kelly thinks that he has been chosen because he has a soft heart, that Miss Julie Rand chose him because "she knew [he] would do what she wanted [him] to do . . ." (112). To the contrary, Miss Julie Rand chooses him because she recognizes, as do the people on the parish—both black and white—that he was a good person. Bound by duty, Jim Kelly persists in his relationship with Marcus even though at times he despises the young man.

Grant and Jefferson, too, are resentful that the women put them together. Grant fears that the mothers' demands will encumber him and prevent him from "escaping" from the parish, which he wishes desperately to do. He views their request as an attempt to control him, and he is resentful as a result. Since Jefferson is going to die, Grant sees no point in trying to help him die like a man. Grant explains his reluctance to get involved to his girlfriend, Vivian: "Suppose I was allowed to visit him, and suppose I reached him and made him realize that he was as much a man

as any other man; then what? He's still going to die. The next day, the next week, the next month. So what will I have accomplished? What will I have done? Why not let the hog die without knowing anything" (A Lesson Before Dying 31). Jefferson is also not receptive to Miss Emma and Tante Lou's machinations. He refuses even to acknowledge, much less talk to, Emma and Grant on their first visit. Rather, Jefferson "lay on his bunk, staring up at the ceiling. He didn't even look at [them] once" (71). On subsequent visits, Jefferson is antagonistic and rude. In a successful attempt, Jefferson proceeds to eat the food Miss Emma sends him in the manner he perceives a hog would: "he knelt down on the floor and put his head inside the bag and started eating, without using his hands" (83). Grant is surprised to hear that "he even sounded like a hog" (83). Jefferson goes so far as to insult Grant's girlfriend. Hoping to enrage Grant so that he will not return to "vex" him, Jefferson taunts him by saying that Vivian's "old pussy ain't no good" (130). Angry at his fate, Jefferson lashes out at Grant.

Eventually, the father-son pairs forge a mutual friendship and the fathers accomplish the tasks that they have been given. In time, Grant helps Jefferson to recognize his humanity. Jefferson learns the fact that "man walk on two foots; hogs on four hoofs" (220) is not the only difference that separates man from beast. Grant convinces Jefferson that no one lives independently of others and that sometimes it is man's duty to make sacrifices and do things for others that he may not want to do simply because that is his lot in life. As Grant makes progress with his surrogate son, Jefferson begins to experience emotions other than cynicism, defiance, and pain (84). As demonstrated in his journal entry, Jefferson learns how to love, ask for forgiveness, and express his feelings of sadness and anger without lashing out at others. On the eve of his execution, Jefferson writes, "im sorry I cry mr wigin im sory I cry when you say you aint comin back tomoro im strong and reven ambros gon be yer wit me an mr harry comn to an reson I cry caus you been so good to me mr wigin an nobody aint never been that good to me make me think im somebody" (232). Jefferson further demonstrates that he is a Man by apologizing for insulting Vivian: "mr wigin when i see you girlfren an yall together i see how

pretty she is an im sorry how i talk that day when i was mad at you an say them nasty thing bout her . . .” (232). Most importantly, Jefferson recognizes that he is “somebody” (232). Equipped with that knowledge, he walks to the electric chair with dignity. Although he had “been shakin an shakin” (233), Jefferson stays strong and dies like a man. Paul, the deputy, reports, “[Jefferson] was the strongest man in that crowded room, Grant Wiggins” (253).

Marcus also dies a man, living by his own rules until his life is cut short by Bonbon. However, Kelly’s influence on Marcus is limited. Try as he might, Kelly cannot convince Marcus to conform to the ways and customs of the parish. Up until his death, Marcus is constantly bucking the system and challenging the norm. Also, Jim Kelly fails to help Marcus see that it is wrong to commit murder, even in self-defense. To the very end, Marcus has a complete disregard for the life he has taken. He sees himself as justified in killing the man: “I ain’t go’n pay for killing that country-ass nigger. Black sonafabitch ought to don’t go round with pretty women if he know he can’t fight” (Of Love and Dust 225). Frustrated by the lack of progress he is making with Marcus, Kelly tells him, “I want you to be a human being, Marcus” (225). To which, Marcus replies, “I’m a human being. I just don’t look at things the way you do” (225). Kelly never manages to turn Marcus into a carbon copy of himself, but he is instrumental in enabling Marcus to die with his pride intact. Because of his ministrations, Kelly makes Marcus’s stay on Hebert plantation less torturous than it could have been. Kelly looks out for Marcus and helps him to adjust to the demanding physical labor. Stubborn and refusing to be broken, Marcus rejects Kelly’s offer of assistance at first because he is still wary of him. Although Kelly suggests that he wear clothes that will protect him from the heat and the sun, on his first day, Marcus reports for work dressed more like he was going to a social function rather than to work in the fields picking cotton: “He had on a short-sleeve green shirt and a pair of brown pants. No hat—not even a handkerchief round his neck. He had on a pair of brown and white dress shoes” (25).

Eventually, Marcus comes to appreciate Kelly's advice. In addition to ensuring that Marcus is dressed properly, Kelly also helps Marcus adjust to the physical labor. Marcus's performance on the first day is telling. He falls behind and his corn picking technique requires that he exert more energy than is needed or can be spared: "each time he threw [the corn] from over his shoulder, it took just a little bit more from what he was going to need the rest of the day" (28). By the time the men quit for lunch, "Marcus was so tired [Kelly] thought he was going to drop before he got up on the trailer" (28). Although Marcus is a stranger to Kelly, he feeds him, nurses him, listens to his problems, advises him, and tries to ease up Marcus's workload in the fields: "I moved the tractor down the field slowly as I could—for his sake—but at the same time I had to go fast enough to get the work done" (35). Marcus comes to value Kelly as a friend. He tells Kelly: "You the only friend I got, Jim" (195). The work that Bonbon and Marshall Hebert force on Marcus would most certainly break a bigger man than Marcus. Because of Kelly's friendship, Marcus endures the brutality to which the two white men subject him. Like Jefferson, Marcus dies a hero: "I admired what he was doing. I wanted to tell him how brave I thought he was. He was the bravest man I knew, the bravest man I had ever met. Yes, yes, I wanted to tell him that" (270).

The father figure does not anticipate that he will, in the end, benefit as well, perhaps even more so, from his relationship with his "son." Whereas the father imparts his knowledge about working with and respecting others, the son is responsible for making the father aware of his complacency and feelings of superiority. Kelly intends to make Marcus aware of his humanity; instead "[his] complacency is shattered by Marcus's values and actions. As the two men observe each other's convictions and become friends, each influences the other, but Marcus has a much more profound influence on Jim" (Babb 72). Although he despises having to go into the "nigger room," the little side room blacks were forced to go into in order to purchase drinks, Kelly continues to frequent the room: "I kept telling myself, 'One of these days I'm going to stop this, I'm going to stop this; I'm a man like any other man and one of these days I'm going to stop this"

(43). He does not boycott the room because "either [he] was too thirsty to do it, or after [he] had been working in the field all day and [he] was just too tired and just didn't care" (43). Marcus shows Kelly that his failure to act, to advocate for change is the same as being complicitous in society's injustices. After spending time with Marcus, Kelly begins to develop a backbone and starts to stand by his convictions. He refuses to get a hotel room for Bonbon and Pauline, the overseer's mistress, so that the two can have sexual relations. The fact that Marcus and Louise would be killed if it were discovered that they were sexually involved highlights Bonbon's ability to take a black mistress and not suffer any consequence. Kelly decides, "I wasn't going to be his pimp—and I wasn't going to sit in that bar while they laid together in one of deLong's rooms, either" (146). Refusing to help Bonbon is Kelly's first step towards reclaiming his dignity.

Kelly finally stands on his own when he declines Hebert's letter of recommendation "telling people that [he's] a good worker" (278). In rejecting Hebert's letter, "he rejects Marshall's manipulation and to a degree keeps what remains of his dignity intact" (Babb 74). Kelly's rejection is a big step for him. Given that jobs are scarce for black men, Kelly needs all of the help he can get to ensure that he will find other employment. Having a letter of recommendation from a white man would give a black man in the 1940s a big advantage. Kelly casts aside his white patron by telling him, "No sir, I'll get by . . ." (Of Love and Dust 278). Instead of relying on a white man to validate his skills and his worth, Kelly decides to validate himself and to let his skill and talent speak for themselves.

Grant, consequently, comes to learn that "being better" does not protect him or exempt him from experiencing white society's scorn and ridicule. Jefferson underscores for Grant that though their lives are quite different (Grant is an educated teacher and Jefferson is a field laborer with no more than an eighth grade education), the whites on the plantation do not distinguish between them; they are both niggers. After agreeing to visit Jefferson in jail, Grant is forced to interact on a regular basis with the white men on the parish. Before, he had made a point of limiting his exposure to them by avoiding them. Grant's interaction with whites on the parish

opens his eyes to the fact that they do not hold him in higher regard than any other black person on the parish. Despite the fact that Grant has a college degree, Henri Pichot treats him like little more than a servant. He summons Grant to his house and makes him wait in the kitchen from 4:50 until 7:15, almost two-and-a-half hours, while he and his guests have cocktails, dinner, and coffee. Then and only then does he acknowledge Grant's presence. Henri Pichot wants to make certain that Grant knows his place and that the parish teacher not think himself as the equal of white people simply because he has a degree.

Dr. Joseph, the school superintendent, also attempts to keep Grant in his place. Refusing even to learn his name, he addresses Grant as Higgins and the year before, during his annual visit, he addressed him as Washington. Grant is angered by Dr. Joseph's visits. Outside of quizzing the older students with grammatical, mathematical, and geographical questions, he asks the younger children to recite Bible verses and he inspects the children's hands and teeth for cleanliness. He disregards the old, outdated textbooks with missing pages and the school's lack of chalk and paper, focusing solely on the children's dental hygiene and the pledge of allegiance. His instructions that Grant give the children "more drill on the flag, ... More emphasis on hygiene" (A Lesson Before Dying 57) reveal what "those in authority consider valuable as the children's education" (Carmean 119). Dr. Joseph and the white community want to keep the children penitent, submissive, loyal, and clean; they do not want to empower their minds for fear that the children will recognize the injustices committed against their families and rise up against society.

Being with Jefferson also changes Grant's attitude about teaching and giving back to his community. In the novel's beginning, Grant, according to Karen Carmean, was "angry, he's a poor teacher to the children and Jefferson, rude to Miss Emma and Aunt Lou, and resentful of Vivian's demands. Like a child, he cannot resolve the paradox that their spoken and unspoken demands, driving him to perform services he would rather avoid, grow from their love" (Carmean 103). Grant teaches, but he hates his profession. He teaches only because, as a black man, his

career choices are limited: “I teach, but I don’t like teaching. I teach because it is the only thing that an educated black man can do in the South today. I don’t like it; I hate it” (191). Grant’s resentment at his lack of choices spills over to his students, whom he rules by fear. He takes his frustration out on his pupils, who tremble in his presence.

While teaching Jefferson how to behave as a man, Grant’s learns that he often falls short of conducting himself like a man. Wanting Jefferson “to show some concern for [Miss Emma],” Grant explains to him that he owes his godmother for all of the sacrifices she has made for him: “That’s why I try to live as well as I can everyday and not hurt people. Especially people who love me, people who have so done so much for me, people who have sacrificed for me. I don’t want to hurt those people. I want to help those people as much as I can” (129). But Grant does not practice what he preaches. It is Jefferson who opens his eyes to his hypocrisy: “My eyes have been closed all my life” (225). Seeing the change in Jefferson, Grant is overcome with emotion: “I felt like someone who had just found religion. I felt like crying with joy. I really did” (186). In the same way that he makes Jefferson feel human emotion, Jefferson has the same effect on him. Grant’s future remains unclear, but he comes to understand that he, too, owes something to his aunt, his community, and his pupils. In the children, Grant recognizes Jefferson. Without someone to care, to take an interest in their futures, and to guide them, many of them will be doomed to the same fate as Jefferson. This knowledge, one certainly hopes, will convince Grant to remain on the parish and make Tante Lou proud by saving the kids from imprisonment and premature deaths.

Grant and Kelly demonstrate that the mothers’ three-step plan for transforming their sons from boys into men is a long and involved process, one that often begins while the son is still a young boy. Although the sons may possess college degrees, good jobs, or perhaps even both, they do not become Men until after they have served as a surrogate father to a community son. Thus, the mothers seem to suggest that boys do not become men until they have become responsible fathers. In this respect, the mothers' three-step plan is ingenious. Step one uncovers

the three methods of selecting the One: 1) process of elimination, 2) birth order, and 3) intuition. Selecting the One based upon intuition recalls to mind the African proverb "It takes a village to raise a child" because every woman has a hand in choosing, guiding, and directing the One. Keeping in mind the importance of family and community is one of the major themes in Gaines's fiction; it is no surprise that this method of selection proves to be the best means of determining the One. Step two reveals that the mothers' definition of manhood incorporates a mixture of traditionally masculine and feminine qualities. In addition to being strong and fearless protectors of their own, their family's, and their community's rights, Men are expected to be spiritual, compassionate, and respectful of others. Gaines's mothers hold their sons to the same set of standards to which they hold themselves. In fact, there is no discrepancy between the codes of conduct for men and women. Thus, in defining manhood, Gaines's mothers create a model for humanity and, in the process, teach their sons how to be humans. Step three, like step one, deals with another of Gaines's themes—the reuniting of fathers and sons. The mothers, despite appearing to have limited influence over their male charges, dominate and direct their sons' transformation to manhood and play an integral role in reuniting fathers and sons. By bringing the two together, the mother helps the father to learn that his presence is very necessary to the development of the black male child and provides the son with a positive role model to whom he can turn for advice and guidance.

In the end, both the son and the father are transformed into Men. On the surface, the mothers' three-step plan may appear to be a waste of time and effort because the Men ultimately die. However, even in death, Men leave behind a legacy for those who follow after them. Jimmy Aaron, Ned, Joe Pittman, Charlie Biggs, Marcus Payne, and Jefferson are all Christ-like figures in that they die so that others might live with dignity and respect. Like Christ's death, their deaths do not end the pain and suffering in the world, but they do serve as examples, as paradigms, for how others should live.

CHAPTER 5

MURDERERS, MAMMIES AND MATRIARCHS, NURTURERS, CAREGIVERS, ABANDONERS, AND CULTURE BEARERS: TONI MORRISON'S MOTHER CHARACTERS ARE AS IMPERFECT AS THE WORLD IN WHICH THEY LIVE

In an interview with Dana Micucci, "An Inspired Life: Toni Morrison Writes and a Generation Listens" (1992), Toni Morrison reveals that "she never set out to be a writer but always wanted to teach . . ." (276). Morrison "didn't begin to write until she was 30, long after she'd acquired a B.A. from Howard and the nickname Toni from her classmates, had gotten an M.A. from Cornell, had taught English at Texas Southern and Howard universities, and had married and divorced a Jamaican architect, Harold Morrison" (284). The end of her marriage in 1964 left Morrison with no job prospects, the responsibility of caring for a three-year-old, Harold Ford, and a baby on the way. (Slade Kevin was born later that year.) As a result, she returned to her parents' home in Ohio. In 1965, Morrison and her sons moved to Syracuse, New York, where she accepted a position as a textbook editor for L. W. Singer, a division of Random House. Of her decision to leave Ohio, Morrison says, "My back was up against the wall, and I didn't want the easy route, which was to live at home with my family or to be in another dependent situation. I wanted to find out who I was and whether I was tough enough" (277). While in Syracuse, she began to write seriously at night, after the children were asleep, to ease her loneliness and stress: "I never planned to be a writer. I was in a place where there was nobody I could talk to and have a real conversation with. And I think I was also very unhappy. So, I wrote then for that reason" (Bakerman 30). Morrison began working on a short story she had started earlier as a member of a small, informal writing group that she belonged to when she taught at Howard. Alan Rancler, then an editor at Macmillan, encouraged her to expand the short story

"about a little girl who longed for blue eyes" into a full-length novel (Samuel and Hudson-Weems 6). Morrison "was nearly 40 before her years of writing at night after the children were put to bed culminated in her first novel" (Fussell 284-85). The Bluest Eye, published in 1970, met with "some favorable reviews and modest sales," but Sula (1974), her second novel, received much critical acclaim (Micucci 277). The rest, as they say, is history.

Morrison admits to using her experiences in life as "fodder" for her literary imagination, but she asserts that her works are not autobiographical: "I will use what I have seen and what I have known, but it's never about my life" (Bakerman 39). For instance, her sons, Morrison came to discover that "boys' demands on a mother were very primitive; they didn't really care what I was about, they wanted service and attention and, at different points in their lives, conversation. They wanted me to be there as a baseline from which they operated. They wanted different kinds of intimacy—it was all very strange" (Lester 47-48). At no time did her sons' demands on her become clearer than while she was attempting to write. Much to her chagrin, the boys interrupted her writing "frequently, asking for things or fighting each other" (Bakerman 32). Morrison realized that secluding herself in a back room annoyed her sons, for, she says, "it [took] me away from what I'm supposed to be doing, which is mothering them" (Bakerman 32). She remedied the situation by writing with her children in the room: "And then it occurred to me that they didn't want me to separate myself from them, so now I write in the big room where we all generally stay. They didn't want me and they didn't have anything to say to me particularly; they just wanted the presence . . ." (Bakerman 32). Morrison's role as a mother to two sons proved beneficial to her as a writer: "It was curious—I found the boys useful when I was doing Song of Solomon, because having watched them grow up, I was able, I think, to enter into a male view of the world which, to me, means a delight in dominion—a definite need to exercise dominion over place and people" (Lester 47-48). Yet it is possible to go a step further and argue that Morrison's experiences as a single mother shaped and influenced her refusal to depict her mother figures as

one-dimensional characters—who possess either good or bad traits and never a mixture of the two—when portraying mother-son relationships.

Although Morrison found motherhood to be a liberating experience, she concedes that "writing was for me the most extraordinary way of thinking and feeling. It became the one thing I was doing that I had absolutely no intention of living without" (Dowling 53). Yet she discovered that the demands of childrearing and working full-time as a senior editor and part-time as an Instructor at Yale University intruded upon her time to write. She gave up her social life: "I don't entertain people very much and I'm not entertained very much" (Bakerman 31). She eliminated the conflict work created by setting her own hours. "[W]hen Yale offered me a part-time teaching job. . . [,]" says Morrison, "I didn't ask anyone's permission to be out of the office on Fridays. I simply took the job" (Dowling 54).

Soon Morrison began to go in to the office less and began to do most of her editing work at home. Eventually she quit her publishing job altogether and accepted the Albert Schweitzer Professorship of the Humanities at the State University of New York at Albany. However, Morrison was unable to solve the problem of her children's demands on her time as quickly or as easily. The children and writing often vied for her attention. Although both were equally important to her, Morrison admits that "the writing could never take precedence over them" (Washington 238). This reason alone, according to Morrison, "is why I had to write under duress, and in a state of siege and with a lot of compulsion" (Washington 238). Therefore, her experiences as a mother not only shaped what she writes about, but also how she writes: "I could not write the way writers write, I had to write the way a woman with children writes. That means you have to have immense concentration. I would never tell a child 'Leave me alone, I'm writing.' That doesn't mean anything to a child. What they deserve and need, in-house, is a mother. They do not need and cannot use a writer" (Washington 238).

Nonetheless, Morrison admits that there have been times when she has made "a lot of mistakes" as a mother (Micucci 279). As a single mother, she found herself having to improvise

and make decisions as she went along. Having to juggle her mothering responsibilities, a career, and her writing, she was not always able to plan ahead: "I did it ad hoc, like any working mother does. Every woman who's got a household knows exactly what I did. I did it on a minute-to-minute basis. Trying to plan for certain things, but not always being able to, and failing in many ways" (Washington 237). Although she vowed to make certain that her writing never took precedence over her sons' needs, she was not always able to give them her undivided attention. Sometimes, deadlines caused her to cut or reduce the amount of time she was able to spend with her boys: "If I'm really working, they'll get left out, too" (Dowling 55). Morrison recalls that while finishing Song of Solomon, she did not have a lot of time to spare her son: "I said to my younger son, who was 10. 'Slade, I'm afraid this isn't going to be a very good summer for you because I'm working. I asked him to please, please bear with me. I told him that once it was finished, we would spend time together" (Dowling 55-56). Her pleading with Slade to be patient with her suggests that Morrison felt that she had to reassure her son that he was still more important than the writing and that her inability to spend time with him was only temporary.

Because Morrison understands the difficulties of rearing children, especially sons, her works are devoid of what one might consider typical "good mothers." There are not any characters in her novels who resemble Florida Evans, Louise Jefferson, Mabel Thomas, or Claire Huxtable, fictional television characters of the last three decades who have been held up as paradigms of black motherhood. In the television show Good Times, Florida Evans always managed to feed her family of five using her own and her husband's meager earnings, all the while maintaining her composure despite her family's poverty and the substandard and dangerous living conditions of the Chicago housing project in which they lived. Always a model of morality, Florida refused to compromise her integrity, even if her family stood to benefit. After George and Louise Jefferson moved on up to their deluxe apartment on The Jeffersons, Louise quit her job as a maid and became a housewife, always at the beck and call of her husband and son. As a single mother of two children, Mabel Thomas on What's Happening? managed to

provide for her son and daughter on the salary she earned as a domestic worker. The Thomas family often suffered financial hardships, but Mabel always remained optimistic. Though she worked hard cleaning other people's homes, she never grew weary and, all-knowing mother that she was, always remained two steps ahead of her precocious children. On The Cosby Show, Claire Huxtable effortlessly juggled the responsibilities of motherhood and a successful law career without so much as ever breaking one of her perfectly manicured fingernails or disheveling her coifed hairstyle. Claire Huxtable epitomized the woman who could do it all.

Fictional characters such as Claire Huxtable, Florida Evans, Louise Jefferson, and Mabel Thomas are reminiscent of the invincible and infallible black matriach in the African American community. Daryl C. Dance, author of "Black Eve or Madonna?: A Study of the Antithetical Views of the Mother in Black American Literature," asserts that black mothers have been pillars of strength in the black community for centuries: "Indeed as we look back over the history of the Black American mother, we see that she emerges as a strong Black bridge that we all crossed over on, a figure of courage, strength, and endurance unmatched in the annals of world history" (131). In the African American community, the image of the mythical strong black woman is held in high esteem and is often defended because, according to sociologist Patricia Hill Collins, "motherhood is the core of the family, culture and community" (175). Because the morality of the mother reflects upon her family and community, there are many individuals who believe that a child's worth is determined by the virtue of his mother. Historian E. Franklin Frazier, author of The Negro Family, asserts that "the birth of the child imposes certain obligations upon the mother because the mores of the Negro community makes the relation between the mother and child the most sacred of the human relations" (318). Therefore, if a child is born to a mother of questionable morals, then he, too, will have questionable morals. For example, in Morrison's novel Jazz, Joe Trace is born to Wild, a woman who eschews her motherly duties by abandoning her son almost immediately after she gives birth to him. Ashamed of his mother and fearful that the people in his community will think him wild and irresponsible just like his mother, Joe

becomes obsessed with work. Characterized as maniacal in his work, "sometimes he worked so long and late he never got back to the bed he bunked in" (Jazz 179). Joe works like a "maniac" in order to distance himself from his mother and to prove that he is nothing like her.

As a result, black women are held by one another and their families, especially their sons, to incredibly high standards. Black men and women alike cling to the image of the infallible black matriarch because, according to Collins, it "praises Black women's resiliency in a society that routinely paints [them] as bad mothers" (Collins 174). Historically, black women have been labeled "as stereotypical mammies, matriarchs, welfare recipients, and hot mommas" (69). Mother glorification provides a means for black men and women to protect black womanhood by dispelling those negative stereotypical images associated with them. While black men and women indulge in mother glorification, it is "especially prominent in the works of U.S. Black men who routinely praise Black mothers, especially their own" (174). In his autobiography, Nigger, author, comedian, and political activist Dick Gregory talks lovingly of his mother, who single-handedly reared him and his five siblings. Gregory credits his mother with encouraging him to persevere in the face of adversity and oppression. The memory of his mother and the desire to ensure that her living was not in vain inspired him to be active in the Civil Rights Movement: "You didn't die a slave for nothing, Momma. You brought us up. You and all those Negro mothers who gave their kids the strength to go on, to take that thimble to the well while the whites were taking buckets. Those of us who weren't destroyed got stronger, got calluses on our souls. And now we're ready to change a system, a system where a white man can destroy a black man with a single word" (209). Likewise, Langston Hughes's poem "Mother to Son" depicts a black mother who, by word and deed, teaches her son to be strong and encourages him to continue the fight for social equality. In the poem, the mother tells the son

> So boy, don't you turn back.
>
> Don't you set down on the steps
>
> 'Cause you find it's kinder hard.

Don't you fall now—

For I'se still goin', honey,

And life for me ain't been no crystal stair. (Hughes lns 14-20)

By praising black women's strength and efforts, black men attempt "to replace negative White male interpretations with positive Black male ones" (Collins 175).

However, mother glorification is not without its disadvantages, and it can quickly turn into harsh criticism of the mother. Along with constant praise comes an increasing demand on the mothers' time, attention, and resources. "Yet, in order to remain on their pedestal," asserts Collins, "these same superstrong Black mothers must continue to place their needs behind those of everyone else, especially their sons" (174). When they do things for themselves or place their needs before those of others, black women run the risk of being labeled as selfish. The black mother who always remains selfless and giving is categorized as the Madonna, "the mother who brings life and salvation" (Dance 123); however, she who does not measure up to this standard is considered an Eve, "the mother who brings death and destruction" (Dance 123). In contrast to the Madonna, the Eve represents an example of the bad mother. While the Madonna inspires and encourages her son to stand up for himself and be a man, the Eve emasculates black men and renders them impotent in their families and communities. She is thought to be harmful to her sons because she "has succumbed to the tempting allurements and wiles of the Devil—the Devil in this case being white American society— . . . . This Black Eve offers to her Black man the poisonous apple that will destroy him, that will repress his spirit and vitality, kill his pride in his Blackness, and render him impotent in a hostile white world" (Dance 124).

In African American literature, numerous black mothers whip their sons for fighting white boys or chastise them for participating in civil rights activities. Richard Wright's Black Boy and John O. Killen's Youngblood are two examples that come to mind. In these works, the sons resent their mothers for punishing them for defending themselves or asserting their masculinity. They fail to realize the difficult position their mothers are placed in, focusing

instead on their own pain and suffering. While they view their mothers' actions as disloyal, they fail to acknowledge that those very actions saved their lives. According to Dance, had it not been for the mother's repression of her son, many young black men "would have either been killed or lost their sanity" (128).

Being cast as either Eve or Madonna proves to be problematic for black women. The Eve image is an unfortunate one for it villifies the black mother for choosing to protect her son's life rather than his pride. On the surface, the image of the Madonna seems to be less problematic because it is such a positive image. However, Collins warns that the image of the infallible black matriarch can be just as troublesome as that of the Eve or even of the happy slave. Like the happy slave, the strong black mother is nothing more than a façade, a mask to cover the wearer's pain and agony. For black women, the image masks or disguises the complexities and difficulties of motherhood. Collins cautions that it is injurious to black women's physical, spiritual, and emotional well being to hold themselves to such incredible standards. In trying to assume the entire burden for their families and communities, black women run the risk of exhausting themselves. According to statistics, black women are less likely to seek psychiatric help, but are more likely to suffer from obesity, heart disease, and hypertension than their white female counterparts. These health concerns can be attributed to their poverty, inadequate medical care and delayed diagnosis, a less healthy and/or sedentary lifestyle, and their tendency to put the needs of others, especially their children, before their own.

For this reason, according to Collins, "African American women need a revitalized Black feminist analysis of motherhood that debunks the image of 'happy slave,' whether the White-male-created 'matriarch' or the Black-male-perpetuated 'superstrong Black mother'"(176). This is what Morrison attempts to do in her novels—to create a revitalized Black feminist analysis of motherhood. All of her mothers are flawed characters. There simply are no purely good or bad mothers. For instance, Mrs. MacTeer in The Bluest Eye gets up in the middle of the night to check on her daughters. Claudia recalls, "And in the night when my coughing was dry and tough,

feet padded into the room, hands repinned the flannel, readjusted the quilt, and rested a moment on my forehead" (12). Mrs. MacTeer's actions demonstrate that she loves and truly cares for her children. However, her gruffness, her tendency to fuss at and berate Claudia, Frieda, and Pecola, detracts from her tenderness. Consequently, Morrison's mother characters seem equally adept at taking away life at the same time that they are giving it. A close look at Morrison's works reveals that she carefully avoids the Madonna/Eve dichotomy in her portrayals of mother figures. However, my analysis of Morrison's mother-son relationships shows that there are six mothering types in her fiction: the murderer, the mammy/matriarch, the caregiver, the abandoner, the nurturer, and the culture bearer. The murdering mother and the mammy/matriarch do not occur solely in mother-son relationships, but the remaining categories do.

Murderers

The fifth Commandment states explicitly that "Thou shalt not kill." Although defense attorneys often use self-defense and the insanity plea as justification for their client's actions, murder is still considered a grave sin. There are those individuals who believe that no one should take a life, regardless of the circumstances. On a daily basis, the news reports incidents of homicide. Accounts of murders are often chilling, but none seem to elicit the response given to reports that a mother has killed her own child. When it was discovered that Susan Smith of Union, South Carolina, had killed her two sons, after claiming that they had been abducted by an unknown black man while they slept in the back seat of her car, public opinion of her shifted vastly. When the story was first reported and people thought her children had been kidnapped, Smith was a poor, pitied, long-suffering young mother, who had to bear the pain and stress of wondering where her beloved children were and whether they were alive and well. However, after it was discovered that Smith had fabricated the story and was responsible for the deaths of her two young sons, she became a pitiful, insufferable, poor excuse for a mother. For, no mother in her right mind would kill her own children. At the mention of Smith's name, even today, it is not uncommon for people to refer to her as the crazy or evil woman who killed her kids because

any mother who kills her own children would have to be just that—crazy or evil—or perhaps both.

However, Morrison's portrayals of Eva Peace in Sula and Sethe in Beloved, two murdering mothers, present them as neither crazy nor evil. Both women are depicted as mothers faced with what Joyce Elaine King and Carolyn Ann Mitchell, authors of Black Mothers to Sons: Juxtaposing African American Literature with Social Practice, term as "'dilemmas as choice, or caught between the 'rock and the hard place'" (18). King and Mitchell assert that black women have the unenviable task of teaching their children how to mediate hostile forces in society, such as "trouble with police, violence in the black community, exclusion in white schools, miseducation even in black schools and threats to a positive black self-identity" (20-21). These hostile forces can cripple or kill their children. Therefore, black women have to help their children develop the personality, integrity, and character required to navigate their way around these hostile forces. When confronting hostile situations, black mothers find themselves having to choose between two equally painful and difficult decisions. For example, a mother living in the 1940s Jim Crow South had to teach her son how to appear meek and humble, even though doing so threatened to "curb the restless inquisitiveness that informs a young mind" (13). However, because "inquisitiveness and intellect are not qualities that the dominant society prizes in a black man-child" (13), the mother understands that if she does not curb her child's spirit he runs the risk of being harmed.

Likewise, Sethe and Eva must choose between two equally difficult and painful actions; they must decide between killing the children they love so dearly or standing by helplessly and watching them suffer as they fall victim to the dehumanizing effects of slavery and drug abuse, respectively. Dilemmas as choice cause Eva and Sethe to feel as though they lack viable options, and they fear that they are caught in a situation for which there is no good solution; they are damned if they do act and damned if they do not. According to King and Mitchell, dilemmas as choice "force the African American mother to teach some values, that should ideally be

transmitted in a positive manner, in an apparently inhumane and negative way" (31). Thus, Eva and Sethe choose "an apparently inhumane and negative way"—murder—of confronting situations which, regardless of how they respond, they cannot overcome.

When faced with the threat of being captured and returned to slavery, Sethe feels she has but one option—she must save her children from the horrors of slavery no matter what the cost. Having her children returned to Sweet Home is simply not an option for her: "I couldn't let all that go back to where it was, and I couldn't let her nor any of em live under Schoolteacher. That was out" (Beloved 163). Upon Schoolteacher's arrival, Sweet Home, despite its name, is anything but sweet or home. Unlike Garner, who followed the principle of treating his "niggers" like men, Schoolteacher believes his slaves to be subhuman. Sethe is nothing more than a breeder and her children are pickaninnies. He considers them to be on an equal footing with his farm animals, and he treats them as such. He teaches his pupils to compare and contrast the characteristics of the Sweet Home slaves to those of the animals by instructing them to create a list whereon they place Sethe's "human characteristics on the left; her animal ones on the right" (193). When Schoolteacher chastises his nephew for "mishandling" Sethe, he advises "him to think—just think—what would his own horse do if you beat it beyond the point of education" (149). The nephew should employ the same approach to tame or correct Sethe as he would use on his horse because he regards them as equivalent. He advises his nephew on the proper way to handle Sethe because he does not want to run the risk of destroying one of his investments. To him, Sethe is a commodity, a means of turning a profit. With "at least ten breeding years left" (149), she is capable of adding to the chattel he owns—all of whom will one day yield a profit either through their labor or from the cash proceeds obtained from their sale.

As a mother, Sethe feels compelled to protect her children: "It ain't my job to know what's worse. It's my job to know what is and to keep them away from what I know is terrible. I did that" (165). She does not want her children to be exposed to Schoolteacher and his cruelty: "No notebook for my babies and no measuring string neither" (198). Used to measure the size of

the slaves' skulls, the measuring string and notebook enable Schoolteacher to justify his enslavement of blacks by proving their aptitude for physical labor and their mental inferiority to whites. Unlike the whip, the notebook and the measuring string are not used to punish or chastise wayward slaves, but their ability to demean Sethe's children fuels her decision to flee Sweet Home and Schoolteacher. As a slave, Sethe lacks autonomy over her own life, and she is unable to protect her children because they do not belong to her. Like Sethe, her children are Schoolteacher's property. If Schoolteacher decides to punish her children, there is nothing that she can do to prevent him. She is a powerless as she was when the boys stole her milk and brutally whipped her. As a slave, Sethe feared becoming too attached to her children. Only after she escaped to Ohio did she feel like she was fully able to love them: "Looks like I loved em more after I got here. Or maybe I couldn't love em proper in Kentucky because they wasn't mine" (168). Even though she gave birth to them, Sethe realizes that, as long as she is a slave, she does not have any parental rights to her children. Therefore, she knows that if she and her children are returned to Sweet Home, they will all be at Schoolteacher's mercy. Her children can be taken away from her at a moment's notice, and there is nothing she can do to stop her family from being torn asunder.

Given her choices, Sethe believes that death alone will provide her the means of guaranteeing the safety and humanity of her children. When questioned about her decision, Sethe's response reveals that, in her mind, inaction is a much graver sin than murdering her children: "Let schoolteacher haul us away, I guess, to measure your behind before he tore it up: I have felt what it felt like and nobody walking or stretched out is going to make you feel it too. Not you, not none of mine, and when I tell you you mine, I also mean I'm yours. I wouldn't draw breath without my children" (203). According to Sethe, insanity and evil do not drive her actions, but experience, love, and commitment do. She would rather see them dead than in Schoolteacher's possession. At least then Schoolteacher will not be able to hurt or abuse her children the way he mistreated her. While Sethe only succeeds at killing one of the children, a

girl, her actions deter Schoolteacher from reclaiming the surviving children: "They ain't at Sweet Home. Schoolteacher ain't got 'em" (165). Unbeknownst to Sethe, murdering her daughter does exactly what she was trying to prevent Schoolteacher from doing; according to Morrison, it drives her close to becoming "what she was terrified of being regarded as, which is an animal" (Darling 252), and it tears her family apart. Beloved and Sethe are separated; Denver loves her mother but fears that she may try once more to kill them; and Howard and Buglar, who grow tired of the unexplainable supernatural occurrences in their home, eventually run away from home.

Although Sethe commits a grave sin, murder, she is not portrayed as crazy or evil. Sethe does, however, prove to be a problematic character for Morrison, who seems to have conflicting feelings about her character's actions. On the one hand, Morrison feels that it is impossible to condemn Sethe for her actions. After all, Sethe does act out of love and, in doing so, she takes control of her life and asserts her humanity. This Morrison finds "noble" (Moyers 272). Yet when asked if she would have killed her two sons if she had been confronted with a similar situation, Morrison admits that she does not know how she would have responded: "I've asked. I don't know. I really don't know" (Moyers 272). The truth is that no one knows for sure how one would respond to a similar predicament. Therefore, Morrison feels that, with the exception of Beloved, no one else can judge Sethe. Morrison states, "I get the point where in asking myself who could judge Sethe adequately, since I couldn't, and nobody else that knew her could, really, I felt the only person who could judge her would be the daughter she killed" (Darling 248).

On the other hand, Morrison is not quite able to refrain from passing judgment on Sethe's actions. She finds that Sethe's decision to commit murder is "understandable, but it's excessive" (Darling 252). Sethe appears to have overstepped the bounds of responsible and acceptable behavior. While Morrison agrees that "it was the right thing to do," she also believes that Sethe "had no right to do it" (Moyers 272). The paradox in Morrison's statement reveals that she applauds Sethe's decision to gain control over her life, assume her rightful role as mother, and to act in what she feels is the best interest of her children. Nevertheless, Morrison feels that Sethe

does not have the right to play god and extinguish a life—regardless of the circumstances—because Sethe is only human. Even though Sethe gave birth to Howard, Buglar, Beloved, and Denver, she is not entitled to own or control them any more than is Schoolteacher. Still, she does not consider Sethe to be insane or evil.

Instead of battling Schoolteacher and slavery, Eva is at war with her son's addiction to heroin. She is torn between watching her son suffer and euthanizing him to put him out of his misery. To Eva, her two possible recourses for action are clear: she can allow Plum to continue to head down this self-destructive path or she can end his suffering now and help him to die with what remains of his dignity intact. Both choices, in Eva's mind, will result in death. The first choice results in a slow, humiliating death caused by suffocation. Because of his heroin addiction, Plum is regressing to his childhood, "being helpless and thinking baby thoughts and dreaming baby dreams and messing up his pants again and smiling all the time" (Sula 71). He seems headed down a path that will lead to a life devoid of dignity and respect. He has begun to steal from his family members, and his physical appearance has started to deteriorate. He is often unkempt and unclean. If she stands by and does nothing, Eva fears that Plum would "be creepin' to the bed trying to spread [her] legs trying to get back up in [her] womb" (71). As time passes, Eva's fears threaten to become a reality. Plum grows increasingly dependent on his mother, to the point that he needs her in the same way that a fetus needs the woman attached to the other end of his umbilical cord. Eva would once again be her son's sole source of shelter, protection, nourishment, and oxygen. Like a fetus, he would not be able to survive without his mother. Were she to take on this extensive mothering duty for "a big old growed man," she believes that she would most certainly be the death of him. Eva explains to Hannah, "a big man can't be a baby all wrapped up inside his mamma no more, he suffocate" (72).

The latter choice, however, brings a much swifter and more dignified death, but it requires that Eva be responsible for taking Plum's life. Killing her only son is a difficult decision for her to make. She had fought desperately to give birth to and keep him alive:

> He gived me such a time. Such a time. Look like he didn't even want to be born. But he come on out. Boys is hard to bear. You wouldn't know that but they is. It was such a carryin' on to get him born and to keep him alive. Just to keep his little old heart beating and his little old lungs cleared and look like when he came back from that war he wanted to get back in. After all that carryin' on, just getting' him out and keepin' him alive, he wanted to crawl back in my womb and well . . . I ain't got the room no more even if he could do it. There wasn't space for him in my womb. (71)

If she were to kill him, all of her hard work would seem to have been in vain. As a mother, her job is to ensure his survival and to protect him from harm, not to be the agent of his death. Cognizant of the trials and tribulations she endured trying to keep Plum alive and to help him reach maturity, Eva decides not to relive the experience of rearing him all over again: "I done tried 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" (72). By killing Plum, Eva puts an end to his attempts "to escape independence through drugs rather than to act responsibly to establish an order and chart a direction for his fragmented life" (Samuels and Hudson-Weems 39). He will no longer be dependent upon anyone to supply his needs nor will he embarrass or hurt himself or any of his family members ever again. Most importantly, she hopes to save herself the pain of watching her son further degrade himself. This way, she can remember him for the man he was and not the shell of the man he would become.

Despite the fact that Eva sets her son afire, Plum's murder is not the horrific event that one would expect. Morrison depicts the events that lead up to Eva's decision to set Plum on fire in a tender and touching manner. Eva, who has but one leg, hobbles on crutches down to Plum's room "late one night in 1921" (45). Before she kills him, "she sat down and gathered Plum into

her arms" (46). She then comforts her grown son as she would a baby: "Eva held him closer and began to rock. Back and forth she rocked him, her eyes wandering around his room" (46). Plum wakes out of his drug-induced sleep to tell her, "Mamma, you so purty. You so purty, Mamma" (47). His comment solicits tears from Eva, who "lifted her tongue to the edge of her lip to stop the tears from running into her mouth" (47). When she finishes "rocking, rocking" him, "she laid him down and looked at him a long time" (47). Eva's actions evoke the image of the Pieta, the grieving mother holding the body of Christ, because she, too, laments the loss of her only son. Plum lies there unaware that his mother is preparing to torch him. He feels the "wet lightness" of the kerosene "splashing and running into his skin," but he mistakes the sensation for "some kind of baptism, some kind of blessing, he thought. Everything is going to be all right, it said. Knowing that it was so he closed his eyes and sank back into the bright hole of sleep" (47). He does not fight what is happening; rather he appears to submit to it, to welcome it. When Hannah tells Eva that Plum is burning and they cannot open the door, Eva replies, "Is? My baby? Burning?" (48). Because she is so loving and affectionate towards him, Eva does not come across as a cold-blooded killer; her actions do not seem calculated or menacing. Instead, one comes away feeling, believing, that had other options existed for her (or had she known of other options), she would have gladly chosen one of them.

Simply put, Morrison describes Eva's actions as "bad." She does not use the words crazy or evil. Instead, in a 1976 interview with Robert Stepto, Morrison says that Eva is guilty of being manipulative, that she is possessive and somewhat self-centered, but that she acts in what she perceives to be the best interests of others. Eva "kills her son, plays god, names people and, you know, puts her hand on a child. You know, she's god-like, she manipulates—all in the best interest. And she is very, very possessive about other people, that is, as a king is. She decided that her son was living a life that was not worth his time. She meant it was too painful for her; you know, the way you kill a dog when he breaks his leg because he can't stand the pain. He may very well be able to stand it, but you can't, so that's why you get rid of him" (16). By comparing

Eva's killing of Plum to putting a dog with a broken leg to sleep because he is injured, Morrison makes it seem as though Eva has committed a mercy killing, albeit perhaps an unnecessary one. Eva tries to provide Plum with some mercy because she thinks that he cannot bear the pain of what he is doing to himself. Therefore, Eva's actions are "bad," but her character flaws drive them. Morrison does not condone Eva's actions, but she does not condemn her for them either because "Eva was generous; wide-spirited, and made some sacrifices" (Stepto 17). Rather, her actions demonstrate the duality of Eva's character. Despite her name, which is a derivation of Eva—the mother of all mankind, Eva embodies the Madonna and the Eve, for she gives and takes life.

Mammies and Matriarchs

Like the murdering mother, the mammy/matriarch character does not occur exclusively in mother-son pairings. Those mother characters who fit into the mammy/matriarch category usually mother their own children, a son and a daughter, along with the children of their white employers. Although the mammy and matriarch are two separate and distinct images of the black woman, a number of scholars hold them responsible for all that ails the black family. "A faithful, obedient domestic servant," the mammy, generally buxom and clad in a head scarf, "symbolizes the dominant group's perception of the ideal Black female relationship to the elite White male power" (Collins 72). Said to provide better care for her white employers, the mammy often ignores the needs of her own family. She symbolizes the "good" black mother, for "even though she may be well loved and may wield considerable authority in her White 'family,' the mammy still knows her 'place' as an obedient servant. She has accepted her own subordination" (Collins 72-3, 75). Contrary to the mammy, the matriarch symbolizes the "bad" black mother (Collins 75). Whereas white males look favorably upon the mammy, black men often subject the matriarch to scorn and ridicule. Involved excessively in the lives of her family members, the matriarch is cast as the strong black woman who often seeks to control by force and coercion. In

the matriarchal household, husbands, more often than not, are absent, sons are emasculated, and daughters are trained to be like their mothers—domineering and controlling.

However, Morrison's fiction fuses the mammy and the matriarch together to create a mother figure who simultaneously loves and cares for the family of her white employers while she neglects and/or destroys her own family, most especially her male children. Of Morrison's mother figures, Pauline Breedlove in The Bluest Eye best fits the mammy/matriarch image. At work, she is "an ideal servant" (The Bluest Eye 127), taking great pride in her job and those individuals in her charge. She lovingly takes care of the Fishers' possessions, guarding them as though they were her own. In dealing with the various "creditors and service people" on the Fishers' behalf, Pauline commands respect and intimidates, refusing to accept anything less than the best for her employers: "She refused beef slightly dark or with edges not properly trimmed. The slightly reeking fish that she accepted for her own family she would all but throw in the fish man's face if he sent it to the Fisher house" (128). Although she does not hesitate to haggle with the creditors and merchants, Pauline would never dream of overstepping her bounds with her employers. Aided in part by their plush carpet, which muffles the sounds of her footsteps, Pauline silently and unobtrusively maneuvers her way around the Fishers' home.

Clearly, Pauline loves her job as a domestic, "for such a role filled practically all of her needs . . . . Here she found beauty, order, cleanliness, and praise" (127). Her response to the Fishers' daughter when her own daughter, Pecola, knocks over the pie she has just baked reveals that Pauline loves the child as well as her job. However, the same cannot be readily said of Pauline's feelings for her own children. Although Pecola suffers a burn from the hot pie filling, "for she cried out and began hopping about just as Mrs. Breedlove entered . . ." (109), Pauline comforts the Fisher child. She does not show Pecola any sympathy or pity. Rather, she lashes out at Pecola "and with the back of her hand knocked her to the floor. Pecola slid in the pie juice, one leg folding under her. Mrs. Breedlove yanked her up by the arm, slapped her again, and in a voice thin with anger, abused Pecola directly and Frieda and [Claudia] by implication" (109). To

add further insult to injury, Pauline consoles the crying Fisher child, promising to bake her another pie, but pushes Pecola out of the door, admonishing her to go home: "Crazy fool . . . my floor, mess . . . look what you . . . work . . . get on out . . . now that . . . crazy . . . my floor, my floor . . . my floor" (109). With a simple "Hush," her response to the Fisher child's inquiries as to "who were they," Pauline dismisses her daughter and treats her as though she were insignificant, she instructs the Fisher child to "don't worry none," as if to say that the names of these are completely unimportant.

Pauline's treatment of Pecola is damaging because she not only embarrasses her daughter in front of her friends but also in the presence of the Fisher child, whom she appears to favor. Not only does Pauline bake the child desserts, but she also allows the little girl to call her Polly, "when even Pecola called her mother Mrs. Breedlove" (108). The Fisher child's familiarity with Pauline is astonishing because Pecola must address her own mother in such a formal way, as though she were greeting a stranger or a family acquaintance. In fact, the Fisher child and the floor both seem to take precedence over her daughter. Pecola's feelings are of no consequence to Pauline, who is more concerned with the condition of her floor. Pauline's interaction with Pecola underscores her devotion to her employers and best supports the argument that she fits the image of the mammy. According to Collins, "by teaching Black children their assigned place in the White power structure, Black women who internalize the mammy image potentially become effective conduits for perpetuating racial oppression" (73). Thus, by slapping Pecola in front of the Fisher child, Pauline imparts to her daughter the idea that whiteness is privileged over blackness and that, as a black girl, Pecola's needs and wants have to take a backseat to those of a white girl.

At home, however, Pauline assumes the role of the matriarch; she is remiss in her care of her family members, confrontational, and verbally and physically abusive. With every year that Pauline remains in the Fishers' employ, her neglect of her own family grows: "More and more she neglected her house, her children, her man—they were like afterthoughts one has just before

sleep, the early-morning and late-evening edges of her day, the dark edges that made the daily life with the Fishers lighter, more delicate, more lovely" (127). As a result, her storefront home is rundown and lacks the order that she so lovingly bestows upon the Fisher home. No where is Pauline's negligence more evident than in the living room, furnished with "two sofas, an upright piano, and a tiny artificial Christmas tree, which had been there, decorated and dust-laden, for two years" (35). The two sofas and the upright piano reveal that Pauline did, in fact, once care about her home. Yet, the size and artificiality of the tree reflect the state of the Breedloves' family life; theirs is simply a cheap imitation of a family and a home. Left to collect dust, the tiny artificial Christmas tree shows that Pauline has "stopped trying to keep her own house" (127). She has given up on her "dingy storefront" home (127).

Even though her home needs attending to, Pauline is most neglectful and harmful in her relationship with her children, Sammy and Pecola, and her husband, Cholly. She belittles Cholly in front of the children, criticizing him for his failure to provide for his family, and she instigates arguments with him, knowing that they will lead to physical violence. She constantly reminds him that she is the primary breadwinner in the family and that if it were not for her efforts, they would have all perished: "You sure ain't bringing in nothing. If it was left up to you, we'd all be dead . . . ." (41). In chastising Cholly, Pauline "felt she was fulfilling her mother's role conscientiously when she pointed out their father's faults to keep them from having them, or punished them when they showed any slovenliness . . ." (128-29). Her constant bickering with Cholly creates a tense home environment, which, in turn, has an effect on her son's behavior. Sammy is a bully who constantly runs away from home. Physically unattractive, Sammy "used his [ugliness] as a weapon to cause others pain" (39). He responds to his parents' fights with violence of his own. For instance, when Pauline and Cholly fight over the coal, Sammy jumps into the fray and "began to hit his father about the head with both fists, shouting 'You naked fuck!' over and over and over" (44). He interferes out of frustration and not because he is interested in protecting his mother. Tired of the constant bickering and fighting, he encourages

his mother to "kill him! Kill him" (44). Sammy has little respect for his mother, but he has even less for his father, whom he curses and wishes were dead.

Rather than teach her children to obedient, responsible, and God-fearing, which is Pauline's objective, instead "into her son she beat a loud desire to run away, and into her daughter she beat a fear of growing up, fear of other people, fear of life" (128). Most likely, Sammy will grow into an adult who believes the best way to deal with problems is to avoid them. As an adolescent, he has already established a pattern of running away because he is unhappy with his home life: "He was known, by the time he was fourteen, to have run away from home no less than twenty-seven times. Once he got to Buffalo and stayed three months" (43). Pauline's actions cripple her children, causing Sammy to either avoid his problems or to address them with violence.

Nevertheless, Morrison portrays Pauline in a sympathetic light. It is easy to place all of the blame for the state of her family on Pauline, but Cholly should also bear some responsibility. Abusive and neglectful though she may be, she does accept the responsibility that befalls her. Having realized that Cholly is unable at times and unwilling at others to take care of her and her children, Pauline "took on the full responsibility and recognition of breadwinner and returned to church" (123). If given a choice, Pauline would much rather stay at home and take care of her family. Watching movies and working as a domestic servant has given her the chance to see how her white female counterparts live. The sight of "white men taking such good care of they women, and they all be dressed up in big clean houses with the bathtubs right in the same room with the toilet" (123) enthralls and enchants her, causing her to want the same life, the same luxuries and opportunities. Observing the ease and luxury afforded to white women eventually has an adverse effect on Pauline; it "made coming home hard, and looking at Cholly hard" (123).

Thus, Pauline immerses herself in her work. At least, her work is something that she can take pride in. In the Fisher home, "power, praise and luxury were hers in this household" (128). Here, she does not have to worry about the quantity, quality, or condition of the food and

household items because "there were soap bars by the dozen, bacon by the rasher, and . . . shiny pots and pans and polished floors" (128). Her housekeeping efforts are taken note of, appreciated, and commented on. After working twelve to sixteen hours a day in someone else's home, tending to someone else's children, Pauline simply does not have the strength or the desire to look after her own family and home. Exasperated by what she believes to be a losing battle, she loses all interest in maintaining her own home because there simply does not appear to be any point in trying.

For Pauline, motherhood proves to be equally unrewarding as her home life. While it is easy to criticize how Pauline treats her children, let us not fail to look at the causes of her behavior. Some individuals are naïve enough to assume that motherhood is always a liberating experience for all women, and they overlook how poverty affects a woman's ability to perform and her experiences as a mother. Whereas motherhood is considered to be rewarding, many scholars and thinkers forget that "the demands of providing for children in intersecting oppressions are sometimes so demanding that [black mothers] have neither the time nor the patience for affection" (Collins 187). Just because Pauline is not affectionate towards her children does not mean that she does not love them. Her getting up and going to work everyday so that they will continue to have a home, unkempt though it might be, suggests that she does love her children. However, because of her poverty, rearing Sammy and Pecola feels like a burden more than a blessing. Motherhood is not a liberating and joyful experience for Pauline: "But it weren't like I thought it was gone be. I loved them and all, I guess, but maybe it was having no money, or maybe it was Cholly, but they sure worried the life out of me" (124). Motherhood for Pauline means worrying about whether there is enough food, coal, and money to satisfy her family's needs. It also means having to grow up and let go of her own dreams. According to Collins, "Black mothers also pay the cost of giving up their own dreams of achieving full creative ability" (197). After giving birth to Sammy and Pecola, Pauline realizes that her children need her to act as an adult and to guide them. Her children's needs must now

take precedence over her own. In order to satisfy their needs, she has "to go back to work. She was older now, with no time for dreams and movies. It was time to put all the pieces together, make coherence where before there had been none. The children gave her this need; she herself was no longer a child" (126).

So, Pauline abandons her dreams of finding romantic love and acquiring physical beauty, and she settles into her life as wife and mother. To make her life bearable, Pauline creates two separate identities for herself, never mixing the two: "Pauline kept this order, this beauty, for herself, a private world, and never introduced it into her storefront, or to her children. Them she bent toward respectability, and in so doing taught them fear: fear of being clumsy, fear of being like their father, fear of not being loved by God, fear of madness like Cholly's mother's" (128). At work, she becomes the ideal servant—kind, ordered, and efficient. However, at home, she is controlling and domineering, demanding that her children behave. As such, Pauline Breedlove embodies two separate and distinct images of the black woman: the mammy and the matriarch.

Nurturers

The nurturing mother, as well as the caregiver, abandoner, and culture bearer, occurs in Morrison's novels in mother-son pairings only. By definition, a nurturer promotes and sustains the growth and development of her children. Jimmy Breedlove in The Bluest Eye and Ruth Dead in Song of Solomon, two nurturing mothers, undertake the task of overseeing their son's physical and emotional development very early in his life. Cholly's and Macon's lives are threatened before they even have a chance to begin; however, Jimmy and Ruth sustain their sons lives and promote their growth by nurturing them. Jimmy begins nurturing Cholly from the moment she rescues him from the junk heap that his mother abandoned him on when he was only four days old. Had Jimmy not "seen her niece carrying a bundle out of the back door . . .," Cholly, in all likelihood, would have succumbed to the elements and died. Although Cholly is her great nephew, Jimmy takes him in and raises him as though he were her own. Ruth Dead, however, begins nurturing her son, Milkman, while he is still a fetus. She must ward off her husband's

attempts to cause her to abort; therefore, she takes extra precautions, such as wearing a "homemade-on-the-spot girdle—tight in the crotch— . . . until the fourth month" of pregnancy (132), in order to carry her son to term.

For the nurturing mother, rearing sons means more than simply helping them reach adulthood. Ruth and Jimmy both promote their sons growth by giving them names that they believe will give them an advantage in life. Because his mother had not given him a name before she abandoned him, Jimmy named him when he was nine days old "after [her] dead brother. Charles Breedlove. A good man" (133). She opts to name Cholly after her brother rather than the man she suspects is his father, Samson Fuller, because "ain't no Samson never come to no good end" (133). Naming him after his father she fears might influence Cholly to become the type of man who runs away from his responsibilities. Likewise, Ruth's son, Milkman, bears the name of his father and maternal grandfather, Macon Foster Dead. In naming Milkman after her father, the town's first black physician, Ruth hopes that her son will follow in his grandfather's footsteps by going "on to college and medical school" and eventually pursuing a career in medicine (69). Ruth and Jimmy name their sons after men in their families who have done well for themselves. According to "Names and Naming," an entry in the Oxford Companion to African American Literature, "because names and naming practices represent cultural ideas and values, personal experiences, and attitudes toward life, they symbolize in their many variations, a striving toward personal identity and self-respect" (Williams 526). Thus, Ruth's and Jimmy's choice of names suggests that the two women subscribe to the belief that a name can shape an individual and determine his personality and perhaps even his future.

As the word nurturer suggests, the nurturing mother encourages her son's growth by feeding and nourishing him; therefore, she is often described feeding her son. Jimmy provides for Cholly's nourishment by feeding him from her plate. As a child, Cholly looks upon his aunt's feeding ritual with disgust. He reveals that "sometimes when he watched Aunt Jimmy eating collards with her fingers, sucking her four gold teeth, or smelled her when she wore the asafetida

bag around her neck, or when she made him sleep with her for warmth in winter and he could see her old, wrinkled breasts sagging in her nightgown—then he wondered whether it would have been just as well to have died there" (132-33) on the junk heap. Rather than allow Cholly to feed himself, Jimmy feeds him, "handing him a bit of smoked hock out of her dish. He remembered just how she held it—clumsy-like, in three fingers . . . . No words, just picking up a bit of meat and holding it out to him" (158). Initially, Cholly fails to realize that this is Jimmy's way of expressing love and affection. Because he chooses to focus on how she looks and smells rather than how she treats him, Cholly overlooks the fact that the two of them are sharing what should be a rather tender and touching moment. Jimmy feeds Cholly to make sure that he gets enough food. Her reason for making him snuggle up "with her for warmth in winter" is the same; she wants to ensure that he receives enough heat and stays warm throughout the night. Although her actions are clumsy and silent, they help to stimulate Cholly's emotional development. According to John Rowan in his review in Self and Society, "for human beings, touching, fondling, caressing, and generally handling each other is necessary for mental health" (1). Likewise, Ashley Montagu, author of Touching, The Human Significance of Skin, asserts that "our self-esteem is related to the amount we touch others" (209).

In handing him his food and making him snuggle up with her, Jimmy tries to make Cholly feel loved, cared for, and protected. It is only after her death, however, that he realizes the extent to which his aunt loved and cared for him. After his disastrous encounter with his father during which he soiled his pants and ended up under a bridge "knotted [in a] fetal position, paralyzed, his fist covering his eyes, for a long time" (157), Cholly becomes fully aware of the fact that at fourteen years of age he is alone in the world without anyone to comfort or protect him. It is then that his feelings about his aunt undergo a drastic change. Whereas before he was repulsed by the sight of her, now "suddenly he thought of his Aunt Jimmy, her asafetida bag, her four gold teeth, and the purple rag she wore around her head. With a longing that almost split him open, he thought of her handing him a bit of smoked hock out of her dish. He remembered

just then how she held it . . . with so much affection . . . . And then the tears rushed down his cheeks, to make a bouquet under his chin" (158).

Unfortunately, Cholly does not gain an appreciation for all that Jimmy has done for him until it is too late. Because her death deprives him of the emotional stimuli caused by touching, he becomes "dangerously free" (159). Feeling that "there was nothing to love," Cholly becomes self-absorbed: "He was alone with his own perceptions and appetites, and they alone interested him" (160). According to Montagu, "Deprivation of bodily contact is related to many adult disturbances including depression, autism, hyperactivity, sexual aberration, drug abuse, violence and aggression" (178). As an adult, Cholly is an abusive drunk who fights his wife and rapes his own daughter. Although there are other factors, such as race, poverty, and feelings of impotence caused by his inability to find steady employment, the loss of bodily contact during his adolescent years also contributes to his degenerative behavior as an adult.

Ruth Dead, however, is a nurturer in the true sense of the word, for the word nurturer derives from the late Latin word nurtruura, which means to suckle. Some individuals view her extended breastfeeding of Milkman as an act of incest. Yet, Ruth's reaction to his breastfeeding suggests otherwise. In fact, her nursing of her son is nothing more than an attempt to extend his childhood: "She sat in this tiny room holding her son on her lap, staring at his closed eyelids and listening to the sound of his sucking. Staring not so much from maternal joy as from a wish to avoid seeing his legs dangling almost to the floor" (Song of Solomon 13). By prolonging his dependence on her, she hopes to preserve the bond they share. She fears, rightfully so, that as he matures, she and Milkman will grow apart and things will never be the same between them. Thus, her breastfeeding of Milkman is an attempt to nourish not just her son, but also herself and the relationship she shares with her son.

In her mind, Ruth has developed a symbiotic relationship with her son, for breastfeeding nourishes both of them. She provides Milkman that which he needs to sustain his life: food and

human contact. Unlike Cholly, Milkman has "always known that [his mother] had loved him" (79). His breastfeeding, in turn, gives her life meaning. While she suckles him, Ruth observes

> his restraint, his courtesy, his indifference, all of which pushed her into fantasy. She had the distinct impression that his lips were pulling from her a thread of light. It was as though she were a cauldron issuing spinning gold. Like the miller's daughter—the one who sat at night in a straw-filled room, thrilled with the secret power Rumpelstiltskin had given her: to see golden thread stream from her very own shuttle. (13-14)

Living in the shadow of first her father and then her husband, Ruth feels powerless. Yet, the mention in this passage of "light," "gold," and "power" reveal that the act of breastfeeding empowers her. Her whole life, Ruth has felt insignificant. However, Milkman's restraint and courtesy say to her that he loves and cares for her and does not want to cause her any pain. His indifference makes her feel important because it demonstrates that even though he is unmoved by and uninterested in breastfeeding, he is willing to submit to it for her sake. Nothing else she has done—including giving birth to her children—makes her feel quite as worthy. Ruth imagines that her son's breastfeeding also gives her life value. Because light is symbolic of truth and knowledge and gold is equated with money or value, Milkman draws or pulls knowledge, truth, and value from her. She passes these qualities on to her son through her milk. Ruth benefits from her "secret indulgence" (13) which helps her make it though the day. Therefore, Freddie's discovery of her clandestine breastfeeding causes Ruth to realize that "she was to lose fully half of what made her life bearable" (14).

Ruth and Jimmy are both nurturers by virtue of the fact that each woman's efforts sustain her son's life and enable him to reach manhood. This is not to say, however, that these women are perfect, for Morrison creates round, complex characters who possess both good and bad character traits. In some respects, Jimmy undermines her own actions, thereby preventing Cholly from seeing how much she truly cares for him because she likes to brag and take "delight

sometimes in telling him of how she had saved him" (132). Likewise, Ruth's strange behavior causes Milkman "to suspect that these afternoons were strange and wrong" (14). However, even though Cholly and Milkman are ignorant of the fact at first, eventually they come to realize that their mothers do love them and that if it had not been for Jimmy's and Ruth's care, they would have died during infancy.

Caregivers

The caregiver, to a certain extent, lacks the emotional or personal attachment to her child that the nurturer displays. Like the nurturer, the caregiver satisfies her son's physical needs. She feeds him, clothes him, bathes him, and provides him with shelter. She oversees both his education and moral training by enrolling him in school and teaching him right from wrong. However, she ignores the child's emotional needs. She does not engage in displays of affection nor does she tell the child that she loves him. Touching between the mother and son is held to a minimum because the caregiver does not deem it important to the child's physical development. Geraldine in The Bluest Eye and Eva in Sula function as caregivers in that they both fulfill the physical needs of the boys in their charge, but neither seems to establish an emotional attachment to her son and, thus, fails to satisfy his emotional needs.

Eva acts as a caregiver in her relationship with the three deweys. "Operating on a private scheme of preference and prejudice. . ." (37), Eva takes in children whose parents either neglect them or are incapable of providing for them. The children, who move from house to house or relative to relative, lack a stable home environment, for "[t]hey come [to Eva] with woolen caps and names given to them by their mothers, or grandmothers, or somebody's best friend" (37). For example, dewey two comes to be adopted by Eva after she sent for him because he "kept falling down off the porch" (37), which suggests that either he was accident prone or that no one was watching him. Eva takes in the three deweys, feeds them, and oversees their education. In extending her home to them, she displays her charitable nature.

Yet Eva appears to be able to supply the boys' physical needs only. She does nothing to encourage their emotional growth. The manner in which she rears the deweys robs them of their individuality. She names each of the boys dewey, in spite of the fact that "each dewey was markedly different from the other two" (38). Not only are they "one and two years apart in age," they do not bear any physical similarities to one another: "Dewey one was a deeply black boy with a beautiful head and the golden eyes of chronic jaundice. Dewey two was light-skinned with freckles everywhere and a head of tight red hair. Dewey three was half Mexican with chocolate skin and black bangs" (38). Despite the differences in appearance, Eva names all three boys Dewey, for, in her opinion, they are all the same. She also does not vary her treatment of them. Each receives the same punishment regardless of whether one or all three committed a misdeed. For example, "when the handle from the icebox fell off, all the deweys got whipped, and in dry-eyed silence watched their own feet as they turned their behinds high up into the air for the stroke" (38). While there are merits to giving children equal treatment when meting out rewards and punishments, it seems unfair that a child would be punished for something he did not do. In giving the boys the same name and the same punishment, Eva overlooks the fact that each child has a personality all his own and that personality needs to be nurtured.

Eva does succeed, however, at bringing each boy "out of whatever cocoon he was in at the time his mother or somebody gave him away" (38). Denied their own separate identities, they become "in fact as well as in name a dewey—joining with the other two to become a trinity with a plural name . . . inseparable, loving nothing and no one but themselves" (38). As a result, they never learn to cultivate their own separate ideas and opinions. Instead, "they spoke with one voice, thought with one mind, and maintained an annoying privacy" (39). The deweys come to look so much alike that when one of the dewey's birth mothers came to reclaim her child, she could not do so because she "didn't know which was hern" (100). Given that the boys looked nothing alike as children, the mother should not have had any problems recognizing her child. No one, including their biological mothers, can tell the deweys apart. They refuse to be

separated, and they are unwilling to function without one another. When it was time for him to go to school, the oldest dewey "would not go without the others." Even though "he was seven, freckled dewey was five, and Mexican dewey was only four," Eva enrolls all three of the boys in school (38). She has to send them together, or they will not go. They have internalized Eva's attitude that they are all they same, and in doing so, they demand that everyone treat them as one body, as the deweys, a trinity with a plural name.

Even as adults, the deweys seem incapable of operating independently of one another. What one feels, they all feel. Therefore, when one dewey becomes sick, they are all sick: "We sick" (128). Physically, the boys' growth is stunted as well. By the time they are ten, eight, and seven years old, it becomes apparent that "the deweys would never grow. They had been forty-eight inches tall for years now, and while their size was unusual it was not unheard of" (84). In 1939, eighteen years after going to live with Eva, they should be twenty-two, twenty, and nineteen years old. Yet, the boys still have not grown much in stature. This becomes evident when Sula captures the twenty-year-old dewey and "held him by the heels over the banister until he wet his pants" (129).

Said "to have remained boys in mind" (84), the deweys do not mature mentally either. Although they are now adults, they remain "mischievous, cunning, private and completely unhousebroken, their games and interests had not changed since Hannah had them all put in the first grade together" (84-85). Even as grown men, the deweys act in much the same manner as they did as children. When they become ill, the deweys go to Sula and announce, "We need some medicine" (129). Rather than wait for Ajax to come out of the bathroom and then get the medicine themselves, they want Sula to retrieve and dispense it as if they are children. Because they do not work, they must depend on others to take care of them. Instead of food, they crave cough syrup, "the catarrh remedy they loved to drink" (129). Since they do not have their own money, they to go to Sula for money and she gives "each of them a dollar bill . . ." (129). Thus,

in forging this shared identity, this trinity, the deweys grow older together, but they do not grow up.

Like Eva, Geraldine is also a caregiver because she fails to develop an emotional bond with her son. In terms of meeting Junior's physical needs, she is a good mother: "Geraldine did not allow her baby, Junior, to cry. As long as his needs were physical, she could meet them—comfort and satiety. He was always brushed, bathed, oiled, and shod." However, she neglects Junior's emotional needs: "Geraldine did not talk to him, coo to him, or indulge him in kissing bouts, but she saw that every other desire was fulfilled" (86). Her repulsion to "the dreadful funkiness of passion, funkiness of nature, the funkiness of the wide range of human emotions" (83) prevents her from nurturing and showing affection towards her son. She tends to Junior's physical needs—bathes, feeds, and clothes him—because she has been trained to perform those tasks and that is what is expected of her. As one of the "sugar-brown Mobile girls," she has been educated in "how to do the white man's work with refinement: home economics to prepare his food; teacher education to instruct black children in obedience; music to soothe the weary master and entertain his blunted soul" (83). Her education instilled in her the belief that good blacks, colored people as opposed to niggers, are neat and quiet; they are paradigms of "thrift, patience, high morals, and good manners" (83). Obsessed with how others perceive her, Geraldine works hard at distancing herself from niggers—the "dirty and loud" black people (83) As a mother, she feels that it is her duty to deter her son from acting like a nigger, which she intends to do by making sure that he is always well groomed and in the company of children who meet her approval.

Motherhood does not prove fulfilling for Geraldine because it brings her into constant contact with the dreaded funkiness of life, those feelings, emotions, and activities Geraldine "associates with blackness" (Samuels and Hudson-Weems 12) and, therefore, tries to avoid. Whereas she has been successful at keeping it at bay in her own life--she takes pride in the fact that she "does not sweat in the armpits or between the thighs" (86)--Geraldine finds that it is

much more difficult to rid Junior of his funkiness. As a result, tending to Junior's emotional needs conflicts with Geraldine's love of order and precision. Because it is the very nature of children to act in an unpredictable fashion, to get dirty, and to act unruly at times, Junior constantly straddles the line between behaving like a negro and acting like a nigger. Nevertheless, Geraldine's interaction with her cat proves that she is more than capable of loving "a living thing" (85). "First in her affections," the cat receives Geraldine's love because it appreciates "and loves her order, precision, and constancy" (85). Junior, however, does not attempt to "be as clean and quiet as [his mother] is" (85). Thus, rearing Junior becomes more of a never ending task for Geraldine since "the line between colored and nigger was not always clear; subtle and telltale signs threatened to erode it, and the watch had to be constant" (87).

Eva and Geraldine find it difficult to show their sons affection; as a result, the boys become emotional cripples. Geraldine cannot supply Junior's emotional needs because she simply does not know how to. She has been taught to be a good wife, homemaker, and teacher, but she has not been taught how to love. Junior recognizes that he comes second to the cat, and he lashes out at the animal, and anyone else he meets for that matter, as a result. Instead of teaching her son how to be an upstanding and respectable citizen, which is Geraldine's goal, she creates a tyrant and a bully. Unaware of how to interact with other children, Junior must rely on coercion and violence in order to convince them to play with him: "When the mood struck him, he would call a child passing by to come play on the swings or the seesaw. If the child wouldn't, or did and left too soon, Junior threw gravel at him" (88).

Whereas Junior does not know how to reach out to others, the deweys lack any interest in interacting with anyone other than themselves. This is due to the fact that Eva, like Pauline Breedlove, simply does not have the time or the patience to show the deweys any affection. Hannah's question, "Mamma, did you ever love us?" (Sula 67), reveals that Eva is not overly affectionate, even with her own children. She is not the type of mother to engage in kissing bouts or to play games with her children because she has more serious concerns—namely, keeping

them alive: "Play? Wasn't nobody playin' in 1895. Just 'cause you got it good now you think it was always good? 1895 was a killer, girl. Things was bad. Niggers was dying like flies" (68). 1895 was indeed a dangerous and deadly time for blacks, especially black men. Eva believes that when confronted with the choice either to keep your child alive or play games with him, the latter choice is not an option. In 1921, when the deweys come to live with her, Eva's concerns still remain the same. Thus, she expends all of her energy trying to keep her children safe. Eva believes that she is doing the deweys a service by taking them in, and perhaps she is. Left with their neglectful and inattentive mothers, the deweys may not have lived to maturity. Eva does keep them alive and well. However, one has to question the quality of their lives. Although they have one another, their lives seem empty and hollow. How good can life truly be for men who still behave and live like children? They have only half-lived, for they have not experienced all that life has to offer. They will never know the joy of having friendships with others nor will they be challenged with accepting or countering ideas different than their own. The examples of Geraldine and Eva show that it is simply not enough to take care of a child's physical needs alone—children need to know that they are loved and are able to show that love to others.

Abandoners

Another mothering category that emerges in Morrison's fiction is the abandoning mother. Unlike the other categories, the abandoning mother relinquishes all mothering responsibilities, leaving other people to rear her children. While it is a common occurrence in the African American community for a woman to rear another woman's children, the abandonment of children generally tends to be frowned upon. It is, however, acceptable for mothers to leave their children in the care of other women when they find themselves in a position where they are no longer able, be it physically, mentally, emotionally, or financially, to provide for their own children. But there is usually the expectation and the hope that the mother, when she becomes able to do so again, will reclaim her children. Such is the case with Eva in Sula, who leaves her three children with Mrs. Suggs, promising "she would be back the next day" (Sula 34). The next

day, in actuality, stretches into eighteen months, and even though Eva did not remain in contact with her children or Mrs. Suggs during that time, she is not considered an abandoning mother because "she reclaimed her children" (34). Rather, her leaving is viewed as an act of sacrifice, done in the best interests of the children. Had she stayed with them, they would have starved to death. In leaving, she was able to eventually provide a better way of life for them all.

However, Cholly's mother in The Bluest Eye and Wild, Joe Trace's mother in Jazz, are abandoners, for they, unlike Eva, do not appear to show any interest in rearing their children. They are guilty of throwing away or turning their backs on their children. Cholly's mother, "when [he] was four days old, . . . wrapped him in two blankets and one newspaper and placed him on a junk heap by the railroad" (The Bluest Eye 132). Cholly is "rescued" by his great Aunt Jimmy, who raises him until her death. Wild, however, does not wait four days to reject her son: "when the baby finally emerged, the problem was clear immediately: the woman would not hold the baby or look at it" (Jazz 170).

Abandoning mothers are similar to murdering mothers in that the community assumes that they must be crazy or deranged to desert their children. Cholly's mother's supposed mental instability and Wild's untamed state reinforce the black community's idea that "good Black women always want their children . . ." (Collins 195). It is rumored that Cholly's mother, who remains nameless in the novel, "wasn't right in the head" (The Bluest Eye 132). Whether this diagnosis came before or after her abandonment of her infant son is unclear. Either way, her decision to throw a perfectly good child away reveals to the community that she is mentally incompetent (at the least) or insane (at the worst). Likewise, Joe Trace's mother is thought to be insane as well. Hunters Hunter gives her the name Wild after she bites him because "that was the word he thought of: Wild" (Jazz 166). She is considered wild because she defies human conventions and expectations, choosing instead to live like a wild animal. Embarrassed and hurt by his mother's rejection of him, Joe Trace considers her "a simple-minded woman too silly to beg for a living. Too brain-blasted to do what the meanest sow managed: nurse what she birthed.

The small children believed she was a witch, but they were wrong. This creature hadn't the intelligence to be a witch. She was powerless, invisible, wastefully daft" (179). In his estimation, Wild lacks the intelligence of even the dumbest and crudest animal. His description of her reveals that he considers her life to be a complete waste.

With the exception of the women's mental instability, no other reason is given to explain why Cholly's mother and Wild abandon their children; the fact that these two women may not want to be mothers is overlooked by the people in their communities. It is difficult for the community to accept that the women may not want to be mothers. For instance, when Aunt Jimmy discovered that her niece had abandoned Cholly, "she beat his mother with a razor strap and wouldn't let her near the baby after that" (The Bluest Eye 132). Although Aunt Jimmy never had any children of her own, she appears to subscribe to the belief that "good Black women always want their children . . ." (Collins 195). Thus, she tries to beat her niece into submission and punishes her for abandoning her motherly duties.

The novels express an implicit conviction that motherhood is empowering, that it is capable of transforming a young girl into a woman and an untamed woman into one that is socially acceptable and respected. According to Collins, "strong pronatalist values in African American communities often vest adult status on women who become biological mothers. For many, becoming a biological mother is often seen as a significant first step toward womanhood" (196). In rejecting her son, Cholly's mother's actions lead Aunt Jimmy to believe that her niece is avoiding womanhood by refusing to act like an adult. Therefore, Aunt Jimmy treats her niece like a child—she beats Cholly's mother—because she feels that she is acting like a child. In the same way that motherhood is supposed to mature Cholly's mother, it is also expected to "tame" Wild. As thought by some individuals, "motherhood can serve as a site where Black women express and learn the power of self-definition, the importance of valuing and respecting [them]selves, the necessity of self-reliance and independence, and a belief in Black women's empowerment" (Collins 176). Hunters Hunter subscribes to this belief, and he arrogantly thinks

that he holds the power to change and mold Wild to fit society's idea of womanhood: "If he had handled it right, maybe she should have stayed in the house, nursed her baby, learned how to dress and talk to folks" (Jazz 167). He blames himself for Wild's rejection of her infant. It is his hope that motherhood would teach Wild how to behave; it would motivate her to cast aside her untamed life and attempt to live in a more civilized and dignified manner. By taking on the responsibility of caring for her child, she would be forced to adhere to socially accepted standards of living, dress, hygiene, and conversation. However, Hunters Hunter overlooks the fact that the choice to conform is Wild's alone to make.

Culture Bearers

The culture bearer engages in the preservation and presentation of her family's history and ancestry. Her objective is to help the son realize his place in the scheme of the family's history and to understand that he cannot live his life independent of others. In restoring or healing the relationships between the son and his family, she helps the son learn to sympathize with other people's circumstances and not to be judgmental. As a result, she teaches him not only how to conduct himself as a man, but as a human as well, and the son learns how to love, feel remorse for his treatment of others, and to care about someone other than himself. Most of Morrison's mothers aspire to become culture bearers, but Pilate in Song of Solomon is the only one who succeeds.

Wilford D. Samuels and Clenora Hudson-Weems, authors of Toni Morrison, assert that Pilate is a "griot: she is guardian of cultural and familial lore" (64). As a culture bearer, Pilate strives to ensure the survival of her mother's and father's lines by keeping their memory alive, which she does by maintaining records of her life, her travels, and family events. Although she and Macon both remember their father, it is Pilate who keeps Macon Dead I's memory alive by singing about it, mythologizing about it, and making it part of her family history (Watkins 46). Because she fears that her family line will die out and the Deads will become a distant memory, Pilate takes Milkman under her wing and prepares him to succeed her as culture bearer. She is

the first person to tell Milkman about his paternal grandfather, Lincoln's Heaven, and the events surrounding the death of Macon Dead I. In fact, Milkman first hears the song about his great grandfather at Pilate's house, even though it is not until much later that he is able to unravel the significance of the story and its relationship to his family history.

In addition to helping Milkman learn about his family history, Pilate teaches him to love, respect, and honor his responsibilities to his biological family as well as the black community at large. When Milkman meets his cousins, Reba and Hagar, for the first time, Pilate introduces him as their brother: "This here's your brother" (Song of Solomon 14). Reba objects to her mother's use of the word brother, and she tries to correct Pilate by elaborating, "a brother is a brother if you both got the same mother or if you both—" (14). Reba misses Pilate's point entirely, which is that Milkman is family and Hagar and Reba should show him the same respect, love, and acceptance regardless of whether they are siblings or cousins: "Pilate interrupted her: I mean what's the difference in the way you act toward 'em? Don't you have to act the same way to both?" (44). In an interview with Anne Koenen, "The One Out of Sequence" (1980), Morrison admits, "the woman that is most exciting, I suppose, is Pilate, only because she has a kind of ferocity, that's very pointed, astute, and she's also very generous and wide-spirited; she has fairness, braveness, you know, in a way I'd like to be" (69). Pilate's generosity of spirit is evident in the last words she utters to Milkman before she dies: "I wish I'd a knowed more people. I would of loved 'em all. If I'd a know more, I would a loved more" (Song of Solomon 337). That she cares not just about her family, but all people, is evident in her statement. As she lays in his arms dying, Pilate tells Milkman to "sing a little somethin for me" (336). Milkman's choice of song, "Sugargirl don't leave me here / Cotton balls to choke me / Sugargirl don't leave me / Buckra's arms to yoke me" (336), the lyrics to the "Song of Solomon," signifies that he will work to keep the memory of Pilate and his ancestors alive.

Before Pilate sends her nephew on a "quest for cultural identity" (Hudson-Weems 53), Milkman grew up immersed in a culture of materialism. His mother is more concerned with her

social status and with gaining the approval of her friends. His father is obsessed with acquiring property and social status; thus, he teaches Milkman to "own things. And let the things you own own other things. Then you'll own yourself and other people too" (55). Consequently, Milkman is very shallow and selfish, and he thinks the world revolves around him; he is concerned only about himself. Because he considers her to be "too insubstantial, too shadowy for love" (Song of Solomon 75), Milkman holds his mother in contempt and does not reciprocate her love: "He had never loved his mother, but had always known that she had loved him. And that had always seemed right to him, the way that it should be. Her confirmed, eternal love of him, love that he didn't even have to earn or deserve, seemed to him natural" (79). Because he does not care any more for his father than he does his mother, Milkman tries to disassociate himself from Macon by forging his own separate identity, which he defines in opposition to his father's style of dress, personal habits, and beliefs about money and property. For example, "Macon was clean-shaven; Milkman was desperate for a mustache. Macon wore bow ties; Milkman wore four-in-hands. Macon didn't part his hair; Milkman had a part shaved into his. Macon hated tobacco; Milkman tried to put a cigarette in his mouth every fifteen minutes. Macon hoarded his money; Milkman gave his away" (63). When his parents attempt to confide in him, he grows resentful and suspicious of their intentions. He believes that his family, especially his mother and father, want something from him, that they are all "working out some scheme of their own on him, making him the subject of their dreams of wealth, love, or martyrdom" (165). Thus, Milkman seeks to distance himself from his family members and believes the only way to accomplish this is to leave, to get as far away from them as possible.

On the surface, Milkman appears not to have any affection for money, property, and possessions. His casual disregard for the money his father works so hard to earn suggests that he is unaware that that very money makes his life easy and affords him the lifestyle and the clout in his community to which he has grown accustomed. Because of his parents' status and money, Milkman has never had to impress and influence people on his own: "he had never had to try to

make a pleasant impression on a stranger before, and did not remember ever asking anybody in the world how they are" (229). However, Milkman has more in common with his father than he cares to admit: "But he couldn't help sharing with Macon his love of good shoes and fine thin socks" (63). Like his father, he also enjoys the luxuries, such as expensive shoes and socks, that only money can buy. Milkman also shares his father's philosophy that owning things enables an individual to own himself. As such, Milkman erroneously believes that money will grant him autonomy over his own life and relieve him of any responsibility to his family: "I just know that I want to live my own life. I don't want to be my old man's office boy no more. And as long as I'm in this place I will be. Unless I have my own money. I have to get out of that house and I don't want to owe anybody when I go" (221-222).

By sending Milkman in search of his cultural identity, Pilate removes him from his familiar surroundings and the influence of his parents, thereby providing him with the chance to begin anew. Without financial connections, he must survive using his own resources, for "there was nothing here to help him—not his money, his car, his father's reputation, his suit, or his shoes. In fact, they hampered him" (271). Instead of inspiring awe, his money angers people and creates resentment. In Shalimar, the men react with hostility towards Milkman when he so casually announces that he was looking to "buy a car as if it were a bottle of whiskey because the one he had was broken" (266). His financial stability makes them aware of their poverty: "His manners, his clothes were reminders that they had no crops of their own and no land to speak of either" (266). Insulted and a little hurt that one of their own, another black man, would treat them in the same manner as the "white men who came to pick them up in trucks when they needed anonymous, faceless laborers" (266), they refuse to offer Milkman their assistance. Milkman must now rely on his wit, his ability, and his endurance—things he has never had to use before. He must prove to himself that he is capable of surviving on his own, and he does.

Thus, Pilate helps Milkman "to give up the shit that weighs you down" (179). Once he is free of the excess baggage he had been carrying around, Milkman is able to (re)establish a

connection with his family and his past. He feels regret over "the gap in his own childhood . . ." (299) caused by his lack of knowledge about his ancestors and family history. Once Milkman discovers his family history and learns the name of those individuals who came before him, he becomes whole. At last, his eyes are opened to the world around him. He develops a curiosity about other individuals and events that lay unearthed, unknown, and he becomes interested in learning the stories and meanings behind other names familiar but previously unexplored and unquestioned by him: "He read the road signs with interest now, wondering what lay beneath the names. The Algonquins had named the territory he lived in Great Water, michi gami. How many dead lives and fading memories were buried in and beneath the names of the places in this country" (329). His curiosity about and awareness of others cause him to reflect on his relationship with his parents and other individuals with whom he has come into contact. He comes to realize that he does, in fact, owe his parents something. He begins to wonder, "But why shouldn't his parents tell him their personal problems? If not him, then who?" (276). His line of questioning leads him to recognize that just as his parents are obligated to him, he has a duty to his parents. Before his journey, he only thought about what people wanted from him and never gave any thought to what he took from or demanded of others without giving anything back in return.

During his journey, he becomes homesick "for the very people he had been hell-bent to leave" (300). By gaining insight into his parents' lives, Milkman comes to understand the reasons for their actions. Instead of resentment, he now feels compassion for them. Imagining how he would respond if he were forced to become celibate for the majority of his adult life enables Milkman to see that his mother never intended to cause him any pain: "And suppose he were married and his wife refused him fifteen years. His mother had been able to live through that by a long nursing of her son, some occasional visits to a graveyard. What might she have been like had her husband loved her?" (300). He also understands the motivation behind his father's obsession with acquiring things: "As the son of Macon Dead the first, he paid homage to

his own father's life and death by loving what his father had loved: property, good solid property, the bountifulness of life" (300). Reflecting upon his relationships with others causes Milkman to experience a wide range of human emotions. He feels silly for "hating his parents, his sisters" (300). He feels ashamed for betraying Pilate's trust by breaking into her house, "the only one he knew that achieved comfort without one article of comfort in it" (301). He feels regret because of the way in which he used Hagar and then dismissed her so brutally: "Why did he never sit down and talk to her? Honestly. And what ugly thing was it he said to her the last time she had tried to kill him?" (301). Also, he is saddened by the fact that because of his behavior in the past "the consequences of [his] own stupidity would remain, and regret would always outweigh the things he was proud of having done" (335). However, the revelation that "from the beginning, his mother and Pilate had fought for his life . . ." (331) helps him to see that had it not been for the grace and love of his mother and his aunt he would not be alive. The very people he feared wanted to take his life are the ones responsible not just for giving him life but for keeping him alive as well. Therefore, it is with excitement that Milkman looks forward to sharing what he has learned: "He was so eager for the sight of Pilate's face when he told her what he knew. So he decided to see her first" (331). Equipped with the knowledge of his past and the desire to share with his family what he has learned, Milkman prepares to assume his position as culture bearer. Like the twenty-one children of Jake, "who sang about [their father's leaving] and kept the story of his leaving alive" (332), it is now up to Milkman to make certain that he preserve and present the story to his family members and future generations.

Although Pilate succeeds in making Milkman whole, she is in no way perfect, for she is neglectful in her relationship with her simple-minded daughter, Reba, and her granddaughter, Hagar. Therefore, in her own way the culture bearer is as flawed as the murderer, the mammy and matriarch, the nurturer, the caregiver, and the abandoner. While these six mothering categories may not exist in the works of other black women writers, Morrison, like her literary predecessors and contemporaries, concerns herself with eradicating stereotypical images—both

positive and negative—of black womanhood, replacing the ones society tries to impose on black women with her own standards and ideals. Her portrayals of mothers are often gritty and sometimes disturbing. Unlike her black male counterparts, Morrison's depictions suggest that she feels that the black mother does not need protecting; therefore, she does not romanticize her mother figures. Even though images of the mammy and matriarch offend many blacks, Morrison grants them some credibility by refusing to overlook or ignore them. She includes them in her works because while the images certainly do not apply to all black woman, they do apply to some. However, Morrison exaggerates her portrayals of mammies and matriarchs to show that these images of black women are bankrupt. For example, Pauline Breedlove loves being in the Fishers' employ not because they are white and she feels inferior to them, but because her job allows her to realize her love of order and precision.

Morrison refuses to accept the Madonna/Eve ideology, for as a mother she knows first hand the challenges, successes, and failures black women encounter while rearing children, especially sons. As in the case of Sethe, Ruth, Pauline, and Geraldine, the best of intentions are subject to misinterpretation and may yield disastrous results. Her mother characters demonstrate the problems that arise from insisting that the black mother act as a paragon of strength and virtue. Looking at Morrison's novels, it seems that those mothers who are the most virtuous are often the ones who are the most rigid and who inflict the most pain upon their sons. Geraldine and Pauline, both of whom are obsessed with being respectable and virtuous, rear sons who are bullies and tyrants. Morrison once stated that when she began writing she "was just interested in finally placing black women center stage in the text, not as the all-knowing, infallible black matriarch, but as a flawed here, triumphant there, mean, nice, complicated woman, and some of them win and some of them lose" (Davis 519). Thus, in her works, her mothers—be they murderers, mammies and matriarchs, caregivers, abandoners, nurturers, or culture bearers—are as imperfect as the world in which they live.

CHAPTER 6

"A MAN AIN'T NOTHING BUT A MAN . . . . BUT A SON? WELL NOW, THAT'S SOMEBODY": THE GLORIFICATION AND PREFERENTIAL TREATMENT OF SONS IN TONI MORRISON'S NOVELS

Over the course of her illustrious career, Toni Morrison's critics have accused her of portraying black men in a negative light. Of her most recent novel, Paradise, Justine Tally, author of Paradise Reconsidered: Toni Morrison's (Hi)stories and Truths (1999), notes that ". . . Morrison's detractors will find much to complain about once again in the 'negative portrayals of black men' as violent and insensitive brutes . . ." (30-31). Looking back at her novels, it might at first appear that there is truth in her critics' claims. In The Bluest Eye, Morrison's first novel, Samson Fuller abandons his pregnant girlfriend. Their son, Cholly, inherits his father's irresponsible nature and runs away from home when he fears that he may have impregnated Darlene. Years later, Cholly, "reeking drunk" (161), commits a most horrendous crime when he rapes his thirteen-year-old daughter, Pecola. Morrison's second novel, Sula, also depicts black male characters as irresponsible and unsteady (McKay 145). BoyBoy abandons Eva "after five years of a sad and disgruntled marriage," leaving her to rear three children with but "$1.65, five eggs, three beets and no idea of what or how to feel" (32). Jude also abandons his wife, Nel, and their three children after he is caught engaging in sexual intercourse with her best friend, Sula. Macon Dead in Song of Solomon does not abandon his family. However, he is both verbally and physically abusive towards Ruth, and his hatred and disdain for his wife and children "kept each member of his family awkward with fear" (10). In Tar Baby, Son kills his wife in a jealous rage after he catches her in bed with another man. In Beloved, Paul D, by telling Sethe that she can confide in him and then criticizing and abandoning

her after she does, confirms for Sethe what Baby Suggs constantly preached—that men are not dependable: "They encouraged you to put some of your weight in their hands and soon as you felt how light and lovely that was, they studied your scars and tribulations, after which they did what he had done: ran her children out and tore up the house" (22). In Jazz, Joe Trace stalks and then murders Dorcas, the teenaged girl with whom he entered into an adulterous affair. Finally, Paradise opens with nine of the men from Ruby going out to the convent and, in cold blood, gunning down the five unarmed women who reside there. While these portrayals of black men are certainly unflattering, it is somewhat unfair and one-sided to accuse Morrison of "male-bashing," for her depictions of women are often unflattering as well. Her women characters prove to be equally adept as the male characters at being verbally and physically abusive, abandoning familial responsibilities, and committing murder. In retrospect, not only are the claims one-sided, but they are also false generalizations. One need look no further than Morrison's portrayals of son figures to disprove her critics' claims that she is guilty of male bashing.

In declaring to Sethe that "a man ain't nothing but a man . . . . But a son? Well now, that's *somebody*" (Song of Solomon 23), Baby Suggs offers proof that the mothers in Morrison's fiction generally regard their sons, whom they hold in higher esteem than their husbands and lovers, as being important and of value. Although Baby Suggs speaks of her own personal experience, her sentiments appear to be an overarching theme in Morrison's body of fiction. In most of Morrison's texts, men are just men, liable to make mistakes and fall short of glory, but sons are revered, for they, like Halle, have the ability to be their mother's saviors. Halle, "a twenty-year-old man so in love with his mother he gave up five years of Sabbath just to see her sit down for a change . . . ," is an ideal son (11). The last of Baby's eight children and the only one that she was allowed to keep, Halle is "the one person who did something hard for her: gave her his work, his life . . ." (140). In buying his mother's freedom, Halle manages to do something for her that the men in her life, the six fathers of her eight children, had failed or neglected to do.

With her husband, the man whose surname she bore, Baby Suggs "made a pact: whichever one got a chance to run would take it; together if possible, alone if not, and no looking back" (142). The chance never arrived for Baby Suggs, whose attempts at escaping were in all likelihood impeded first by her eight pregnancies, then her children, and finally her physical infirmity. Her husband, however, "got his chance, and since she never heard otherwise, she believed he made it" (142). Even though they promised that they would not look back, the fact that her husband remains faithful to their pact seems to reinforce Baby Suggs's belief that men are just men, that they are not as dependable nor as committed as are sons.

As a husband, however, Halle is no more successful than is Baby Suggs's husband. Even though "Sethe had the amazing luck of six whole years of marriage to that 'somebody' son who had fathered every one of her children" (23), she discovers unfortunately that as a husband Halle is simply a man. Because he was often working to earn money to purchase his mother's freedom, Halle left Sethe to deal with the pressures of rearing their children alone. She does not go to him for help with her concerns, for ". . . when he did get down to a little sleep, [she] didn't want to be bothering him with all that" (160). Though Halle may be unaware of the day-to-day occurrences in his wife's and his children's lives, he knows for certain that he must get his family away from Sweet Home while the children are still young. When Schoolteacher prevents Halle from hiring himself out for "debt work," he is, in effect, denying Halle the opportunity to buy his and his family's freedom. Aware of this, Halle asks Sethe, "The question now is, Who's going to buy you out? Or me? Or her?" (196). While the debt work Halle had to do in exchange for Baby's freedom is physically exhausting, it is by far a safer and more certain means of attaining his and his family's freedom than is trying to run away, especially since he will be accompanied by Sethe and the children, who will only slow him down. In the end, Halle falls short as a husband, failing in his attempt to get himself and his family away from Sweet Home and leaving Sethe to make her escape alone.

Morrison's mother characters appear to privilege sons not just over men but over daughters as well. When I first began this study, I was looking to dispel the notion that black mothers give their daughters preferential treatment over their sons. I was almost certain that Morrison's texts would reveal that the mother doles out equal treatment, thereby not distinguishing between her son and daughter. What I did not expect to discover is that the daughters are often sacrificed for the betterment of the sons. In Fiction and Folklore: The Novels of Toni Morrison (1991), Trudier Harris questions "who has value in Morrison's novels" (188)—the men or the women or, in this case, the sons or the daughters. While I agree with Harris, based upon what is demonstrated in the texts, that ". . . the question of who has value in Morrison's novels comes down to a seemingly easy answer . . ." (188), I disagree, to a certain extent, with her answer. Harris says men, but I say, more specifically, sons. This, of course, brings us to the question of why—why are sons of value? In Morrison's canon, mothers glorify their sons because they believe that their male offspring possess the ability to correct the shortcomings and compensate for the disappointments caused by the men (i.e., husbands, fathers, and lovers) in their lives. Unlike their daughters, who are grounded by the burdens of childrearing, domestic chores, and community service, the sons provide the mothers with the chance to experience freedom from familial and social responsibility vicariously.

Sons are precious, but they come at a high price for the mothers. In telling Hannah that "boys is hard to bear. You wouldn't know that but they is" (Sula 71), Eva reveals, on the one hand, that sons are difficult to conceive, deliver, and bring to maturation. For instance, Ruth Dead has to go to great lengths in order to conceive and carry Milkman to term. To get her husband to come to her after fifteen years of marriage which have been "long deprived of sex" (Song of Solomon 134), she must submit to the "nasty greenish-gray powder Pilate had given her to be stirred into rain water and put into food" (131). Then after becoming pregnant, she must endure her husband's attempts "to get her to abort" (131). Ruth is forced to withstand

> the nausea caused by the half ounce of castor oil Macon made her drink, then a hot pot recently emptied of scalding water on which she sat, then a soapy enema, a knitting needle (she inserted only the tip, squatting in the bathroom, crying, afraid of the man who paced outside the door), and finally, when he punched her stomach (she had been about to pick up his breakfast plate, when he looked at her stomach and punched it), she ran to Southside looking for Pilate. (131)

In spite of her husband's attempts to terrorize her and the abuse she is made to suffer, Ruth remains committed to protecting her unborn child and takes what, for her, amounts to drastic measures to save it. Alone and unaware of where she is going, Ruth ventures out into Southside, which with its working-class residents is so unfamiliar to her it is almost as though she has entered a foreign country or another world. She knows not where she is going since "she had never walked through that part of town, but she knew the street Pilate lived on, though not the house" (131). The one thing she knows for certain is that Pilate will know what to do.

The mother's duties do not decrease in number nor become easier over time. If anything, quite the opposite occurs, for the process of rearing boys is often a long and arduous task, one that is not complete simply because the child reaches the age of maturity. With Plum, Eva's mothering responsibilities never end. From the moment he is born until his death, he has to be mothered (meaning protected, cared, and provided for). Eva confides to Hannah, "It was such a carryin' on to git him born and to keep him alive. Just to keep his little heart beating and his little old lungs cleared and look like when he came back from the war he wanted to git back in [the womb]" (Sula 71). Even as a child, Plum does not appear to be as strong or as hearty as are his older sisters. Even though they were all hungry and malnourished, Plum, the only boy child, is the one who succumbs to illness. Suffering from a severe case of constipation, "he seemed in great pain and his shrieks were pitched high in outrage and in suffering" (33-34). In order to save her son and to end his misery, Eva takes him to the outhouse and "deep in its darkness and

freezing stench, she squatted down, turned the baby over on her knees, exposed his buttocks and shoved the last bit of food she had in the world (besides three beets) up his ass" (34). Forced to use the last of the family's lard to extract the compacted stool of which her son is unable to rid himself, Eva deprives herself and her two daughters of food in order to ease her son's physical pain and discomfort. Relieved, "the grateful Plum slept" (34), while his mother worries about how she will be able to continue to provide for her children.

When Plum returns home after serving in World War I, Eva finds herself once again caring for her son, who by now was "a big old growed-up man" (72). As a result of his heroin addiction, Plum begins to exhibit childlike behaviors. He appears to be either unable or unwilling to take care of himself. Gone are his interest in personal hygiene and his physical appearance: "His hair had been neither cut nor combed in months, his clothes were pointless and he had no socks." He does not eat properly, eating "only snatches of things at beginnings or endings of meals." His days are spent in idleness as he divides his time between "trips to Cincinnati and sleep[ing] for days in his room with the record player going" (45). Without employment, he becomes dependent upon his family members to satisfy his habit. He begins to steal from them. At twenty-six years of age, Plum seems perfectly content with his mother taking care of him. However, his constant demands and dependence on Eva for the necessities of life (i.e., shelter, clothing, food, money, and, in his case, heroin), cause her to feel as though he is regressing to his infancy. Worried that Plum is "trying to get back up in my womb" (71-72), Eva fears that her mothering responsibilities to her son will never end.

On the other hand, Eva's statement also supports the belief that African American boys are at a greater risk than are their female counterparts. Although black women are often the victims of a double oppression—racism and sexism—there are many individuals in the black community who feel that black men are more often the targets of racism and prejudice, that "European Americans have done everything imaginable to malign and subjugate African American males" (Perkins v). Statistically, black men are more likely to be incarcerated or to die

a premature death, which is often the result of gun and/or gang-related violence, but they are less likely to receive a fair trial in the criminal justice system, to further their education, or to gain white-collar or professional employment than are black women. Many blacks, both male and female, share Jude's sentiments "that a Negro man has a hard row to hoe in this world" (Sula 103). Thus, a number of "[black] mothers feel that a black man-child duly 'chastened' or broken at home will pose less of a threat to a society already primed to destroy him" (King and Mitchell 13). None of Morrison's mothers appear to subscribe to this belief. Pauline Breedlove, perhaps, comes closest to this group of "mothers who whip their sons brutally 'for their own good' . . ." (12). Yet, she chastises both her son and her daughter because she "felt she was fulfilling a mother's role conscientiously when she pointed out their father's faults to keep them from having them, or punished them when they showed any slovenliness, no matter how slight, when she worked twelve to sixteen hours a day to support them" (The Bluest Eye 128-29). The motivation behind her chastening of her son, Sammy, appears to come more out of concern for appearances, most specifically her own, than out of any fear that her son will be harmed. Because "she was an active church woman, [who] did not drink, smoke, or carouse . . . ," Pauline is more concerned that her children appear to be respectable and God-fearing (128).

For the most part, Morrison's mothers tend toward being "the overprotective mother who imposes herself as a buffer between her son and the hostile world of both intra and interracial violence. She seeks to shield her son—seen as more precious than anyone or anything else in the world—from legitimate correction from others and rarely corrects him herself. She overindulges him in every respect" (King and Mitchell 15). In pampering and coddling their sons, many black mothers are guilty of creating "double standards for their children . . ." (Kunjufu 6). According to Jawanza Kunjufu, author of Countering the Conspiracy to Destroy Black Boys (1982), "Parents often perpetuate male seasoning by patterning their household to fit the sexist mold. Female parents, who are well aware of the lack of male support, can often be found rearing their male

child with few household responsibilities required. Many boys continue to reach manhood with little skill and less interests in cooking and cleaning" (35-36).

Despite the fact that they often bear the brunt of the housework, Morrison's mother characters perpetuate double standards for their children by assigning their sons fewer domestic chores than they do their daughters. Pauline Breedlove constantly belittles Cholly for his failure to provide properly for his family: "You sure ain't bringing in nothing. If it was left up to you, we'd all be dead . . . ." (The Bluest Eye 41). Although she feels she must shoulder the responsibility for her family alone, she perpetuates what Kunjufu terms male seasoning by assigning her children chores based upon the sexist mold. She orders Sammy to get the coal (44) because typically boys are assigned chores that require manual labor, such as taking out the garbage, mowing the lawn, chopping the firewood, and hauling coal. What is interesting is that Pauline orders Sammy to retrieve her some coal only after Cholly refuses, which indicates that her son is not always expected to perform this task. In fact, the narrator reveals that the chore of hauling coal is one that is normally done by any number of individuals in the Breedlove family: "They all knew that Mrs. Breedlove could have, would have, and had, gotten coal from the shed, or that Sammy or Pecola could be directed to get it" (41). Not only is Pecola required to haul coal on occasion, but Pauline also assigns her daughter regularly scheduled jobs related to the domestic sphere. Pecola has to go "to her mama's work place to git the wash" and then "she got to hang up the clothes before the sun goes down" (103). In addition to doing the laundry, Pecola is also given other domestic duties to perform. For instance, when Cholly rapes her, "she was washing dishes" (161). The chores Pauline doles out to her children do not require the same amount of time and effort required to complete them. The amount of time required for Sammy to haul coal does not even come close to the amount needed by Pecola to go pick up the wash, carry it home, hang it out to dry, do the dishes, and get coal when needed. By assigning such chores, Pauline imparts to her son the belief that men are exempt from performing household chores

because they are the woman's responsibility, and she prepares her daughter for a lifetime of domestic chores and service to others.

Not only are sons assigned fewer chores than daughters, but they are generally pressed into service at a later age than their sisters. At the ages of twelve and thirteen, Corinthians and Lena, respectively, are gainfully employed making roses. However, at the age of twelve, Milkman is free to be a child and roam the streets of Southside with his best friend, Guitar, while his sisters are confined to the house where they "spent hour after hour tracing, cutting, and stitching the costly velvet . . ." roses that they sold to Gephardt's department store (5). The only boundary that seems to have been established for Milkman is that he "stay away from Pilate" (50), for his father fears that she will have a negative influence on his son. Macon orders Milkman to work for him in the afternoons after school only after Milkman disobeys his one command. Instead of keeping him away from Pilate, his after school job provides him with more opportunities to frequent her home: "Contrary to what his father hoped, there was more time to visit the wine house. Running errands for Macon's rent houses gave him leave to be in Southside and get to know the people Guitar knew so well" (56).

Song of Solomon further demonstrates how the double standard to which mothers hold their children prepares the son to expect others to care for him and the daughter to assume her position as wife and mother. Even though Macon forces Milkman to work for him, all textual evidence reveals that Ruth, his mother, does not command her son to perform chores around the house. Like Pauline Breedlove, Ruth instills in her children the belief that women are supposed to cater to men's needs. She requires her daughters to help around the house and to assist her in watching and caring for their brother. Based upon Lena's comments to Milkman, it becomes evident that Ruth has never required Milkman to clean up after himself or care for any of his family members. Lena tells her brother, "You have yet to wash your own underwear, spread a bed, wipe the ring from your tub, or move a fleck of your dirt from one place to another. And to this day, you have never asked one of us if we were tired, or sad, or wanted a cup of coffee.

You've never picked up anything heavier than your own feet, or solved a problem harder than fourth-grade arithmetic" (215). In not requiring him to look after anything or anyone—including himself, Ruth encourages him to be irresponsible and self-centered.

Consequently, by holding them to a double standard, Ruth fosters feelings of resentment among her children. In a heated rage, Lena reveals to Milkman the source of her resentment towards him: "Our girlhood was spent like a found nickel on you. When you slept, we were quiet; when you were hungry, we cooked; when you wanted to play, we entertained you; and when you got grown enough to know the difference between a woman and a two-toned Ford, everything in this house stopped for you" (215). Instead of sisters, Lena and Corinthians seem to function as housekeepers and playmates. As a result, Lena feels that their lives revolved around making Milkman's life easier, that part of their childhood was sacrificed so that he could live in relative comfort without the distractions of household noise and chores. Her hostility towards Milkman stems from the knowledge that he receives preferential treatment by virtue of the fact that he is endowed with "that hog's gut that hangs down between your legs" (215). Even though his sisters have spent the majority of their lives caring for him, Milkman feels nothing but contempt and disdain for Lena and Corinthians. To Lena, "he had not said more than four consecutive sentences since he was in the ninth grade" (211) because he considers her to be inconsequential and of little importance. He sees his sisters only in terms of the work they do. To him, his sisters are little more than flower makers who exist to clean up his messes. He treats them as though he were royalty and they his loyal subjects, ordered to do his bidding and to fulfill all of his wants and needs. As loyal subjects, it is their duty, their job, to look after him; therefore, he does not have to acknowledge or thank them for the services they perform.

Plum and Hannah demonstrate that sons and daughters continue to be socialized differently even after the children become adults, sometimes with children of their own. Even as adults, they never share equal household responsibilities. When Plum returns home after the war, it is simply to rest and recuperate from the stressful effects of combat. Readers are told that his

family "waited for him to tell them whatever it was he wanted them to know" (Sula 45). Yet when Hannah returns home after her husband's death, she comes "prepared to take care of it and her mother forever" (41). Because he is male, Plum has the luxury of waiting, of being able to do things on his own time, according to his own terms. As a daughter, however, Hannah is expected to care for her mother and to perform tasks around the house as they are needed. Hannah is often described while working—"carrying a coal scuttle up from the basement" (43), "pinch[ing] the tips off the Kentucky Wonders and snapp[ing] their long pods" (68), "put[ting] down some dough" (56), and "bending to light the yard fire" (75) so that she might can some fruits and vegetables. Said to have "floated in a constant swaddle of love and affection" (45), however, Plum is free to "take trips to Cincinnati and sleep for days in his room with the record player going" (45). There is never any mention of his lending a hand to help anyone around the house. Should Plum choose to contribute to the running and upkeep of the house, all the better, but if he chooses not to do so, no one will accuse him of being lazy or a bad son.

The mothers are also guilty of having double standards in terms of educational expectations for their sons and daughters. In accusing her brother of never having "solved a problem harder than fourth-grade arithmetic" (Song of Solomon 215), Lena also reveals that Ruth and Macon have lower academic expectations for Milkman than they do for his sisters. Parents encourage their daughters to do well in school and to further their education because they believe that college is the place where their daughters can snare a husband. Macon "was eager for his daughters to go to college—where they could have found suitable husbands—and one, Corinthians, did go" (69). Ruth supports her husband in encouraging the girls to go to college, for she instills in her daughters the idea that they must "marry well" (188). Corinthian's education, in Ruth's opinion, makes her a much more attractive candidate for marriage, for "her education taught her how to be an enlightened mother and wife, able to contribute to the civilization—or in her case, the civilizing of her community" (188). Yet Milkman is not required to excel in school. On the subject of their son's education, however, Ruth and Macon are

divided. Ruth believes that a college education will afford Milkman the opportunity to establish a respectable career for himself. Although she fervently hopes that her son will "not stop his education at high school, but go on to college and medical school," the only thing she does to ensure that he fulfill her wishes is to give him "a pair of silver-backed brushes . . . engraved with his initials, the abbreviated degree designation of a doctor" (69). However, Macon thinks that it would be a waste of time for Milkman to go to college. In his estimation, "college was time spent in idleness, far away from the business of life which was learning to own things . . . . [I]t was pointless for Milkman, especially since his son's presence was a real help to him in the office" (69). Because Macon and Ruth fail to agree on the importance of an education for their son, they do not motivate him to reach his full potential. Moreover, this is not a distinction Milkman shares alone. None of the sons in Morrison's fiction enroll in or graduate from college.

Unlike his sisters, Milkman is not pressured to find a spouse or to date within his family's social circle. It is perfectly acceptable for him to live the life of a carefree bachelor, one of "pussy and Honoré parties" (107). There is never any mention in the novel that either Ruth or her husband tries to persuade Milkman to marry and start a family. Nor does the stigma of dating outside of his social class follow him as it does his sisters. Once Macon discovers that Corinthians has been secretly dating Henry Porter, who resides in one of his Southside rental properties, he forbids his forty-four-year-old daughter from leaving the house and makes her quit her job. Macon does not care that at forty-four Corinthians is far from being a child and is very capable of making her own decisions. Macon sees her decision to date Porter as a disgrace to her family for she has dated outside of and beneath her social class. She has chosen a mate who is, in her mother's opinion, not worthy of dating the granddaughter of <u>the</u> Dr. Foster, the town's first black physician. Even though the odds against Corinthians finding a mate within her family's social circle increase dramatically with every passing year, her parents continue to hold her to their expectations because they are more concerned about how they will appear than with her happiness. Milkman agrees with his parents that Porter is not good enough for Corinthians, but

his opinion is influenced in part by his knowledge of Porter's involvement in the Seven Days. Because he does not make known the reason why he objects to his sister's relationship with Porter, Lena assumes that her brother adheres to the idea that there exist different codes of conduct for men and women: "But he's Southside, and not good enough for her? It's good enough for you, but not for her, right?" (274). Lena does not understand that Milkman disapproves of Corinthian's relationship with Porter because he is concerned about her physical well being and not because he thinks Porter is not good enough for his sister. However, Lena's comments are telling because they reveal that she is aware that her brother dates outside of the Honoré sect. Although Ruth and Macon are also aware that Milkman has been dating Hagar, who is not only a Southside resident, as is Porter, but also Milkman's first cousin and the granddaughter of a bootlegger, neither one of them chastises him for dating outside of their social class. Thus, Ruth and Macon both seem to subscribe to the belief that sons should be permitted more sexual freedom than daughters.

According to sociologist Patricia Hill Collins, the expectations placed on Pecola, Hannah, Lena, and Corinthians are typical, for "black daughters learn to expect to work, to strive for an education so they can support themselves, and to anticipate carrying heavy responsibilities in their families and communities because their skills are essential to their own survival and those for whom they will eventually be responsible" (Collins 183). Like Hannah, Sula and Jadine are both expected to care for their aging relatives. Their refusal to do so subjects them to criticism and vilification by their communities and families. For instance, "when word got out about Eva being put in Sunnydale, the people in the Bottom shook their heads and said Sula was a roach" (112). The people of the Bottom consider her actions to be the ultimate form of betrayal because families are supposed to care for one another. In having Eva committed to the nursing home, they feel Sula has turned her back on the woman who cared for her after her mother's death and paid for her to go to college. Even though Eva also reared the deweys, there never seems to be any expectation that they should also shoulder the responsibility for her care. Instead, judging by

Nel's question of "who's feeding the deweys and Tar Baby?" (100), it appears that Sula is supposed to look after these grown men as well. Similarly, Jadine's "leaving is figured as an abdication of responsibility towards the old folks who reared her and made sacrifices for her" (Matus 99). In telling Jadine that "a daughter is a woman that cares about where she come from and takes care of them that took care of her . . . . I don't want you to care about me for my sake. I want you to care about me for yours" (281), Ondine reveals that she considers her niece to be a failure as a daughter. In her estimation, a good daughter knows and upholds her responsibilities as a woman, which include, but are not limited to, supporting not just herself but also those who have helped her along the way because her survival is ultimately tied with theirs.

Although the daughters are required to undertake the care and responsibility of their parents and household chores while their brothers are free to come and go as they please, it is the sons who inherit the family legacy. To Hannah and Pearl, "it was manlove that Eva bequeathed her daughters" (41). Whereas her son stands to gain a home, property, and material possessions, she passes on to Hannah, who "simply refused to live without the attentions of a man" (42), a dependency on men and male companionship that is so strong that it causes her daughter to take "a steady sequence of lovers, mostly the husbands of her friends and neighbors" (42). When it comes to men, Hannah is said to have "rubbed no edges, made no demands, made the man feel as though he were complete and wonderful just as he was—he didn't need fixing—and so he relaxed and swooned in the Hannah-light that shone on him simply because he was" (43). Hannah is placating and complementary, soothing bruised egos and putting the needs of her male lovers before her own. What is sad is that Eva teaches her daughters to be independent and capable of taking care of themselves because men are not always responsible. However, she contradicts her teachings by instilling in them the belief that their lives are incomplete without men, who are worth having even if the daughters must share them with others. Despite the fact that Hannah returns home to look after her mother and the house, it is her son, "Plum, to whom [Eva] hoped to bequeath everything . . ." (45). Implicit in Eva's decision to leave everything to Plum is the

notion that a man needs to own things, for he should be the head of his family and the one to provide for its members. In passing her possessions on to her son, Eva hopes to make him into the man his father failed to be—a man who provides for his family. Even though Hannah has proven herself to be more adept at managing the household, Eva cannot leave her possessions to her daughter because she does not want to undermine Plum's masculinity. Giving all of her possessions to her daughter would, in effect, appear to be a vote of no-confidence for her only male child. However, Plum does not inherit the home his mother built on Carpenter's Road because his heroin addiction is exposed by Hannah, "who found the bent spoon black from steady cooking" (45). Ironically, Hannah most likely discovered the spoon while cleaning her brother's room.

Consequently, death thwarts Eva's attempts to pass on her property to either of her children. After learning about Plum's addiction, she kills him by dousing him with kerosene and setting him on fire. Eva considers killing Plum an act of mercy: "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" (72). Like her brother, Hannah also dies a fiery death. Hers, however, is a direct result of her own carelessness, for she gets too close to the flames and her dress catches on fire. Sadly, Plum has it easier than his sister, even in death. Whereas Plum's death is described in calm and soothing words—he perceives it as "some kind of baptism, some kind of blessing . . ." (47), Hannah's death is an agonizing and painful one. The flames that engulfed her are said to have made her dance (75) and cause her to lose her senses (76). Mr. and Mrs. Suggs extinguish the fire by dousing "the smoke-and-flame woman" with a tub of water filled with tomatoes (76). While the water has the desired effect, the results are horrendous: "The water did put out flames, but it also made steam, which seared to sealing all that was left of the beautiful Hannah Peace. She lay there on the wooden sidewalk planks, twitching lightly among the squashed tomatoes, her face a mask of agony so intense that for years the people who gathered 'round would shake their heads

at the recollection of it" (76). That "the women who washed the body and dressed it for death wept for her burned hair and wrinkled breasts as though they themselves had been her lovers" (77), the breasts and hair symbols of her femininity and beauty, suggests that Hannah's death caused people to reflect upon the woman she had been, as if to say that death erased all traces of her femininity and beauty. Death robs Hannah of her womanhood, but it restores Plum's manhood.

In Song of Solomon, Milkman, despite never proving himself capable of caring for or showing any interest in anything or anyone other than himself, also inherits his mother's legacy, and Pilate entrusts him with the task of maintaining and perpetuating their family's oral history. Both Ruth and Pilate look to Milkman to ensure that the memory of each woman survives and thrives. Because he is the only male child, the heir apparent, Milkman, provided he survives the end of the novel, will undoubtedly inherit his parents' possessions. With the exception of the fine mahogany table stained by the large watermark (11) which originally belonged to her father, Ruth has nothing of her own to pass on to her son. Thus, she feels compelled to pass on her father's legacy to Milkman by "hint[ing] strongly that he ought to consider going to medical school" (69) and giving her son her father's name—Macon Foster Dead. It never occurs to Ruth to encourage her daughters to pursue a career in medicine. Having lived for so long in the shadows of big and powerful men, first her father and then her husband, Ruth believes that the most a woman can accomplish in life is to marry a successful man and bear his children.

In comparison, Pilate's household is not as restrictive as her sister-in-law's. Whereas societal conventions and expectations bind Ruth, Lena, and Corinthians, Pilate, Reba, and Hagar live without rules and schedules. Ruth prepares dinner every night, but Pilate and her girls eat according to their whims and desires. Macon observes that "she and her daughters ate like children. Whatever they had a taste for. No meal was ever planned or balanced or served. Nor was there any gathering at the table" (29). However, Pilate and Ruth share one commonality—both women lost their mothers as children. Pilate, whose mother died giving birth to her,

explains to Ruth how it is that her mother died before she was born: "She died and the next minute I was born. But she was dead by the time I drew air. I never saw her face. I don't even know what her name was" (141). Feeling cut off, disconnected from her mother, and her father and brother, both of whom she lost within weeks of one another at the age of twelve, Pilate assumes the role of family historian. According to Wilfred D. Samuels and Clenora Hudson-Weems, authors of Toni Morrison, Pilate's "role as guide and educator—as pilot, as her name suggests—is that of griot: she is guardian of cultural and familial lore" (64). Pilate maintains records of her life. She collects rocks as souvenirs in order to remember the places to which she has traveled. She places the scrap of brown paper with her name on it in "the little brass box that belonged to her mother" and fashioned an earring "which would house her name" (167). By placing the piece of paper, which represents Pilate, in the brass box, which represents her mother, Pilate is, in essence, reestablishing the line between herself and her mother that was severed after her mother's death. The earring does what her navel would do if she had one—provide proof that she was born of a woman. In reestablishing the connection with her mother, Pilate attempts to make certain that both her mother's and her father's lines survive. It is her way of not forgetting her mother. Whereas Pilate seeks to ensure that she does not forget her mother, Jill Matus asserts that Pilate does not make certain that her daughters will remember her: "Although there is something free and exciting about her household of women, its nutritional and other eccentricities, wonderful singing, and hand-to-mouth existence, Pilate's line neither thrives nor survives . . . . [I]n the world of the novel, there are no others like her; nor does she have female descendants who will raise and possess her for their futures" (84).

Thus, it seems odd that Pilate chooses Milkman to succeed her as family griot rather than selecting Hagar, Reba, Lena, or Corinthians. However, Pilate, like Eva and Ruth, also seems to be of the opinion that boys and men should inherit the family's legacy. It appears that she planned to pass her legacy on to a male child all along. Pilate's reasoning for helping Ruth seduce Macon into reestablishing a physical relationship with her reveals that Pilate has a vested

interest in bringing Ruth and Macon together once more: "Besides, you'll get pregnant and your baby ought to be his. He ought to have a son. Otherwise this be the end of us" (125). Even then Pilate is thinking about perpetuating the family line. Macon observes that his sister "seemed more interested in this first nephew of hers than she was in her own daughter, and even that daughter's daughter" (19). Her interest in Milkman from the very beginning indicates that Pilate had an ulterior motive for helping Ruth to conceive. She needs for this boy baby to be born just as badly as does Ruth, for she fears that, without him, her family line will end and the Deads will be forgotten. Pilate is reluctant to pass her legacy on to her daughters since she does not think they are capable of perpetuating the family line. For one, "they never arrive at Pilate's level of independence or her realization that true love is unselfish, caring, and above all free" (Samuels and Hudson-Weems 74). For another, she does not consider them to be true Deads. When Milkman meets his aunt for the first time, she tells him, "Ain't but three Deads alive" (Song of Solomon 38). Her count excludes the women in her family because they are not stable or permanent fixtures on the family tree. They will eventually marry into someone else's family and give birth to children who will bear that family's surname. However, by including herself in her count—she, Macon, and Milkman are the only Deads alive—she places herself on an equal footing with her brother and nephew. In some respects, Pilate attempts to assume a masculine stance. She crossdresses—pairing her long skirts with men's shoes and caps. She shaves her head, thereby ridding herself of her hair—a sign of her femininity. She also defies societal expectations for a woman by living a nomadic life, bearing a child out of wedlock, and refusing to marry the child's father.

Regardless of her attempts to cast herself as an ambiguous figure, Pilate is still a woman; therefore, she cannot succeed as a hero. According to Patrick Bjork, author of The Novels of Toni Morrison: The Search for Self and Place Within the Community, "the symbolism of cutting her hair and the definitive establishment of her position should enable Pilate to both emulate and disarm the androcentric myth and allow her the freedom and connection to fully develop and

perpetuate her own vital community. But even within her own family, Pilate is unable to transmit her strength and vision" (98). In spite of her strength, independence, and determination, she does not possess the skills needed to complete the mission herself. Pilate misunderstands her father's posthumous messages to her. His ghost says to her "Sing, Sing." She fails to realize that her father is calling her mother's name. Instead, she mistakes his message for a command to sing. When he tells her "You can't just fly off and leave a body," she thinks that he wants her to go and reclaim the body of the man Macon killed in the cave. Pilate does not realize that "he was talking about himself. His own father flew away. He was the 'body.' The body you shouldn't fly off and leave" (Song of Solomon 333). According to Cynthia A. Davis, author of "Self, Society and Myth in Toni Morrison's Fiction," Pilate needs Milkman to complete her quest to unearth the names of those individuals who came before her and to discover her ancestral heritage because she is an incomplete hero: "She does have the independence and compassion of the hero, but her sense of mission is oddly garbled. She misinterprets her dead father's messages, mistakes his bones for someone else's, cannot complete her 'quest' without Milkman's explanation. She does the right thing, but from intuitive rather than conscious knowledge. Thus, while she embodies Morrison's values, she is not the complete hero that Milkman is, for she lacks his recognition of meaning" (38). Bjork asserts that Pilate's failure to make herself whole is caused by no fault of her own, that historically women have not been allowed to conceive and be the focus of the quest:

> Morrison clearly indicates [that] women, like Pilate or Sula, have been, throughout history, locked out of a fully integrated myth in which they are central and in which they can connect to and transmit a regenerative legacy, and therefore make themselves, and those around them, whole. The myth of heroism allows women to assist in and benefit from the quest for a self and place within the community, but it does not allow for origination; it is historically dictated in a patriarchal society, then, that Milkman play the central role in the mythic quest. (98-99)

Therefore, Pilate cannot pass on the legacy of her quest to her daughters, even if she wanted to, because it is not all hers to give since women can only assist in the quest and not create or transmit it.

The mothers' tendency to pass their legacies on to their male offspring, even though their sons, for the most part, lack the education, work ethic, and sense of responsibility of their daughters, is revealing. It suggests that Morrison, like her mother characters, believes that men and women have specific gender roles to fulfill: black women act as nurturers and culture bearers in their families and communities, while black men control the household. According to Morrison, "the men I knew called the shots, whether they were employed or unemployed" (Stepto 17). The flight motif in Morrison's novels offers further proof that she adheres to double standards for sons and daughters. Morrison asserts that all people fantasize about flying—"the literal taking off and flying into the air, which is everybody's dream" (Watkins 46). Even though Morrison claims that all people dream about flying, it is important to note that only her son characters are capable of flying without consequences.

In Morrison's works, flight is a metaphor that signifies escape. Flying, by providing a means for escape, represents freedom--absolute freedom. Through flight, individuals can leave behind "intolerable pressures and constraints" (Matus 79). They can go in search of a better way of living or a better place to live. For this reason, Robert Smith, the insurance agent, attempts, albeit unsuccessfully, to "take off from Mercy and fly away on [his] own wings" (3). Tired of the abuse and kidding inflicted upon him by the people from whom he collects insurance payments and no longer able to bear the guilt caused by his involvement in the Seven Days, Robert Smith plans to flee his problems, to spread his wings and leave his troubles behind. In the same manner, Solomon simply grew tired of the mindless and backbreaking work of involuntary slavery and the dehumanizing treatment suffered at the hands of the overseer, and he flew away on his own volition.

Although Solomon and Milkman are able to fly like birds, their flight enables them to escape an oppressive situation and to leave behind his selfish ways and his checkered past. In an interview with Mel Watkins ("Talk with Toni Morrison" 1977), Morrison states that flight in Song of Solomon is also synonymous with abandonment and desertion: "I used it not only in the African sense of the whirling dervishes and getting out of one's skin, but also in the majestic sense of a man who goes too far, whose adventures take him far away . . . black men travel, they split, they get on trains, they walk, they move" (46).

Morrison's reaction to black men's tendency to flee is surprising. She admits, in a 1976 interview with Robert Stepto entitled "Intimate Things in Place: A Conversation with Toni Morrison," to being fascinated with black men's ability to simply walk away or move on:

> Although in sociological terms that is described as a major failing of black men—they do not stay home and take care of their children, they are not there—that has always been to me one of the most attractive features about black male life. I guess I'm not supposed to say that. But the fact that they would split in a minute just delights me. It's part of that whole business of breaking ground, doing the other thing. They would leave, go someplace else. There was always that possibility. They were never—I don't say they were never, obviously there were expectations to all of this—but they didn't just let it happen, just let it happen. That's a part of the interesting magic I was talking about. (26)

Morrison's critics tend to question the lack of, to quote Nellie McKay, "steady" male characters (145), whose absence they interpret as a sign of male bashing. Yet Morrison's use of words such as "attractive," "delights," and "interesting magic" suggests that she envies, to a certain extent, but does not resent or begrudge, black men's ability to "split in a minute."

Consequently, all of Morrison's male characters are capable of flying, and the majority of them do. Although there exists some uncertainty as to the origin of his love of flying, even as a

child Milkman seems to understand that flight provides a means to escape. As a child, his fascination with flying is unwittingly attributed to Robert Smith because the insurance man's fateful attempt at flight coincides with Milkman's birth: "Mr. Smith's blue silk wings must have left their mark, because when the little boy discovered, at four, the same thing Mr. Smith had learned earlier—that only birds and airplanes could fly—he lost all interest in himself" (9). Flying offers the young Milkman an escape from his mundane existence by fueling his imagination. If he could fly, he could leave behind his sisters and "their casual malice" (10), his cruel and indifferent father, and his "insubstantial" mother (75).

Once Milkman starts to believe that humans are incapable of flight, he comes to feel as though he has no reason to live and, therefore, becomes indifferent to everyone and everything: "To have to live without that single gift saddened him and left his imagination so bereft that he appeared dull even to the women who did not hate his mother" (9). But later when he learns that "if you surrendered to the air, you could ride it" (337), Milkman learns to care not just about himself, but also about his fellow man. Whereas before he "felt used," felt that "somehow everybody was using him for something or as something" (165), he is now willing to be used. The novel concludes with Milkman poised for flight and ready to surrender his life to Guitar should his friend desire it: "'You want my life?' Milkman was shouting now. 'You need it? Here.' Without wiping away the tears, taking a deep breath, or even bending his knees—he leaped. As fleet and bright as a lodestar he wheeled toward Guitar and it did not matter which one of them would give up the ghost in the killing arms of his brother" (337). King and Mitchell assert that "Flying is a metaphor for rising above, transcending the limitations this society places on black humanity. It is the ability to love one's self with an intact soul, to love one's family and to take pride in one's heritage" (49). Milkman's newfound ability to fly, to place someone else's needs before his own, "symbolizes his ultimate actualization and freedom. He is, without a doubt, the true heir of Solomon" (Samuels and Hudson-Weems 69).

Ajax in Sula shares Milkman's love of flying. He is said to have but two loves—his mother "and after her—airplanes. There was nothing in between" (126). Unable to fly in a literal sense, Ajax learns to fly by eschewing commitment, by fleeing women who want to make him settle down. Having been reared by his mother, who gave him and his six younger brothers "absolute freedom" (126), Ajax values his mobility, his ability to come and go as he pleases. In his mind, women pose the biggest threat to his freedom. He seems less concerned, however, with their desire to settle him down than he is with their wanting him to account for his whereabouts. Sula arouses Ajax's interest because she appears to be unlike all of the other women he has ever known, with the exception of his mother. The very qualities he admires in his mother are the same he admires in Sula: "her elusiveness and indifference to established habits of behavior reminded him of his mother . . ." (127). Because the two women appear to be so much alike, Ajax believes that Sula's independence will enable her to understand how much he values his own independence and will prevent her from wanting to usurp his. Ajax discounts the fact that Sula is still a woman and, therefore, he is stunned and filled "with a mild and momentary regret" when he observes that Sula is also becoming possessive and is on the verge of pressuring him to commit to her: "Every hackle on his body rose, and he knew that very soon she would, like all of her sisters before her, put to him the death knoll question 'Where you been?'" (133). "[H]aving detected the scent of the nest" (133), Ajax determines to terminate his relationship with Sula. Refusing to be tied down, he exercises his ability to fly by fleeing his relationship with Sula and going to the air show in Dayton. As his way of saying goodbye, "he dragged her under him and made love to her with the steadiness and intensity of a man about to leave for Dayton" (134). Ajax's flight is not as majestic nor as grand as Milkman's and Solomon's, but it serves the same end as Solomon's flight—it removes him from what has become an unpleasant situation, and it restores, guarantees even, his freedom.

What is interesting is that the mothers encourage and nurture the sons' ability to fly. The reason for this is that most of the father figures in Morrison's novels are generally absent from the

home. Cholly, Plum, the deweys, Nel's children, Ajax, Guitar, Howard and Buglar are all reared by single mothers. Some of the fathers are absent due to either death, as is the case with Halle and Guitar's father, or because the men terminated relationships with their children's mother and, thus, left home when the children were still young, as is the case with BoyBoy, Jude, and Samson Fuller. BoyBoy leaves home when Plum is but an infant, and the only time he returns to Medallion for a visit is when his son is three years old. During that visit, the two of them do not develop a father-son relationship, for "BoyBoy didn't ask to see the children, and Eva didn't bring them into the conversation" (Sula 36). Those fathers who are present in the household tend to be somewhat distant and fail to form a close relationship with their sons. Cholly does not establish a relationship with Sammy because he does not know how to: "Having no idea of how to raise children, and having never watched any parent raise him, he could not even comprehend what such a relationship should be" (The Bluest Eye 160). However, Macon Dead does not establish a relationship with Milkman because his disdain for his wife and the deceitful method she employed to conceive their only son taints his feelings. It is therefore difficult for him to accept and be affectionate towards his son: "This disgust and uneasiness with which he regarded his son affected everything he did in that city. If he could have felt sad, simply sad, it would have relieved him. Fifteen years of regret at not having a son had become the bitterness of finally having one in the most revolting circumstances" (16). Without any help from the fathers, the mothers tend to do the majority of the parenting.

Because of the double standard to which mothers hold their sons and daughters, the mothers protect their sons from being overburdened by responsibilities or concerns. King and Mitchell claim that "giving a son too much or doing too much for him does not develop the strength of character and force of personality a black youth needs to cope with life's difficulties and society's miniviolences" (26). By making the sons responsible for no one, the mothers enable them to leave home, to fly the nest, at the slightest provocation or the first sign of trouble without feeling beholden to anyone. For the sons, there does not exist any conflict between their

desire to fulfill their own dreams and those of their family members because no one has ever expected them to put someone else's needs before their own. Sometimes in their efforts to teach their sons to be responsible, the mother indirectly encourages her son to fly. In The Bluest Eye, Pauline attempts to correct Sammy's behavior by pointing out his character flaws. Instead of teaching him to be "respectable" and God fearing, "into her son she beat a loud desire to run away . . ." (128).

The daughters possess the ability to fly, but, unlike their brothers, many of them are not even aware that they can because their mothers do not encourage or nurture it. As in the case of Pecola, most daughters do not fly because domestic responsibilities and societal expectations often ground them. Both Sammy and his sister, Pecola, suffer because of their parents' constant quarreling. Whereas Sammy manages to gain relief from the problems at home by running away, "Pecola, on the other hand, restricted by youth and sex, experimented with methods of endurance" (The Bluest Eye 43). Because she is a girl, she must learn to tolerate the conditions at home, which she attempts to do by alternately trying to make herself invisible and by praying for blue eyes. Needless to say, both are exercises in futility. Even at a young age, Pecola understands that running away provides the best means of escaping her mother and father, but she realizes that flight is not an option for her: "She had long ago given up the idea of running away to see new pictures, new faces, as Sammy had so often done. He never took her, and he never thought about his going ahead of time, so it was never planned" (45). Pecola needs Sammy in order to escape, but he does not think to include her on his trips. Most likely, Pecola's domestic chores interfere with her chances of joining her brother. When Sammy prepares to leave home, it is quite possible that Pecola is either going to or coming from picking up the laundry or she is in the house performing one of her many chores. Since she lacks the time to trail her brother, she cannot try to convince him to allow her to join him. Having never seen, known, or heard of a woman who has fled her responsibilities, Pecola is unaware that she, too, can fly like Sammy.

Because Morrison disapproves of women who abdicate their responsibilities to their families and communities, those daughters who do fly are criticized and even ostracized by their mothers, their contemporaries, and their communities. Morrison seems to believe that those women who turn their backs on or walk away from their families have forgotten their feminine qualities. They have lost sight of their nurturing characteristics. She accuses those women of trying to act like men. According to Morrison, most contemporary women rely upon their "sexuality rather than femininity, because that is perceived as weak" (Ruas 105). Unlike Morrison, these women do not celebrate black women's strength, their ability to survive in the face of incredible adversity and responsibility, and their ability to do several things at once: "I mean we're managing households and other people's children and two jobs and listening to everybody and at the same time creating, singing, holding, bearing, transferring the culture for generations. We've been walking on water for four hundred years" (Moyers 270).

Sula shuns societal expectations by refusing to marry and bear children because she feels that it is the only way she can be free. However, Morrison disagrees, for she opines that black women, despite their "enormous responsibilities," have always had "a certain amount of 'freedom'" (Stepto 17). Eva, Sula's grandmother, embodies the strength for which Morrison praises black women. She does not condone Sula's behavior, but she tolerated and, and in some respects, supported it by paying Sula's tuition. However, Eva considers the time her granddaughter spent away at college and living in the city pursuing her own dreams—ten years—to have been a vacation of sorts from her womanly responsibilities, but it is now time for her to become serious and act like a woman. Shortly after Sula arrives home, Eva asks her, "When you gone to get married? You need to have some babies. It'll settle you" (Sula 92), the implication being that Sula is not settled, that she is being irresponsible. Sula responds to her grandmother's question by stating, "I don't want to make somebody else. I want to make myself" (92). Her response sparks a dialogue that ends in her grandmother's criticism of her: "Selfish. Ain't no woman got no business floatin' around without no man" (92). Eva considers Sula's decision not

to marry and bear children to be selfish because she has been taught that women are called to perform these acts and for her not to do so suggests that her granddaughter does not care about anyone but herself.

Although Nel and Sula are the same age and belong to the same generation, Nel cannot comprehend Sula any more than does Eva. She, too, fails to understand her friend's desire to live on her own terms and to be free because she "knows and believes in all the laws of that community. She is the community" (Stepto 14). Because Sula refuses to conduct herself in the manner society dictates that a woman should, Nel accuses Sula of behaving like a man: "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" (Sula 142). Nel's comments suggest that she believes it perfectly acceptable for men to be independent and to make choices, but she finds Sula's actions reprehensible because she in not only acting out of turn but also out of gender. Consequently, Sula's refusal to conform causes the demise of her friendship with Nel.

Eva and Nel believe Sula to be acting like a man, but the community members perceive her rejection of motherhood and marriage as an insult. Her refusal to conform suggests to them that she feels herself too good for motherhood and marriage, that she considers their lot in life to be beneath her or as something to be scoffed at or ridiculed. As a result, the community ostracizes Sula. They label her a "bitch" (112), and the men accuse her of having sexual intercourse with white men, which the people of Medallion consider to be "an unforgivable thing—the thing for which there was no understanding, no excuse, no compassion" (112). Thus, the community, which prides itself in assisting its members during times of financial hardship, illness, and death, feels justified in rejecting Sula, refusing to come to her assistance even during her illness and subsequent death. When Sula dies, those individuals brave enough to attend her funeral do so "just to verify her being put away" (150) and not to ensure that she has a proper burial. In contrast, when Hannah died, women in the community bathed and prepared her body

for burial. Even though Hannah and Sula both engaged in affairs with married men in the community, Hannah is not ostracized because, having been married and borne a child, she is one of them.

Like their daughters, the mothers are capable of flying, but those who do fly are often considered to be crazy, or they meet disastrous ends. In Jazz, Wild flees from familial responsibility when she rejects her newborn son. Because she appears to be "too brain blasted to do what the meanest sow managed: nurse what she birthed" (Jazz 179), she is ostracized and labeled as crazy and wild. Hunter's Hunter names her Wild because, in his estimation, that is how she acts. Her refusal to conform, to accept the role of mother, confirms her craziness for the townspeople and her son, Joe, who views her as "this indecent speechless lurking insanity" (179). Why else would she refuse to care for her own child? In comparison, Sethe's flight has the opposite effect of what she intended. In a bid to keep her family intact and to prevent her children from experiencing the dehumanizing effects of slavery and suffering abuse at the hands of Schoolteacher, Sethe flees Sweet Home. The odds that Sethe, a slave woman, will successfully escape slavery are against her. According to Deborah Gray White, author of Ar'n't I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South, female slaves were less likely to become fugitives because "most runaways were between sixteen and thirty-five years old. A woman of this age was either pregnant, nursing an infant, or had at least one small child to care for" (70). Slave women with children were reluctant to run away without their children because ". . . for those fugitive women who left children in slavery, the physical relief which freedom brought was limited compensation for the anguish they suffered" (71). Escaping with children, however, "made the journey more difficult than it already was and increased the chances of capture" (71). Six months pregnant when she flees Sweet Home, Sethe has good reason to be proud that she and her children reached Ohio safely: "I did it. I got us all out. Without Halle too. Up till then it was the only thing I ever did on my own. Decided. And it came off right, like it was supposed to. We was here. Each and every one of my babies and me too" (Beloved 162).

Sethe appears to be successful at first, but her flight is not without consequences. Because she and her children are of great value to Schoolteacher, he pursues her, hoping to reclaim his lost property. Running away from Sweet Home gives Sethe a taste of freedom and strengthens her resolve not to return to Sweet Home. In her mind, death becomes the only recourse available to her. She would rather see her children dead because in death "no one could hurt them" and "they would be safe" (163). Therefore, she attempts to kill her children and succeeds in killing the "crawling already? baby girl." Instead of keeping her family intact, Sethe drives a wedge between herself and her children, who do not fully appreciate her efforts. They do not trust her, for they are afraid that whatever drove her to kill the first time could possibly motivate her to kill again. Consequently, the boys tell their sister, Denver, "die witch! stories" so that she can protect herself against their mother should she need to. Howard and Buglar both "run away by the time they were thirteen years old—as soon as merely looking in the mirror shattered it (that was the signal for Buglar); as soon as two tiny hand prints appeared in the cake (that was it for Howard)" (3). Although Sethe gains freedom for herself and her children, she pays dearly for it. Flight costs Sethe her relationship with her children.

When their sons' lives are in jeopardy, the mothers gain the use of their wings and soar vicariously through their sons. Ruth Dead flies to Pilate's home twice—both times to save Milkman's life and both times without consequence. The first time she flees after Macon punches her in the stomach, another one of his attempts to cause her to abort their unborn child. Although she was unfamiliar with the neighborhood her sister-in-law lives in and did not know the exact location of her home, "[Ruth] ran to Southside looking for Pilate" (Song of Solomon 151). After her visit with Pilate, Macon does not retaliate and "he left Ruth alone after that" (132). The second time she flees to Pilate's home after Freddie informs her "that Hagar had tried to kill Milkman six times in as many months" (130).

In Sula, by trying to prevent Plum from killing himself, Eva transforms herself into a bird and soars for just a little while. After Eva retreated to her bedroom on the third floor in 1910,

"she didn't willingly set foot on the stairs but once and that was to light a fire . . ." (37), the one which would end her son's misery along with his life. "On each landing she stopped for breath" (46) physically exhausted during her descent to Plum's room. Yet, once she reaches the final landing, she gains the ability to fly when the crutches she uses to help her walk seem in her mind to undergo a metamorphosis, transforming into wings. During this scene, Eva is compared to a heron and an eagle. Her motions are described as "swinging and swooping like a giant heron, so graceful sailing about its own habitat but awkward and comical when it folded it winds and tried to walk" (46). Plum awakens as Eva is dousing him with kerosene and mistakes his mother for a bird: "He opened his eyes and saw what he imagined was the great wing of an eagle pouring a wet lightness around him" (47). The ascent back to her room is "slow and painful," yet she continues to move like a bird.

However, when it comes to saving Hannah's life, Eva's wings are clipped and she moves once more with the "awkward and comical" (46) manner that the heron possesses when it attempts to walk. Eva springs into action immediately upon seeing Hannah's dress catch on fire: "Eva knew there was time for nothing in this world other than the time it took to get there and cover her daughter's body with her own. She lifted her heavy frame up on her good leg, and with fists and arms smashed the windowpane. Using her stump as a support on the window sill, her good leg as a lever, she threw herself out of the window" (75). Instead of flying, as she intends to do by launching herself out of the window, Eva finds herself thrashing about in the air: "Cut and bleeding she clawed the air trying to aim her body toward the flaming, dancing figure" (76). In spite of her efforts, "she missed and came crashing down some twelve feet from Hannah's smoke" (76). Gone is the graceful "swinging and swooping" (47) she possessed on the night she journeyed down to Plum's room. Eva jumps out of a third floor window, risking life and limb, only to fall short of her target. It seems as though Fate has decided to play a cruel joke on the mother, for all of her efforts to save her daughter end unsuccessfully: "Stunned and still conscious, Eva dragged herself toward her firstborn, but Hannah, her senses lost, went flying out

of the yard gesturing and bobbing like a sprung jack-in-the-box" (76). Even though there is no way humanly possible for Eva, who is missing a leg, to catch her daughter, she refuses to give up: "They found her on her stomach by the forsythia bushes calling Hannah's name and dragging her body through the sweet peas and clover that grew under the forsythia by the side of the house" (77). Eva's attempt at heroism ends tragically: "Mother and daughter were placed on stretchers and carried to the ambulance . . . . Hannah died on the way to the hospital" (77).

The son in Morrison's works is given an incredible gift. He is allowed to fly without fear of being shunned by his family and community. As a result, it appears that the son receives preferential treatment, that he has more value than his sister. I do not dispute that the son is privileged, but I think that he is coddled for a different reason. Implicit in Morrison's novels is the belief that women are stronger than men. Morrison's respect and admiration for black women's ability to create, sing, hold, bear, and walk on water carry over to her novels. The daughter is given chores and held to higher expectations than the son because the mother feels that she can handle it. The mother does not place the same expectations on her son because she, to quote King and Mitchell, "seeks to shield her son—seen as more precious than anyone or anything else in the world—from legitimate correction from others and rarely corrects him herself" (15).

Therefore, the mothers share Morrison's sentiment that boys require different mothering strategies than daughters. According to Morrison, "Boys' demands on a mother were very primitive; they don't really care what I was about, they wanted service and attention and, at different points in their lives, conversation. They wanted me to be there as a base line from which they operated. They wanted different kinds of intimacy—it was all very stranger" (Lester 47-48). In Sula, Ajax's mother seems neglectful of her offspring. The mother seems to share Morrison's belief that boy children need space, for she gives them "absolute freedom," which, we are told, is "known in some quarters as neglect" (Sula 126). Yet, Ajax and his six brothers clearly love their mother, an "evil conjure woman" (126), and they "worship" the ground she walks on.

It is their joy to do her bidding, "to bring her the plants, hair, underclothing, fingernail parings, white hens, blood, camphor, pictures, kerosene and footstep dust that she needed, as well as to order Van Van, High John the Conqueror, Little John to Chew, Devil's Shoe String, Chinese Wash, Mustard Seed and the Nine Herbs from Cincinnati" (126). Ajax and his brothers worship their mother because she gives them space and allows them to run free, yet they know that they can always return home to her when they need attention.

For the most part, all of Morrison's mothers take a relaxed approach to rearing their sons. They do not crowd their sons; rather they give them the space to come and go as they please. The mothers encourage their sons to soar, to fly, even though the mothers' ability to fly is limited. In addition to symbolizing self-actualization, freedom, rising above, transcending limits, and loving one's self and one's family, flight is also a sign of both the son's and the mother's success. The son achieves flight due to the efforts of the women in his life (for example, mothers, grandmothers, aunts, women in the community, and sisters). That the son flies means that the mother succeeded at her job. Morrison reveals that in helping Milkman rid himself of "the shit that weighs you down" (Song of Solomon 179), Pilate enables him to see the influence women wield in his life: "By the same token, Milkman is in a male, macho world and can't fly, isn't human, isn't complete until he realizes the impact that women have made in his life" (Ruas 107). It is then that Milkman comes to understand just how self-centered he has been: "With two exceptions, everybody he was close to seemed to prefer him out of their life. And the two exceptions were both women, both black, both old. From the beginning, his mother and Pilate had fought for his life, and he had never so much as made either of them a cup of tea" (331). All that the mothers ask for in return is that their sons recognize and show appreciation for the fact that some woman gave birth to, nourished, housed, clothed, and protected them. The mothers, in turn, will give their sons their wings and make them into complete human beings. In doing so, the old adage "if you love someone, set him free" holds true, and the son returns to his mother.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

This summer I am working for the University of Georgia's Upward Bound program teaching English Composition to rising tenth, eleventh, and twelfth graders. All of the children in this particular program are African-American, and a good number of them are being raised by single mothers. For their final project, I asked the students to present their favorite poem or song to their classmates and to explain how this work inspires them, reminds them of someone or something, or influences their actions. In my twelfth grade class, a male student chose Langston Hughes's "Mother to Son" because, according to him, the poem reminds him of his relationship with his mother, who encourages him to keep "a-climbin' on" (ln 9). A male student in my eleventh grade class selected the song "Love," by Rhythm and Blues recording artist Musiq Soulchild, because it made him think of his mother, who taught him to love everyone. Also, in my tenth grade class, another male student did his presentation on Boyz II Men's "A Song for Mama," which states, "You were there for me to love and care for me when skies were gray. / Whenever I was down you were always there to comfort me. / No one else can be for me what you have been to me. / You will always be the girl in my life for all times. / Mama, you know I love you." The student explained to the class that he chose this song because he loves his mother. Although the students in the Upward Bound program are fifteen, sixteen, and seventeen years old, an age when most teenagers no longer feel comfortable with expressing their love for their parents in front of their peers, none of the boys seemed to mind or feel ashamed. They talked proudly of the things their mothers had done for them and of their feelings for their mothers.

I have encountered grown men who have been just as comfortable speaking about how much they love their mothers. One of my colleagues in the Upward Bound program, a black male in his early thirties, talks about his mother all the time. He is convinced that black mothers are the most powerful people on the earth because they have the ability to mold and shape a black man's life. Similarly, my father and his brothers talk of their late mother with affection. They were very protective of her when she was alive, and they would have fought anyone who dared to say a disparaging word about her. To this day, my father still bristles if someone even suggests that his mother is anything less than a saint, which is what he and his brothers consider her to be. Likewise, Ernest J. Gaines often talks of his late maternal great aunt, Augusteen Jefferson, in the same manner. In April of 2001, I had the good fortune to meet Gaines and talk with him about his aunt. During our talk, Gaines stated that he never heard Jefferson complain, even though she had a hard life. For this reason, he makes his characters strong and capable of surviving whatever obstacles they encounter. Of his characters, Gaines stated, "if you can't take it, you know you shouldn't be one of my characters."

Since beginning this study of Gaines's and Morrison's literary portrayals of black mother-son relationships, I have had many opportunities to speak with many people--men and women, blacks and whites, young and old people, individuals within and outside of the academy--about my subject. When people discover that I am studying black mother-son relationships, their reactions are almost always the same. Most of them state that they find the subject intriguing and feel that it needs to be given more critical or scholarly attention. Inevitably, the person with whom I am speaking will ask me why there is a lack of scholarship on black mothers and sons, and I am forced to admit that I am no closer to having an answer now than I was when I first began; I simply do not know. When I turn the question on the person I am talking to, he or she always seems to be at as great a loss as I am.

What I do know, however, is that people outside of the academy talk about black mother-son relationships often. While driving to school one morning, I turned to the morning show on

V-103, an urban radio station broadcasting out of Atlanta, Georgia, and I overheard the end of a discussion between the disc jockey, Frank Ski, and the guest for that day, whose name I did not catch. The two men had been talking about how they, like my colleague in the Upward Bound program, believe that black women wield considerable power because they are in a position to raise their sons to be the kind of men women want as mates. Perhaps I am simply more aware of them now that I have been studying these relationships, but it seems as though I can no longer turn on the television or radio or pick up a book or magazine without seeing, hearing, or reading about a black man talking about his relationship with his mother.

The literary works of Gaines and Morrison reflect the attitudes and opinions of individuals in the black community who believe that black women can show their sons how to be men. Gaines's mother characters meet with more success than Morrison's because he tends to romanticize his portrayals of black women and motherhood. In his literary works, black mothers always want and love their children. With the exception of Johanna Rey, in In My Father's House, all of his mother characters are strong—physically, mentally, and emotionally—and his older mother characters are all deeply religious. Also, Gaines's mother characters prove to be more than capable of dealing with the difficulties and challenges that accompany single motherhood, and, like Augusteen Jefferson, they do so without complaining. Although their efforts to teach their sons how to be men meet with resistance and hostility sometimes, the mothers persist and eventually triumph. Like Gaines, Morrison acknowledges and praises black women's strength and resilience. However, her depictions of black mothers are not always flattering. In fact, some of her portrayals can be disturbing. As a single mother, Morrison knows personally that motherhood for black women is not always fulfilling, that it can be a stifling experience for some women. Therefore, she refuses to make her mothers perfect. As a result, some of her mothers succeed, while others fail. Some of them abandon or neglect their children, refusing to rear their own progeny, and some of them make bad or ill-advised decisions.

Gaines and Morrison may differ in their portrayals of the mothers, but it is clear that the sons are of the utmost importance. Seen as more precious than anyone or anything, sons are privileged over husbands, daughters, and mothers even. They are educated, and they are encouraged to fly. They are entrusted with preserving and perpetuating the family's name, history, and legacy. It is the mothers' hope that the sons will accomplish that which their fathers failed or were unable to do. When reading the novels of Gaines and Morrison, one witnesses the passing of the torch. In teaching their sons how to stand up for their beliefs and family members, the mothers prepare the sons to succeed them as culture bearers and to become the heads of their families and leaders in their communities.

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