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Goodness in Toni Morrison's Black Female Characters

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Goodness in Toni Morrison's Black Female Characters

by

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Abstract

In August 2019, the world lost an unwavering voice that demanded truth, love, and beauty. The death of Toni Morrison was deeply saddening. Morrison's artifacts center black women and removes the shadow of whiteness that has stifled black lives for many years. Toni Morrison's novels have often been read as presenting something beloved, lost, and familiar to the African-American reader. Her ability to progressively and pragmatically write for black women and about black women fosters my professional and personal growth. Particularly, the novels *The Bluest Eye, Sula,* and *Beloved* illustrate Morrison's awareness of the black female voice. In exploring the discourse around the *goodness* of black women, Morrison's literature offers the best possible response.

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Especially helpful to me during this time were my in-laws, my mother, my sisters, and my graduate friends. To my in-laws, thank you for raising your granddaughters with us with encouragement and love; my mother, thank you for still raising your adult daughter with compassion and unwavering love; my sisters, thank you for listening to me cry, weep, and scream; and lastly, my graduate friends, thank you for sharing the pain and joy through it all.

United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) published a startling statistic October 2018, "16 million girls will never set foot in a classroom and women account for two thirds of the 750 million adults without basic literacy skills" (UNESCO, 2018). When I was a little girl, a black-Somali-Muslim refugee little girl, earning a master's degree in English studies never seemed imaginable. However, reading became my vehicle to success. Books buried my failures and inspired my successes. I am forever grateful to Toni Morrison's artifacts to this world and her ability to foster the identity of black women. I am blessed to know Toni Morrison's work.

African proverb that says, “If you educate a man, you educate an individual. If you educate a woman, you educate a nation.”

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Introduction

"What does it mean to be a *good* black woman?"

Recently, I was enjoying a night out in Uptown-Minneapolis with four professional black female friends. Quickly, our friendly conversation turned into a debate regarding the role of black women in the lives of black men, particularly in marriage and society. The school psychologist in our group developed her argument explaining generational trauma, healthy relationships, and complementary relations. The social studies teacher gave a history lesson on slavery and the Jim Crow era, the Centracare hospital nurse focused on sexual healing, and the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* reporter highlighted police shootings and the need to save black men by focusing on black women. Bewildered, I listened. The reporter, a religious conservative, continued and suggested a book to cement her point, *God's Gift: How to Be a Good Black Woman to a Strong Black Man*, by Angela Freeman. My reporter friend analyzed and preached primarily on how *good* black women are crucial to the success of black men and the black community. But, as a literature teacher and Master's candidate, I attempted to define what it means to be a *good* black woman. For the hour drive back home, I pondered that question. I came home that evening, began research, and read reviews on Freeman's book. My question got louder and louder with each review I read on Amazon:

> Rykiel Turner writes, "If you have indeed found yourself on the less appealing, less inviting or less attractive end of the spectrum of partners, here is a set of tools to assist you on your journey to 'redemption'."
>
> MNM writes, "Angela Freeman delivers a no-holds barred reality check to Black women! We all know what our flaws are, but it's rare when an author provide a guide to improve them! She forces the reader to start with the woman in the mirror."

> Amazon Customer writes, “Some women need to be reminded how to be a WOMAN for their man, for their home and not a ‘bad bi**h.’”
>
> Lyoness writes, “It spells out in easy, plain, & simple words and behaviors how to be the best woman, mother, & wife possible.” (Freeman, 2013)

Freeman’s title exposes the ways in which the standard of *goodness* is imposed nationally and globally on black women. Her title compares the *goodness* of black women to the *strength* of black men, therefore, the comparative analysis dismisses black women while praising black men. The comparative analysis reinforces traditional views of a man's strength, referring to his physical prowess. Society contrasts physical power against the emotional state, challenges, or triumphs of women. Generally, the title serves as a reminder of the contradictory attitude held toward the emotional and mental *goodness* of women. However, the conversation my professional female friends and I had, the ideas behind the title in Freeman’s book, and these reviews reminded me of the conflicting disposition and the unconscious bias held toward black women by society. In addition, all three notions appear to require the *goodness* of black women at the expense of the black man, the black community, and the white community. And, moreover, assumptions are explicit in movies, plays, music, and news media.

Historically, and too often, the *goodness* of black women has been a topic of discourse. Conversations and reviews about what it means to be a *good* black woman are not uncommon. In a year-long study of articles, Shanara Reid-Brinkley acknowledges the struggle for black women to achieve being *good*, “‘Real’ black women are constructed as ‘queens,’ or women who are deserving of respect. The ‘queen’ identity recycles the ideology of the ‘cult of true womanhood’ in which women who perform their genders appropriately are placed on a pedestal as representatives of the purity and goodness of the race” (13). As a result, the marginalization and

alienation of black women from the popular definition of purity, black women often refashion their identity to attain some relevance in society. Associating with the 'queen' image illustrates black women's awareness of the narrative and desire to change the narrative.

European colonization and cultural imperialism have contributed to the marginalization and the ill-informed socio-cultural perception of black women. My thesis will attempt to investigate Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye, Sula,* and *Beloved* to find a literary response to the question, "What does it mean to be a *good* black woman?"

Toni Morrison, like many other African American female writers, for centuries, has illuminated the black woman's experience. Through literature, black women have illustrated the ugliness of slavery, the whiteness of Jim Crow America, and the fruit of the feminist movements. Black female writers—novelists, poets, journalists, playwrights, essayists, social commentators, and feminist theorists—have found exceptional techniques to inform, inspire, and instruct readers of all ages and races. Morrison's *The Bluest Eye, Sula,* and *Beloved* spotlight how white culture, black culture, and history impose ambivalent standards of *goodness* on three particular black women. The struggle of the black female characters inspire and instruct readers to find a possible answer to the question, "What does it mean to be a *good* black woman?"

The moral *goodness* of black women is and have always been predetermined by the favorability of whiteness over blackness. Unfortunately, for centuries, the idealized perception of *goodness* has been perpetuated by religion and media through images of masculinity and a blonde-haired blue-eyed appearance. Historical stereotypes of black women's moral deficiency has distorted the projection of black women in art, literature, and music. As noted by Eric Hairston in *The Ebony Column: Classics, Civilization, and the African American Reclamation of the West*:

> African American women were beset by a multitude of problems. The mythology of depravity and benightedness distanced them from their white, Victorian counterparts and thus helped exclude them from larger discussions of women's rights. Moreover, the same mythology encouraged white men's predation and abuse of black women, while encouraging black men to look to Victorian womanhood as the exemplar of feminine beauty and virtue. (Hairston 123)

According to Hairston, the *goodness* of black women is blurred by the nation's dehumanizing history of slavery, stories of sexual promiscuity or sexual abuse, and the classic image of the white Victorian lady. Such racist interpretations of black women's *goodness* paved the way for today's gender biased opinion of black women. Too often, globally and systemically, society endorses the tragic narrative of black women as unattractive, not white enough, unwed, angry, and unlovable. The black female deficiency narrative is often a bestseller and an obsession for the media. In 2012, actor D. L. Hughley ranted on *NPR* for 17 minutes about black women stating, "I've never met an angrier group of people. Like black women are angry just in general. Angry all the time" (Martin 2012). In addition, Steve Harvey capitalizes on black women by writing self-help books on intimacy, commitment, love, and relationships, most notably in his 2009 book, *Act Like a Lady, Think Like a Man*. Such patriarchal narratives pressure black women to compromise autonomy in favor of black men. The directive "think like a man" to find happiness and fulfillment denotes a struggle in agency, a struggle deeply rooted in slavery and the image of the white Victorian lady.

The U.S. Census Bureau, in 2013, estimated the black female population in the United States at 23.5 Million ("Black Demographics"). Being part of two marginalized groups, black women, like Morrison, use language and storytelling to find autonomy and emotional agency in

order to disrupt the space of otherness. Black women are always crafting their existence within the oppressive socially-constructed reality of maleness and whiteness. Fortunately, Morrison's beautifully crafted novels center black women, allowing readers to question the perspective of history and patriarchal norms. Lastly, staying within the black community and culture, Morrison redefines the *goodness* of black women by reinventing narrative styles, empowering the neighborhood prostitutes, and infusing ghostly elements.

Morrison's novels aim to illustrate the formative experiences of black women in American society. The narrative of such experiences seeks to develop readers' psychological awareness through the use of dehumanizing experiences, mainly experiences of slavery, rape, and alienation. *Sula, The Bluest Eye,* and *Beloved* spotlight African American female protagonists who lose the struggle against the double oppression of gender and race. Like most black women in a patriarchal society, the women fall victim and fail to become *good* black women. Morrison assigns moral interpretation of their failures to oppositional characters. For example, in *The Bluest Eye,* moral authority rests on Claudia, who as eyewitness, narrates Pecola's rape. In *Sula,* the exiled character whom the novel is named after dies without attaining moral goodness, while Sula's traditional friend, Nel, finds a more hopeful ending. Lastly, Sethe, the young adult runaway slave in *Beloved*, experiences despair and is unable to attain *goodness* compared to her surviving child, Denver, who is able to fashion an optimistic future based on her goodness. Morrison suggests that *goodness* always succeeds, so I aim to assess *what is good* in Claudia, Nel, and Denver?

Evident in Lawrence Kohlberg's 1958 *Structural Theory of Moral Development*, conventional *goodness* is often oriented in social obligations and conformity (Zhang and Zhao 161). Thus, Morrison suggests *goodness* depends on maintaining social order. Pivotal to the

structure of society, Morrison explores the ties between mother and daughter. In *Beloved*, as well as *Sula,* black women of all ages struggle to fulfill a basic level of *goodness* due to their gendered and racialized society. Moments of *goodness* are explored in the following passages:

> "'I had milk,"' she said. 'I was pregnant with Denver but I had milk for my baby girl. I hadn't stopped nursing her when I sent her on ahead with Howard and Buglar.' Now she rolled the dough out with a wooden pin. 'Anybody could smell me long before he saw me. And when he saw me he'd see the drops of it on the front of my dress. Nothing I could do about that. All I knew was I had to get my milk to my baby girl. Nobody was going to nurse her like me. Nobody was going to get it to her fast enough, or take it away when she had enough and didn't know it. Nobody knew that she couldn't pass her air if you held her up on your shoulder, only if she was lying on my knees. Nobody knew that but me and nobody had her but me. I told that to the women in the wagon. Told them to put sugar water in cloth to suck from so when I got there in a few days she wouldn't have forgot me. The milk would be there and I would be there with it." (Morrison 19)

This section shows Sethe's maternal instincts. Adamant about nurturing her children, this moment sheds light on the profound effect of motherhood on women. Sethe is driven by her natural instinct as a mother, appearing to only care about getting milk to her baby. Her desire to show strong familial ties emphasizes motherhood as a form of *goodness*. In addition, black women are chained by the social construction of *goodness* in relation to beauty and whiteness: "Pecola turned to find the front door and saw Jesus looking down at her with sad and unsurprised eyes, his brown hair parted in the middle, the gay paper flowers twisted around his face" (Morrison 92-93). This section demonstrates how Pecola feels devalued and insecure about her existence. Her dissatisfaction and disappointment with life on earth and in heaven is apparent by

the allusion to Jesus. The "unsurprised eyes" of Jesus imply the moralizing majority as white and male. As a result, the moral judgments of white Christianity vilify black women and restrict Pecola, and black women in general, to a life of tribulation on earth. Lastly, the actions of black women are read differently than those of white women. In *Sula,* Morrison illustrates two types of black women: the conformist and the nonconformist. However, Morrison complicates the *goodness* between the two in the end:

> "How you know? Sula asked.
>
> "Know what?" Nel still wouldn't look at her.
>
> "About who was good. How you know it was you?"
>
> "What you mean?"
>
> "I mean maybe it wasn't you. Maybe it was me" (Morrison 146).

Here, Sula questions Nel's *goodness,* shedding light on the unwritten laws of customs and tradition in society. For centuries, black women have struggled with expectations and responsibilities that compromise their health and wellbeing. As noted by Sula, on her death bed, the "maybe" dismisses all social standards and reshapes perceptions of Nel and the reader.

I have organized my thesis into three chapters. Each chapter will evaluate themes of *goodness* in each novel: *Sula, The Bluest Eye,* and *Beloved*. Chapter one focuses on the three novels' oppositional forces and influences. Chapter two unpacks black female morality and theories around gender, sex, and femininity. And lastly, chapter three explores Morrison's approach to black female identity and black culture in relation to her overall definition of black female *goodness*.

In chapter one, "Goodness taught and learned," I focus on how culture influences perception and action, ranging from individual decisions to interpersonal interactions, and shapes

a society's worldview. Black women struggle to perform cultural standards of purity, because the culture's perception of *goodness* is overshadowed by the whiteness of history and media. Morrison mobilizes her black female characters through emotional agency, mainly to refute cultural influences. Emotional agency is an active engagement with power. Claudia, Nel, and Sethe, separated by time and space, unite in their fierce response to power. For example, Claudia narrates her fight against the white standards of consumerism and beauty, a powerful force that infiltrates her black life; Nel willingly pursues a life of conformity to avoid tragedy and chaos; and lastly, Sethe sacrifices motherhood to save her daughter from slavery. In addition to evaluating the "triple consciousness" of black women in comparison to W. E. B. Du Bois' "double consciousness," this chapter analyzes marketing and societal pressures through the *Clark Doll Experiment,* an experiment done by Dr. Kenneth Clark and his wife Mamie. In addition, Barry Brummet's *A Rhetoric of Style*, particularly the rhetorical moralization of white culture, unpacks the influence of white aesthetics in *The Bluest Eye*. Further, I evaluate patriarchal dominance in *Sula* to help demonstrate the struggle of the past and present for black women. Finally, the lack of the traditional mother in *Beloved* brings to the surface discourse around generational trauma and rememory.

In chapter two, "An Autonomous Journey to *Goodness*," I demonstrate how Morrison spotlights the psychological pain of whitewashing on black readers and writers. In her fragmented storytelling approach, Morrison denies the presence of whiteness in her literature. Chapter two focuses on the main characters, Sula, Pecola, and Sethe, who receive the greatest amount of textual space in each novel. Morrison underlines the intrinsic desire for autonomy in black women. In this chapter, I explore *The Female Bildungsroman in English* by Laura Fuderer in connection to Morrison's suppressed and defeated black female characters. Morrison's

antiheroine approach to female bildungsroman challenges T. S. Eliot's essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent" by drawing on race and gender. And, with an unsettling ending in each novel, Morrison reinvents the typical female bildungsroman to capture the struggle of black women. For example, Morrison's black female protagonists are victims who mature and develop despite physical abuse, including rape and incest, alienation, and endless emotional trauma.

In this second chapter I also consider how Morrison empowers the good and the bad female characters with space and voice, especially in contrast to the male characters. Accordingly, in any given culture, women are always compared to men in terms of power, character, and triumph. The battle of the sexes argument was made popular by Sigmund Freud, who argued, "Women oppose change, receive passively, and add nothing of their own" (2). The 1925 paper entitled, "The Psychical Consequences of the Anatomic Distinction between the Sexes" labels women as passive and men as active. Freud implies that the masculine nature of "activity" makes men more whole, especially against the feminine nature of "passivity." However, Morrison constructs black female characters who are void of stereotypical attributes of "femaleness." Such voids prevent them from achieving *goodness*; for example, Sula actively denounces the conventional standards of marriage by sleeping around, Sethe kills her own child, and Pecola forgoes reality and yields to self-deception. The answer to what it means to be a *good* black women is dependent on Morrison's redefinition of the bildungsroman and gender theory.

In chapter three, "Storytelling as a form *Goodness*," I summarize Morrison's inspirations for storytelling and literature. For example, the great Zora Neale Hurston, Modernism, the Harlem Renaissance, and the Great Depression move the plot of Morrison's novels. Morrison is often signaled out for her prolific and traumatizing stories. Cornel West has called Morrison "The great storyteller, the great literary artist, of black folk. She's our Tolstoy, our Joyce, our

Walter Scott" (Leitch 900). In her essay "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature," Morrison unpacks topics related to identity, race, institutional studies, and the canon tradition. In her Nobel Prize acceptance speech, she expressed her firm belief in the power of language to challenge the dominant culture:

> The systematic looting of language can be recognized by the tendency of its users to forgo its nuanced, complex, midwifery properties for menace and subjugation. Oppressive language does more than represent violence; it is violence; does more than represent the limits of knowledge; it limits knowledge. Whether it is obscuring state language or the faux-language of mindless media; whether it is the proud but calcified language of the academy or the commodity driven language of science; whether it is the malign language of law-without-ethics, or language designed for the estrangement of minorities, hiding its racist plunder in its literary cheek – it must be rejected, altered and exposed. It is the language that drinks blood, laps vulnerabilities, tucks its fascist boots under crinolines of respectability and patriotism as it moves relentlessly toward the bottom line and the bottomed-out mind. Sexist language, racist language, theistic language – all are typical of the policing languages of mastery, and cannot, do not permit new knowledge or encourage the mutual exchange of ideas. (Morrison 1993)

Morrison examines African American history through language; her novels represent individual lives with psychological and aesthetic details that illustrate the relationship between language and power. Morrison makes the invisible visible, for instance through the character Sethe, the beaten and battered slave mother, and through Sula, the "dangerous female" who is "outlawed, unpolicing, uncontained and uncontainable" (156). Finally, the ghost element of *Beloved,* appears to be an effort to soften the blow of reality, especially the legacy of slavery. Finally,

Morrison challenges readers to embrace a broader understanding of goodness in these antithetical characters.

Malcom X in 1962 said, “The most disrespected person in America is the black woman. The most unprotected person in America is the black woman. The most neglected person in America is the black woman.” Black women struggle to find a place in society; however, their resilience does not go unnoticed. Morrison, in her disruption of a largely white-male dominated literary domain, faced down critics one novel at a time. In 1973, Sara Blackburn, a *New York Time*s writer and critic, reviewed *Sula*: “in spite of its richness and its thorough originality, one continually feels its narrowness. … Toni Morrison is far too talented to remain only a marvelous recorder of the black side of provincial American life” (Blackburn 1973). Blackburn’s rebuke of Morrison’s art propelled Morrison to her award-winning novel, *Beloved*. Unfortunately, her award gained the negative attention of black men, mainly the African American poet, musician, and cultural critic Stanley Crouch, who told the *Washington Post*:

> “I hope this prize inspires her [Morrison] to write better books…‘Beloved’ was a fraud. It gave a fake vision of the slave trade… ‘The Bluest Eye’ was her best. I thought something was going to happen after that. Nothing did.” (Streitfeld 1993)

The subjugation resulting from such disrespect and doubt occurs too often in literature and beyond for black women. Morrison not only proved her *greatness* with *Sula*, *The Bluest* Eye, and *Beloved*, but her work continues to empower young black women by connecting *goodness* to emotional agency, autonomy, and storytelling.

As I conclude my master’s thesis on Morrison’s literary response to my inquiry, I can hear Morrison in her intimate, confident, assertive voice saying, “What’s the world for you if you can’t make it up the way you want it?” (Beavers 2010). Toni Morrison is, for a group of five

professional black women debating their role in the lives of black men and society, the best mediator and the greatest voice of reason.

Chapter 1: Morrison, "*Goodness* Taught and Learned"

Hegemonic values evolve in the same way biological organisms evolve. Such ideas are known as the social aspects of human life, or culture. In exploring ideas of *goodness* in popular culture, society steers its members toward the great values of mankind: truth, good and beauty. The influence of culture does not fall on any fixed entity; however, it has a shared meaning of collective and individual understanding of the self and others that includes stories, religion, media, rituals, and language. Unlike biological evolution, culture can be intentionally taught and thus spread from one group of people to another. One of the mystical forces governing culture is literature, through its use of language. Inconspicuously, the exclusive interests of the literary canon have framed American society as white and male, and taught the superiority of white aesthetics. However, Toni Morrison stands as an explicit contrast to white aesthetics in her novels. Morrison, in her novels *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, and *Beloved,* attempts to centralize black life and culture in contemporary culture through her black female characters. In fact, in her Nobel speech, Morrison shared her view on literature: "Ladies and Gentleman: narrative has never been merely entertainment for me. It is, I believe, one of the principal ways in which we absorb knowledge" (Morrison "The Nobel Lecture"). In her conscious effort, Morrison teaches and reteaches complicated topics pertaining to black women in white culture. According to Cynthia Davis' essay, "Self, Society and Myth in Toni Morrison's Fiction," "All of Morrison's characters exist in a world defined by its blackness and by the surrounding white society that both violates and denies it" (Davis 2). Meaning, the black female characters develop social identities that are based on shared understanding and expectations. Despite social identity, Morrison comments on *goodness* by spotlighting the emotional agency of Nel, Claudia, and Sethe over the power that dominate their life and culture.

Emotional agency is an active engagement with power. Emotional agency is an individual's ability to act upon and influence outcomes either to benefit or undermine external forces. In the chapter "Emotion and Agency," Jan Slaby and Philipp Wuschner define emotional agency as active participation with culture, "Emotions unfold in the *act*-they are not felt responses to prior and independent reactions or actions nor clearly separate causal entities or events prior to our actions, but acted-out engagements with the world" (Slaby and Wuschner 212). Emotional agency involves interactive cognitive abilities and affective traits that promote awareness of the self, others, and future possibilities. Slaby and Wuschner emphasize that emotional agency is the capacity to act independently in response to life and culture. Morrison's female characters, mainly Nel, Claudia, and Sethe, embody emotional agency in a culture that demands black women to be white, submissive, and conforming.

The cultural perceptions of black women that stem from slavery and the implementation of Western colonialism are difficult for narration. Such overwhelming expectations and norms perpetuate negative stereotypes of black women, particularly the *goodness* of black women. Morrison sets out to tell the stories of "the people who in all literature were always peripheral-little black girls who were props, background...those people were never center stage and those people were me" (Russell 235). With consistent powerful language, Morrison creates black female characters and covers topics of racial prejudice, sexism, neglect, abuse, and systemic oppression, illustrating the formative experiences of black women in contemporary American society. Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, and *Beloved* spotlight how white culture, patriarchal norms, and history impose ambivalent standards on black women. Under extreme pressures, Morrison's black female characters attempt to change their circumstances by taking ownership of the cultural expectations placed on women to attain *goodness* in the end. However, Morrison

does not trust one character to narrate. Through the other characters Claudia, Nel, and Sethe, Morrison attempts to expose complex and multifaceted perspectives rooted in white culture, patriarchal norms, and history. For example, the complexities of culture are most evident in Morrison's void of a consistent narrator in her novels: "Morrison's preference for omniscient narrators seems puzzling at first. After all, the moral and epistemological authority such narrators usually embody is a focus of Morrison's attack" (Rainwater 3). In essence, the omniscient narrator provides images that draw in the reader's mind to the trauma of poverty, white superiority, and slavery. In addition, Morrison's changing point of view allows the reader to gain a fuller portrait of each black woman's full capacity-social disparities, physical barriers, and mental hurdles.

Contextually, Morrison published *The Bluest Eye* in 1970, during the emergence of Black aesthetics. For centuries, the high esteem and acceptance of white aesthetics has made blackness synonymous to ugliness and poverty. However, during the publication of *The Bluest Eye* America was starting to see a growing black pride movement. According to Rodney Brown, "'Black Aesthetic' was used to describe works of art, literature, poetry, music, and theater that centralized black life and culture" (Frederick 2016). In essence, the burden of white aesthetics created the black aesthetic movement, mobilizing African American writers, musicians, poets, and artist to spotlight the beauty of blackness. And, Morrison's focus on black characters, black culture, and the black community aligns with the 1970's black pride movement.

In *The Bluest Eye,* Morrison spotlights the sad reality of black girls who are subjugated to the image of white as beauty, initiating conversation around black aesthetics. Right away Morrison counters the dominant white culture imposed on black people in the opening pages of the novel. Morrison opens the novel with three versions of "Dick and Jane" to illustrate Western

ideology. Using a passage from "Dick and Jane," a book that represents the perfect white family from the suburbs, Morrison illustrates a Standard American English version, a version without capitalization or punctuation, and spaceless-run version (Morrison 1). In the reading of "Dick and Jane," Jane is depicted as the prototype of the middle-class girl, who gets along with her brother, has loving parents, and has natural beauty, or "blue eyes." The allusion to "Dick and Jane" spotlights the emblem of white aesthetics. Morrison wants the reader to understand the "Dick and Jane" images circulating to the black neighborhoods serve to internalize racism for young learners. For example, the main character, Pecola, desperately longs for blue eyes like Jane, "Every night, without fail, she prayed for blue eyes" (Morrison 45). Because white aesthetics is so pervasive in literature and school reading material, Pecola longs for the white definition of beauty in mainstream society. In addition, Pecola attributes her ugliness to her blackness; she regularly stares into her mirror "trying to discover the secret of ugliness, the ugliness that made her ignored or despised at school, by teachers and classmates alike" (Morrison 45). Pecola, a little black girl, tries to negate her blackness and find acceptance with a white aesthetic. Although Pecola is the main character, Morrison gives authority and voice to Claudia. Claudia rejects white aesthetics as the only standard of beauty by expressing her frustration with whiteness; she dismembers the white doll, "I destroyed the white baby dolls" (Morrison 22). Morrison contrasts Pecola to Claudia, who accepts her blackness and denies whiteness. The power of voice and narration is how Morrison imposes black aesthetics for black people. The moral elevation of Claudia insinuates Morrison's preference for the black aesthetic as stylistically and morally *good.*

Morrison shows that because black women are susceptible to the charges of being aesthetically unpleasant, the moralization of style, as covered by Barry Brummet in *A Rhetoric of*

Style, can be an instrument of domination. Brummett states, "The moralization of style is helped by the stylization of morality... religion [has] become a private leisure-time pursuit purchased in the market like any other consumer culture lifestyle" (Brummett 113). Meaning, morality is, in effect a consensus of what society regards as beautiful and popular; and in *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison features dolls of various kinds: Raggedy Ann dolls with round faces and mops of hair, and the blonde, blue-eyed baby dolls. Claudia and her allusions to the Clarks' dolls test illustrates the tradition of white domination in non-white communities. The *Clark Doll Experiment,* an experiment done by Dr. Kenneth Clark and his wife Mamie, showed that black children, because of marketing and societal pressures, instinctively select white dolls over black in terms of beauty and morality. The character's accepted form of beauty is moralized by the characteristics represented in the preferred doll, "Adults, older girls, shops, magazines, newspapers, window signs-all the world agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow haired, pink-skinned doll was what every girl child treasured…this is beautiful, and if you are on this day 'worthy' you may have it" (Morrison 20-21). Morrison uses dolls to acknowledge that the moralization of style and beauty occurs in large part through the process of othering by the fashion industry. The novel's black adults fall victim to style "a system of signification grounded largely in image, aesthetics, and extrarational modes of thinking" (Brummett 7) rooted in whiteness.

However, Claudia, the *good* character, is the voice of social critique. Claudia embodies black feminist thoughts. She refuses to love Shirley Temple and finds the Raggedy Ann dolls revolting, and her impulse upon receiving one of the blonde, blue-eyed dolls is to dismember it to see what it is made of "to find the beauty, the desirability that had escaped me, but apparently only me" (Morrison 20). Claudia's inquiries of herself and her environment aligns with Dr. Clark's investigation of black aesthetics. Morrison uses Claudia to send the subliminal message

of black morality. She wants to get at the root of the meaning of race, fashion, and moralization of beauty.

Sula was published in 1973 during the Vietnam War. Like *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula* uncovers the repressive influence of white culture on black people and examines the corruptive forces that compel black society to destroy the bond of black women. The two female characters, Sula Peace and Nel Wright, are binary opposites who strive for *goodness* under the direct pressure of the deceptive white community and the pressure of black patriarchal society. Sula and Nel grow up on a hillside known as the "Bottom." Morrison relays the mockery of the "Bottom" as a "nigger joke." The land was used to trick a slave who had been promised freedom and a piece of bottom land, illustrating the oppressive white dominance over the black community. The white community elevates itself in the rich and fertile valley, while the black community is forced to live on the boundary, or margin, of the white society. Illustrating life at the Bottom, Morrison offers context from a third person point of view, but also gives a detailed perspective on the black community in Medallion through the actions of Sula and Nel.

In most communities, compared to men, women are more susceptible to conformity, making women the gatekeepers of social norms. Social conventions are passed down from mothers to daughters the same way language is passed down. Women embody the values and collective desires of norms through words and actions. Unwritten and codified, social norms benefit those in power in any community, often white people and men. Cristina Bicchieri, Ryan Muldoon and Alessandro Sontuoso argue that "Like grammar, a system of norms specifies what is acceptable and what is not in a society or group. And, analogously to grammar, it is not the product of human design and planning" (Bicchieri, Muldoon, and Sontuoso xi). In other words, abiding by convention requires no study or imagination, one simply mindlessly joins the crowd.

In *Sula*, Morrison offers two specific characteristics to illustrate social norms and the consequences of nonconformity: the good wife, Nel, and the "whore," Sula. In essence, Morrison highlights negative stereotypes traditionally used to challenge the *goodness* of African American women. For example, through public humiliation, ten-year-old Nel experiences an important coming-of-age moment. On the train, Helene, Nel's proud mother, smiles at the racist white conductor, and Nel takes note of the *look* she sees in the black soldiers' faces:

> Nel looked away from the flash of pretty teeth to the other passengers. The two black soldiers, who had been watching the scene with what appeared to be indifference, now looked stricken. Behind Nel was the bright and blazing light of her mother's smile; before her the midnight eyes of the soldiers. She saw the muscles of their faces tighten, a movement under the skin from blood to marble. No change in the expression of the eyes, but a hard wetness that veiled them as they looked at the stretch of her mother's foolish smile...It was on that train, shuffling towards Cincinnati, that she resolved to be on guard-always. She wanted to make certain that no man ever looked at her that way. That no midnight eyes or marbled flesh would ever accost her and turn her into jelly. (Morrison 997-998)

Helene instills in Nel a tendency to conform by constricting her imagination, and after the train incident, Nel herself resolves to avoid confrontation, which is a character trait of conformity. Little Nel falls victim to the eyes of society, which Morrison bestows to soldiers. At this point, Nel makes the conscious decision to avoid the *look* of disapproval at all costs, which comes to mean, later in her life, that she must follow the rules of society or suffer this same disgrace all over again. Nel's experience on the train reinforces conformity and restricts black women in the public sphere.

A crucial element in sustaining norms is the presence of a binary opposite. Binary opposition in literature is “a key concept in structuralism, a theory of sociology, anthropology and linguistics that states that all elements of human culture can only be understood in relation to one another and how they function within a larger system or the overall environment” (Marinaro 344). Nel and Sula are split into opposites-Nel, the conformer; Sula, the nonconformist. According to Harding and Martin in their book, *A World of Difference: An Inter-Cultural Study of Toni Morrison’s Novels*, “Morrison… emphasizes the interconnection of community stability and individual survival. The two values coexist in a state of tension; neither deserves to be emphasized one above the other” (Harding and Martin 103). In essence, oppressive conditions can enable black women to form bonds and cultivate female solidarity in order to survive. Morrison paints the central figures in the novel, Nel Wright and Sula Peace, as diametric opposites whose lives are dictated by their mothers (nature) and their home (nurture). After the train ride, Nel copes with norms, humiliation, and obligation in her new friendship with Sula Peace; however, her home life shadows her personal preferences:

> Nel, who regarded the oppressive neatness of her home with dread, felt comfortable in it with Sula, who loved it and would sit on the red-velvet sofa for ten to twenty minutes at a time--still as dawn. As for Nel, she preferred Sula's woolly house, where a pot of something was always cooking on the stove; where the mother, Hannah, never scolded or gave directions; where all sorts of people dropped in; where newspapers were stacked in the hallway, and dirty dishes left for hours at a time in the sink, and where a one-legged grandmother named Eva handed you goobers from deep inside her pockets or read you a dream. (1001)

The Peace household is far from the order and discipline of the Wright household. Because *goodness* is often synonymous to discipline, such as organization and structure, the literal and figurative chaos woven into Sula's narrative implies lack of *goodness*. Even the physical structure of the house itself is confusing, with inaccessible rooms and doors continually being added on by Eva, who is the master of the family, and this confusion and disorder translates directly into Sula and Nel's relationship. In addition, when Nel and Sula first meet, they become instant friends despite their differences, they connect "Because each had discovered years before that they were neither white nor male" (1011). Morrison captures both the excitement and innocence of female friendship, and the sad reality of binary oppositions in society. The conflict between structural norms and desire for individuality threaten the stability of Sula Peace and Nel Wright's relationship. Eventually, the girls lose sight of their shared experiences of inferiority and trauma, when Nel Wright chastises Sula Peace on her death bed for her nonconformity, "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" (Morrison 142). Nel lectures Sula with a level of moral superiority. Nel's tone implies Sula's actions are childish and abnormal because society does not allow such behavior without consequences.

Beloved explores Black cultural identity, mainly the need for contemporary America to reclaim the full narrative of slavery, especially the suffering of black women. Morrison takes us on a thought-provoking journey to a horrifying past in American history, thereby enabling readers to evaluate motherhood and slavery in a more well-informed manner. The meeting place assumes a special significance within its complex and pluralized history of slavery, a history that denigrated the social structure of black families. One of the first and most important influences

on identity is early relationships, particularly the family. The family can impact a child from birth throughout its life. In *Beloved*, the biological mother-child connections are the strongest relationships. Andrea O'Reilly writes that Morrison "emphasizes how essential mothering is for the emotional well-being of children, because it is the mother who first loves the child and gives that child a loved sense of self" (O'Reilly 377). Morrison blends the realistic details of Black families and neighborhoods with the symbolic, the ambiguous, and the supernatural. The novel provides an insight into mothers and women. Morrison's develops the true courage of a slave mother, Margaret Garner, who believed in protecting her children from slavery by all means necessary. In an interview with Gloria Naylor, Morrison explains Margaret Garner's story and the newspaper clippings that inspired *Beloved*:

> One was a newspaper clipping about a woman named Margaret Garner in 1851. It said the Abolitionists made a great deal out of her case because she had escaped from Kentucky … with her four children. She lived in a little neighborhood just outside of Cincinnati and she had killed her children. She succeeded in killing one; she tried to kill two others. She hit them in the head with a shovel and they were wounded but they didn't die. And there was a smaller one that she had at her breast. (Naylor 206-7)

Morrison's interpretation of Margaret Garner's story inspires the development of Sethe, the female protagonist. According to her interview, Morrison develops Garner's tragic story into a plot relating the one of greatest terror of slavery. Garner, in Morrison's eyes, was a fierce mother who believed in protecting her children from slavery through infanticide. Through Sethe, Morrison divulges the connection not just between a mother and her child, but between a mother and her daughters, Beloved and Denver, during slavery. The novel employs flashback and the narration of multiple characters to expose or limit relived trauma of slavery. For example,

Sethe's brief and broken bond with her mother explains the distant relationship she has with Denver and to some extent, with Beloved. The failure of Sethe's hope to experience motherhood is echoed in the repeated lines, "You are mine. You are mine. You are mine" (Morrison 256). Sethe's moment of ownership in repetition prolongs and intensifies the dark reality of being a black mother during slavery. Sethe comforts Beloved saying that she will never leave her again. The moment of ownership between mother and child exemplifies emotional agency, at the very least through repetition. Using her motherly instincts, Sethe shows control: a belief in her own capacity to influence her life and culture, while denying any further pain from slavery. Essentially, motivated by a mother's desire to protect and love her daughter, the infanticide can be forgiven. The concept of love in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is a complicated by the evils of slavery and the inevitable division of families.

Finally, Morrison addresses the biological and psychological bigotry of slavery for black women. Being doubly oppressed, as a woman and as a mother, Sethe suffers severe repression. As a woman, by nature, Sethe is prescribed the specific role of carrying, delivering, and rearing children. Her reproductive capacity makes her more vulnerable and alienated. Sethe tries to counter the alienation and bigotry through breastfeeding. For Sethe, love for her children and her desire to keep them safe is symbolized by her ability to breastfeed them:

> "I had milk," she said. 'I was pregnant with Denver but I had milk for my baby girl. I hadn't stopped nursing her when I sent her on ahead with Howard and Buglar.' Now she rolled the dough out with a wooden pin. 'Anybody could smell me long before he saw me. And when he saw me he'd see the drops of it on the front of my dress. Nothing I could do about that. All I knew was I had to get my milk to my baby girl. Nobody was going to nurse her like me. Nobody was going to get it to her fast enough, or take it away

> when she had enough and didn't know it. Nobody knew that she couldn't pass her air if you held her up on your shoulder, only if she was lying on my knees. Nobody knew that but me and nobody had her but me. I told that to the women in the wagon. Told them to put sugar water in cloth to suck from so when I got there in a few days she wouldn't have forgot me. The milk would be there and I would be there with it. (Morrison 19)

Sethe's moment of reflection exposes the assumptions of female *goodness* tied to motherhood. Her desire to respond to her child in vain provides the reader historical background on black women. Sethe's maternal instinct is not absent, her instinct is deprived by the institution of slavery. Her adamancy about nursing her children shows *goodness*. She appears to only care about getting milk to her baby. She is also showing how attached she is to her children. Sethe's "rough choice" cloud her mind and make her question whether or not she was a good mother-one who loved her children so much she would do anything to prevent biological and physiological oppression.

With the end of the Civil War in 1865, newly freed black men and women began to formulate a cultural identity and cultural self-determination in American society. The dream to live freely and explore possibilities was quickly negated by white supremacy. As White lawmakers on state and local levels passed strict racial segregation laws known as "Jim Crow laws," African Americans became second-class citizens. Such denigrating history and laws complicated the conceptualization of Blackness in America. In fact, black people have reconciled their black identity within Western cultural norms. The conflict of conformity and compromise in black identity is best illustrated by W. E. B. Du Bois, who introduced the concept of a double consciousness into the social and political sphere in his landmark book *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). According to Du Bois, the concept of 'double consciousness' refers to a source of inward

"twoness" experienced by African Americans because of their racialized oppression and devaluation in a white-dominated society. For African Americans the 'double consciousness' raised social and psychological problems, as Du Bois says, "the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world" (Du Bois 3). To Du Bois's point, American history, politics, and laws have illustrated that black people possess no true 'self-consciousness' but a 'double consciousness,' witnessing the perception of blackness through the veil of whiteness. In addition, Du Bois captures the experience of being black in America, society's perceptions that inflicts the indignity of racism, and the force to create an "acceptable" version of blackness for the sake of others. However, Du Bois's 'double consciousness' does not include the reality of being black and female. Recently, black feminists have investigated the 'double consciousness' theory and added their own layer as black women in American society.

In 1904, Mary Church Terrell, the first president of the *National Association of Colored Women*, wrote, "Not only are colored women ... handicapped on account of their sex, but they are almost everywhere baffled and mocked because of their race. Not only because they are women, but because they are colored women" (Terrell 292). To Terrell's point, black women were brought to this country to be unpaid workers, their bodies abused and experimented on, and their faces were used as the poster children for poverty and welfare. Inspired by Du Bois, black feminists have reimagined the misconstrued narratives of black womanhood in contemporary American culture. The triple consciousness theory argues that black women view themselves through three lenses and not two: "America, blackness and womanhood" (Welang 1). The triple-consciousness unveils the three core lenses black women use to navigate their identity within a

white patriarchy and black hypermasculinity. Triple consciousness is well illustrated in Toni Morrison's disclosure of black female characters and their identities in relation to race, gender and American-ness.

The identity of black women in America contributes to forming the social fabric of the United States. The layers of race, gender, and socioeconomics within a racist and oppressive society negate the identity of black women in reality and fiction, especially when the Eurocentric construct is illuminated as a fundamental component of American identity. Such illumination forces people of color to be dismembered into socially unequal components. This dismemberment of self, within the American culture and historical context, can be psychologically devastating to black women.

Morrison empowers her black female characters, Claudia, Nel, and Sethe, with emotional agency as they try to change their oppressive culture through awareness. Each novel illustrates the politics of social structure, the setting and living spaces shape everything. *Sula*, encompasses the trauma of black life in white culture: scapegoat, butt of jokes, a lesser other. The farmer told the slave that the hilly land was "the bottom of heaven" (Morrison 5). The slave unfortunately did not know any better so he accepted the land. In both Sula and Nel there is a quest for social and gender identity. Morrison describes how Sula "had clung to Nel as the closest thing to both an other and a self, only to discover that she and Nel were not only one and the same thing" (55). Nel is drawn to Sula out of her awareness that black women are restricted by their community and by the outer society. Finally, the slave context of *Beloved* shows that black mothers were prohibited from bonding with their children due to the fact that they were property. However, because of the fact, Sethe perceives her role as a mother as the most important part of her identity, and she performs her obligation in an extreme way. *The Bluest Eye* centers on social

outcasts, predominantly through the story of Pecola Breedlove. Morrison emphasizes agency based on physical possessions. For instance, Claudia relays the social hierarchy based on characters' relations to property (Morrison 17-18). And, while Claudia asserts agency in her reaction to the dolls, with anger and destruction, the Breedloves simply seem to harbor an internalized resentment and accept the dominant culture.

Growing up in America, as a young black-Muslim refugee, the social labels of my identity muddled my journey. When I was a young woman, my mother often advised me *goodness* demands thoughtful response over immediate reactions. Morrison creates black women who represent the value of emotional engagement in a society that undermines their existence. Emotional engagement builds character and connotes future possibilities. The *goodness* of Morrison's characters can be found in how emotionally invested they are in the end. For example, only in the final scene of *Sula*, Morrison creates an image of Nel mourning the death of her friend; the emphasis on her friendship is stronger than her husband's betrayal of his family, Nel finally expresses her repressed feeling for Sula, "'We was girls together,' she said as though explaining something. 'O Lord, Sula,' she cried, 'girl, girl, girlgirlgirl.' It was a fine cry--loud and long--but it had no bottom and it had no top, just circles and circles of sorrow" (Morrison 162). In the final chapter of *The Bluest Eye,* Claudia implicates herself in using Pecola as a scapegoat, "We are wrong, of course, but it doesn't matter. It's too late. At least on the edge of my town, among the garbage and the sunflowers of my town, it's much, much, much too late" (Morrison 206). Lastly, Sethe vows to never give up her children again. Black women, despite power structures, find a way to fashion a distinct agency grounded in their individual best interest through awareness and emotional agency. Most of all, black women continue to find ways to be their own heroes, and that is *good* enough for me.

Chapter 2: An Autonomous Journey to *Goodness*

Literature explores human life, provides solutions to human problems, and even problematizes human solutions. The social-emotional experiences uncovered in Toni Morrison's novels connect with the outside world, especially through the topic of *vice*, which is often expelled by its counter, *goodness*. The battle between good and evil is properly recorded in literature as early as William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. In most cases, an author illustrates the influence and power of evil, and a character's inability to attain *goodness*, often leading to their own tragic demise. Hence, the victory of *goodness* over evil is present in traditional didactic literature; philosophically, traditional writers are obligated to impart a lesson on religion, philosophy, history, or politics. However, unlike most writers, according to the article in *New York Times Magazine*, "The Radical Vision of Toni Morrison," Morrison avoids any obligations to the reader in her novels and, instead, focuses on developing the complicated, weightless feeling of heaviness that comprises each novel. Rachel Ghansah notes:

> Often, in black literature, it seems as though the author is performing two roles: that of the explorer and the explainer. Morrison does not do this. Morrison writes stories that are more aesthetic than overtly political, better expressed in accurate Tolstoyan detail than in generalizing sentiments blunted with anger. Most important, she is an author who writes to tease and complicate her world, not to convince others it is valid. (Ghansah 2015)

As stated in the article, black writers are often burdened with the task of unpacking the juxtaposed complexities and contradictions of black existence. However, like Leo Tolstoy, the great Russian writer whose great novels include *War and Peace* (1869) and *Anna Karenina* (1877), Morrison offers perceptive psychological insights into her characters. She denounces society's expectations to teach readers about being either black or female. Instead, Morrison's

novels *Sula*, *The Bluest Eye*, and *Beloved* complicate the invincible divide between the sensuous and the intelligible. Morrison captivates readers to see her black female characters as a grayscale continuum, not a black-and-white dichotomy of good or evil. For example, the social alienation of Sula, Pecola's sexual abuse, and Sethe's traumatic rememory all show women's natural desire to escape subjugation, drawing attention to Morrison's view of *goodness* as composed of fluid and interlaced existential capacities. Morrison, Sula, Pecola, and Sethe's road to *greatness* and *goodness* is most evident in their universal pursuit of autonomy.

Morrison's novels are often psychological, defined in terms of fluidity. Early in her career, Morrison was criticized for excluding white characters from her novels. However, her response provides an insight to Morrison's quest for authenticity, "We've had the first rush of black entertainment, where blacks were writing for whites, and whites were encouraging this kind of self-flagellation. Now we can get down to the craft of writing, where black people are talking to black people" (Fox 2019). Fundamentally, Morrison spotlights the psychological pain of whitewashing on black readers and writers. Honorably, Morrison voices her strong critique of the power of whiteness. Her critique is most evident in her denial of whiteness in her literature. And, while enraging the dominant white literary culture, Morrison dumbfounds the black community with her unconventional fragmented narration. *Sula* includes fragmented images of death, especially death through fire: "Quickly, as the whoosh of flames engulfed him [Plum], she shut the door and made her slow and painful journey back to the top of the house" (Morrison 46-47), and "The flames from the yard fire were licking the blue cotton dress...making her [Hannah] dance" (Morrison 75-76). *The Bluest Eye* fragments Pecola's narrative by allowing Claudia MacTeer to narrate Pecola's rape incident, which further victimizes Pecola. Lastly, the fantasy quality of *Beloved* protects the readers from living and reliving the trauma of slavery. Case in

point, the murder of Sethe's infant daughter is only told by the detached voice of the narrator, and the complete traumatic narrative is never provided by Sethe. The three novels include various narrative perspectives and blur the line between fiction and nonfiction. Such unconventional practices in literature are a necessary leverage against white-male literary critics, particularly T.S Eliot in his essay, "Tradition and the Individual Talent." In its entirety, *Sula*, *The Bluest Eye*, and *Beloved* lack T.S Eliot's definition of literary tradition, or a historical sense:

> the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country...which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his contemporaneity. (Eliot 885-886)

Eliot rejects originality and individual artistic expression, and argues that talented writers recognize the past is ever present. According to Eliot, contemporary writers with talent thoughtfully embrace and maintain tradition, and tradition should guide literary inventions over originality. Primarily concerned with the whiteness and maleness of literature, Eliot is oblivious to specific burdens facing the African American identity. For example, Eliot was probably unconcerned with the fact that black authors were excluded from literary traditions, and such traditions excluded the black experience. Evidently, Morrison's fluid storytelling techniques derive from self-preservation, a sense of autonomy, and her desire for respect in Eliot's "historical sense" ideology. In her nonfiction book, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992), Morrison combats Eliot's argument, noting that classic-modern literature "end up describing and inscribing what is really on the national mind...the literature of

the United States has taken as its concern the architecture of a *new white man*...it is striking how dour, how troubled, how frightened, and how haunted the early, founding literature truly is" (Morrison 143-146). In her argument, Morrison stresses her fear and concerns regarding "historical sense," mainly the use of literature to create and sustain social hierarchies. And, because literature relies on, sustains, and values structural divisions that enable whiteness, Morrison consciously incorporates fluidity in her quest for authenticity.

Morrison equally rebukes the traditional notion of the Bildungsroman features. In fact, Morrison confronts the European eighteenth century white-male-dominated genre by associating the reality of black women with the genre. Because of its layered context, the Bildungsroman novel can be defined as a complex type of novel. Bildungsroman novels flourished in English literature during the Victorian Period among the realists, becoming a more popular genre to present day. Foundationally, the plot of the Bildungsroman primarily consists of the successful maturation of the male hero from youth to adulthood, making the genre linear and male dominated. In addition, the genre emphasizes maturity, self-actualization, and growth.

Consequently, the genre marginalizes female characters, drawing the attention of female critics. In response to the acceptance of the Bildungsroman genre, Elizabeth Abel, Marianne Hirsch and Elizabeth Langland published *The Voyage In: Fictions of Female Development*, a collection of essays on the development of female characters in the Bildungsroman novels. The women denounce the exclusion of female protagonists in the Bildungsroman genre stating, "the broadest definitions of the Bildungsroman presuppose a range of social options available only to men" (Abel, Hirsch, and Langland 355). Specifically criticizing the traditional foundation of the Bildungsroman genre, the women assert that the restraints of society realistically prevent female

characters from participating in the genre. For example, society does not culturally accept that women initiate a journey of self-discovery.

Morrison not only challenges the foundation of the Bildungsroman genre with female characters, she reinvents the genre with black-antiheroine female characters. In the journal article "Toni Morrison's New Bildungsroman: Paired Characters and Antithetical Form in *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula,* and *Beloved*," Anne T. Salvatore notes Morrison's transformation of the genre:

> "Through these paired characters in *Beloved* as well as in *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*, Morrison paradoxically expresses a belief in both determinism and existentialism...conveying narrative and moral authority on these characters even while she dramatizes powerfully the disastrous lives of the anti-heroines, Morrison has transformed the bildungsroman into a dialectical form...confers an ethical potential on the narrative and suggests that Morrison's powerfully eloquent language is not contradictory to her meaning, as some critics would have it, but instead stands as linguistic evidence of a world that Morrison believes to be ultimately redeemable, even potentially beautiful" (Salvatore 23)

Salvatore acknowledges Morrison's conscious approach to her character's decisions and agency in a predetermined genre. In transforming the genre, Morrison, for didactic purposes, manipulates the traditional Bildungsroman genre to challenge her reader's preconceived notions on black women's *goodness* by drawing on race and gender oppressions. She reconciles the antiheroines' seemingly opposing views on reality by illustrating an unsettling end that reinvents the typical bildungsroman with trauma and with a wider perspective.

Inside Morrison's "New Bildungsroman," she takes apart the lives of black women and writes above and beyond the typical ending by employing realistic, raw instances of trauma,

death, and enforced silence. Morrison adapts the Bildungsroman genre to fit the sensibilities of diverse readers. Ironically, prior to each tragic end, the female characters find a moment of victory through the power of language, odd friendships, and the process of rememory. In respect to Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, Morrison truthfully writes fiction with material independence and a sense of autonomy in a historically masculine genre, like Woolf, Morrison understands that "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction" (Woolf 6). Woolf's 1929 feminist text empowers contemporary female writers to think and act freely beyond political and gender limitations. As Sula, Pecola, and Sethe struggle to develop and preserve a space of their own, Morrison empowers each woman with voice and choice. In *Sula*, Morrison creates a black female character who rejects the burdens of being female, especially motherhood, to shape herself differently. As shown in the text, Sula declares her primary interest as a woman in her response to Eva,"'When you gone to get married? You need to have some babies. It'll settle you.' 'I don't want to make somebody else. I want to make myself'" (Morrison 92). Sula flourishes in her ability to break her silence and demand others to listen, to hear her, and to believe her. Although the novel reads like a novel that authentically represents the cultural and historical survival of black women, Morrison does not contextually bind Sula to blackness or womanhood. Hortense J. Spillers' journal article, "A Hateful Passion, a Lost Love," validates Sula's efforts toward autonomy:

> Whatever Sula has become, whatever she is, is a matter of her own choices, often ill-formed and ill- informed...Sula is neither tragic nor pathetic; she does not amuse or accommodate. For black audiences, she is not consciousness of the black race personified, nor "tragic mulatto," nor, for white ones, is she "mammie," "Negress," "coon," or "maid." She is herself. (Spillers 6)

In other words, Sula's taste of freedom makes her voice powerful and distinguishable. Her attitude against societal established norms and her lack of regret make her a unique puzzle that exists outside of the box, where Sula finds a space of her own in her choices.

The combined pressure of the self and society in *The Bluest Eye* complicates the image of *goodness* for black women. Trapped in an oppressed home, community, and self-perception, Pecola is a twelve-year-old innocent black girl searching for love: "What did love feel like? She wondered. How do grown-ups act when they love each other" (Morrison 44). Without the loving guidance of her parents, Pecola equates beauty to love; unfortunately, her classmates and her community have deemed her ugly and unworthy: "'You nasty little black bitch. Get out of my house'" (Morrison 72). Morrison tragically depicts Pecola's journey from innocence to insanity. Interestingly, Morrison blends an odd narrative that defies norms in Pecola's journey to insanity. The broken unwanted twelve-year-old Pecola finds happiness in a welcoming space provided to her by the three neighborhood prostitutes. Pecola is in awe of the prostitutes: "Pecola loved them, visited, and ran their errands" (51). Ironically, the women are the only characters who represent happiness, meaning, the women are the only representation of laughter and song in the novel:

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

Despite the social stigma associated with prostitution, Morrison defines true beauty in the pages dedicated to the socially ugly and abhorrent prostitutes. The pages illustrate the women as charming, joyful, and free: “Maria belched, softly, purringly, lovingly” (Morrison 57). Against society’s expectations, the prostitutes exemplify for Pecola that happiness, freedom, and music do not rely on blonde hair and blue eyes; however, beauty lies in the most welcoming space, particularly in the company of other women. Morrison laces the image of black women with the ugliness of the world, but also spotlights their beauty and the hope beneath the surface.

Through the use of rememory, Morrison conjoins the supernatural vision with her female characters’ aspiration to self-discovery. In *Beloved*, Morrison coins the word “rememory” around Sethe’s painful past and present relationship with Beloved. Inspired by the true story of an escaped slave who murdered her infant daughter, the ghost, Beloved, symbolizes the tyrannizing culture of slavery, while embodying the power of the past in the present, mainly its healing effect. At first glance, the word “rememory” can be misinterpreted as a part of the ex-slave Sethe’s colloquial language in her short fragmented description of rememory to her free-born daughter, Denver:

> Some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it's not. Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place--the picture of it--stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world. What I remember is a picture floating around out there outside my head. I mean, even if I don't think it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there. Right in the place where it happened. (Morrison 43)

Sethe details the inability to escape the reality of the repressed and unhealed past. Sigmund Frued explored such moments of blur in “The Uncanny.” For Freud, the uncanny is a distinct

"class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar …frightening what is known of old and long familiar" (789). Freud teaches that the familiarity of repressed trauma is most frightening because it consists of the return of the past. Sethe accepts the uncanny moments by declaring their permanency, stating that even after death, memory lives in space and time.

Morrison layers many lost stories of women's pain through the effortless connection between Sethe and Beloved. At one point in the book, Sethe reconciles her past by using the power of storytelling with Beloved:

> It became a way to feed her [Beloved]. Just as Denver discovered and relied on the delightful effect sweet things had on Beloved, Sethe learned the profound satisfaction Beloved got from storytelling. It amazed Sethe (as much as it pleased Beloved) because every mention of her past life hurt. Everything in it was painful or lost. She and Baby Suggs had agreed without saying so that it was unspeakable; to Denver's inquiries Sethe gave short replies or rambling incomplete reveries. Even with Paul D, who had shared some of it and to whom she could talk with at least a measure of calm, the hurt was always there...But, as she began telling about the earrings, she found herself wanting to, liking it. Perhaps it was Beloved's distance from the events itself, or her thirst for hearing it-in any case it was an unexpected pleasure. (Morrison 58)

Morrison masterfully illuminates how storytelling keeps memories alive and heals relationships. Here, Beloved plays a crucial role in making Sethe use language to acknowledge her wounds from the past. From experience, I know that the desire to tell stories often emerges from a need to take responsibility for past actions and a need to impact the future. Sethe's comfort with Beloved reflects her desire to responsibly mend the killing of her daughter, eerily similar to how

the Mariner tries to cope with his killing of the albatross in Samuel Coleridge's most famous poem, "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner." By blending the everyday with the supernatural, Morrison momentarily heals a journey destined for tragedy.

Morrison's black male characters are just as central to understanding the female characters. Morrison exhibits an understanding of generational trauma and socio-historical influences on the psyche. Morrison creates her male characters with the complexity of black male subjectivity. The characters Jude Green in *Sula*, Cholly in *The Bluest Eye*, and Paul D in *Beloved* suffer from socio-historical forces that shape their amoral choices. Morrison's traditional badman displays mental impairments such as weakness and lawlessness, mainly compared to the women. In contrast, Morrison's female characters make decisions, take risks, and learn. Unlike Jude Green, Cholly, and Paul D, the *goodness* of black women lies in their desire for autonomy, making them a driving force, even in the face of incredible opposition.

Women are always compared to men in terms of power, character, and triumph. The battle of the sexes argument was made popular by Freud, who argued, "Women oppose change, receive passively, and add nothing of their own"(2). In the 1925 paper entitled "The Psychical Consequences of the Anatomic Distinction Between the Sexes," Freud labels women as passive and men as active. Freud implies that the masculine nature of "activity" makes men more whole, especially against the feminine nature of "passivity." In essence, Morrison's not only reinvents the bildungsroman genre, she redefines psychological femininity. Sula, Pecola, and Sethe actively denounce tradition with individual goals of nonconformity, blue eyes, and validation, illustrating a stark opposition to Freud's stereotypical attributes of 'femaleness.' OBJ

Embodying Freud's masculine "activity," Sula's conscious effort to demean social conventions devastates Nel and frees Jude from his stagnant life. Jude Green, Nel's husband,

dreams of spending his adulthood working on the famed New River Road. However, his weakness is implied in his lack of agency as he complains about his boss, whites, and begs for pity. Jude's inactivity is overwhelmed by Sula's promiscuity, as the two are caught having sexual relations by Nel (Morrison 105). A nonconformist, Sula incurs hatred from her town folks-men and women alike. Sula's unruly power of self-expression exert more control than Jude's marriage vows, fatherhood, and long-term goals. In fact, Nel's comment on Sula's life provides an insightful review that depicts her more whole than Jude, "You can't be walking around all independent-like, doing whatever you like, taking what you want, leaving what you don't" (Morrison 142). Unlike Nel and Jude, Sula prioritizes her independence, her experience, and her personal truth even if it's painful; she particularly prioritizes her autonomy over the unspoken codes of tradition and community. Sula does not allow others or circumstances define her existence. Sula's ambition for autonomy creates a richer perception of black women's emotional endurance, which requires a level of *goodness* and resiliency.

Cholly Breedlove in *The Bluest Eye* is a mentally and physically unstable drunk who rapes his daughter, Pecola Breedlove. Morrison invests time building Cholly's character, providing a brief history of Cholly's life: abandoned by his mother, saved by his aunt who passed away while he was very young, caught having sex for the first time and humiliated as those white men who discovered him forced him to continue having sex as they watched, and finally meeting and being denied by his father. Cholly's misfortunes impair his actions as a father. Morrison notes near the end of the novel that Cholly was the only one who loved Pecola "enough to touch her" (Morrison 206). Morrison suggests Pecola's tragic fate was unstoppable: she is a product of society. Ironically, Cholly's internal monologue exposes his ignorance and obsession with himself, "why wasn't she happy? The clear statement of her misery was an

accusation" (Morrison 161). A sign of his mental impairment, Cholly solidifies that Pecola's character is a scapegoat for society- Cholly, the prostitutes, and her friends. Pecola bears the blame for the sins, crimes, mistakes, or misfortunes of her environment.

Paul D, stuck between three women in *Beloved*, unmasks how maternal instincts devour a woman's self-perception. Surrounded by slavery and women, Paul D naturally begins to question his manhood. As a result, he succumbs to Beloved's desire for love, "I want you to touch me on the inside part and call me my name" (Morrison 116). Overwhelmed by her desire for self-love and validity, Beloved forces herself upon Paul D to conceive, and she demands Paul D express her name. Realistically, names express identity and individuality. Expressing another's name in a conversation indicates the power of acknowledgement. Paul D, the only male character, validates the women, mainly Beloved.

Morrison creatively asserts that black women should acquire admiration, validation, and mental toughness. Her characterization of Sula, Pecola, and Sethe implies that autonomy is a key component that propels individuality, mental toughness, and goal-orientation. In the finale of Morrison's novels, the women unapologetically take ownership and possession. In *Sula*, on the topic of morality, Sula possesses the last word, "I mean maybe it wasn't you. Maybe it was me" (Morrison 146). Sula's self-declares her morality against the socially accepted Nel. Sula's self enhancement fosters self-admiration in spite of her circumstance as a black woman living in the Bottom. In *The Bluest Eyes*, after many chapters of desiring beauty and blue eyes, in the end, Pecola grants her own wish. In her own mental state, in the very last chapter, Pecola creates a new self and an imaginary friend that helps her narrate and address her story (Morrison 204). Pecola powerfully disconnects from reality to possess some control in the end. Lastly, the final chapter of *Beloved* weaves the power of the scorned black woman, as Sethe denounces slavery

by vowing to never part with Beloved. The final three lines of this poetic prose are “You are mine. You are mine. You are mine” (Morrison 256). Sethe’s final act of entitlement as the authorized mother, shows mental domination, as she reclaims her power as a mother.

The *goodness* of black women is rooted in the power of autonomy. Through active, purposeful, and conscious engagement with past traditions and the reinvention of tradition, Morrison pioneers a path for change. Morrison presents a world interlocked in the system of race, class, and gender oppression. The ambiguous nature of womanhood and blackness threatens the psychological survival of black women. According to Morrison, the power to unlock and dismantle the system depends on the will of the black women to initiate a journey to autonomy. Beginning such a journey requires intentional organization, cooperation, and morale of not only physical freedom, but mental and emotional freedom. In her novels, Morrison implicitly takes the lead, she “strips language to its essence, so that all the original force is there. She shies away from excessive adjectives and adverbs, which thereby leaves “holes” and “spaces,”...[she invites black women to] supply some of the emotion and color for her stories” (Harris 7). Morrison invites readers to participate in restructuring power, starting with her novels. In her critical and literary work, Morrison reminds readers that black history is “neither a chronicle of events to be revered nor an archeological exhibition to be observed. Engagement with the black past required transformative participation” (Karageorgos, 2020). Like Morrison and her black female characters, the *goodness* of black women lies in their determination and desire for systemic overhaul by all means necessary.

As a young black woman, I am flustered by Morrison’s problematic solution to the *goodness* of black women. Strangely, the tragic endings of Sula, Pecola, and Sethe leave a far more powerful impression than their happily-ever-after ending. Their tragic end is the result of

their desire for self-determination, self-regulation, and self-direction. The three novels shift seamlessly between black women's present troubles and their traumatic flashbacks. In a society centered in whiteness, Morrison reimagines the black female identity in a space that is fluid and brand new, thus giving black women space of their own to recognize *goodness* beyond physical or emotional death. In her tragic endings, Morrison sacrifices surface for depth and accessory for autonomy. Tragedy elicits an immediate grief response and a strange sense of obligation to seek progress. In the face of grave social threats such as gender oppression, rape, and slavery, Sula, Pecola, and Sethe embody *goodness* at its finest-bravery, resilience, and hope.

Chapter 3: Storytelling as a Form of *Goodness*

Toni Morrison's life began in the midst and the rise of a radical cultural shift in American history. Born as Chloe Anthony Wofford in 1931 in Lorain, Ohio, Morrison adopted the name 'Toni,' a nickname from her undergraduate years at Howard University, and kept her last name 'Morrison' from her marriage to then ex-husband Harold Morrison, hence becoming Toni Morrison. Born during the Great Depression, near the end of the Harlem Renaissance, and the radical shift from tradition to modernism, Morrison was part of an economic disaster, a literary transformation, and a cultural and political shift in American history. The Great Depression, America's first major economic crisis from 1929-1941, broke the rigid patriarchal belief that assumed men as the 'breadwinner' or the 'sole provider,' which shifted American ideology on male-female gender dynamics (Helmbold 633). The Harlem Renaissance demonstrated an overt racial pride that developed a new black identity. Through the production of literature, art, and music, the Harlem Renaissance promoted progressive politics and authorized a platform for black people to confront America's pervading racism. Lastly, new discoveries, inventions, and achievements sprung the modernist literary movement, which turned art inward toward subjectivity and experience. Philosophically rejecting all religious and moral principles as the only means of obtaining *goodness*, modernists saw *goodness* rooted in the fragments of human experience and storytelling. Modernism, championed by towering figures like Jessie Fauset, Virginia Woolf, and William Faulkner, denounced the linear, logical or chronological writing strategies fused together by Greco-Roman Classicism and Judeo-Christian tradition; however, modernism encouraged the use of "stream of consciousness" narration to uncover the complex realities behind the humanity and inhumanities of the world. In addition to a downward spiraling economy, Morrison's novels document the influence of the Harlem Renaissance and Modernism.

A pivotal time for African Americans, the Harlem Renaissance birthed a new sense of self for black people in America. The contribution of black artists, writers, fashion designers, and musicians created outlets for expression and pride in black culture. Although most of the well-known figures of the Harlem Renaissance were men, such as W. E. B. DuBois, Countee Cullen, and Langston Hughes, the women of the movement had a much deeper-rooted literary history. Starting with Phyllis Wheatley, who as a slave woman was the first black person to publish a book, through the American Revolution, through two world wars, and through several movements, black women always managed to articulate their struggles and hopes through literature. In "An Interview with Toni Morrison," conducted by Nellie McKay, McKay shares Morrison's awareness of black women's contribution and accomplishments by presenting Morrison's own words, "In all of the history of black women, we have been both the ship and the harbor...We can do things one at a time, or four things at a time if we have to" (2). Fueled by the conscious effort of black women from the past, whether in colonial-era America or during the Harlem Renaissance's patriarchal dominance, black female writers have risen to prominence through the power of language in literature. Such power made Morrison unafraid of controversy, especially when telling the stories of black women. As the first black woman to win the Nobel Prize for Literature, and since the publication of *The Bluest Eye* in 1970, Morrison has exerted powerful language with underlying emotions to uncover the simmering consequence of racial and gender constructs, following the conventions of the movement's most prominent literary figure, Zora Neale Hurston.

Morrison's interest in giving black women a voice echoes Hurston. Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, published in 1937, most notably established the vivid experience of a young black woman named Janie from the South and her journey to autonomy. Like Morrison's

Sula and *The Bluest Eye*, Hurston draws an accurate image of the complexity of being a *good* black woman within the black community. Like Sula and Pecola, Janie, Hurston's black female protagonist, is ill-treated and misunderstood by her own community. Morrison powerfully mirrors Hurston by demonstrating black women's radical acts of self-preservation against the judgment of public opinion.

Like Sula, who exists as a victim of public judgement, Janie's identity becomes convoluted by legendary tales, or gossip, constructed by men. The "porch sitters," a gossiping group made of mostly men, judge Janie's *goodness* from various unreliable male perspectives throughout the novel. Janie is constantly the object of discourse rather than the subject. To one "porch sitter" Janie "couldn't look no mo' better and no nobler if she wuz de queen uh England" (42), while to another, "she sho don't talk much. De way she rears and pitches in de store sometimes when she make uh mistake is sort of ungodly, but she don't seem to mind at all" (50). Hurston employs the old tradition of storytelling, or gossip, to demonstrate how black women live in a world where good and evil are dichotomized. Similarly, Sula's character falls victim to the public opinion of black men: "But it was the men who gave her the final label, who fingerprinted her for all time. They were the ones who said she was guilty of the unforgivable thing-the thing for which there was no understanding, no excuse, no compassion" (Morrison 112). After supposedly sleeping with a white man, Sula upsets the novel's expressed moral code that a black woman's body should be solely the property of black men (Morrison 113). Based on taboos and prohibition, the men's judgement of Sula is baseless and unproven. Ironically, however, Hurston and Morrison's legendary tales surrounding black women's morality inspire a greater *goodness* in black communities. Sula's shocking and defiant behavior unites her community, as it moves to protect against her evil behavior:

> Their conviction of Sula's evil changed them in accountable yet mysterious ways. Once the source of their personal misfortune was identified, they had leave to protect and love one another. They began to cherish their husbands and wives, protect their children, repair their homes and in general band together against the devil in their midst. (Morrison 102)

Through Sula's sacrifice, Morrison demonstrates how the morality of black women is scapegoated in black communities. And, Hurston's porch setting, for the gossiping "porch sitters," symbolizes a strong sense of community in the face of racism. Hurston notes, the porch serves as a safe place for black men to find comfort after the "Mules and other brutes had occupied their skins" (Hurston 1). The gathering of black people, becoming one body on the porch, provides a powerful image of unity. Inspired by Hurston, Morrison uses the culture of storytelling to create tales and legend around the *goodness* of black women. By embracing the old artistic tradition of storytelling, both women invite readers to facilitate and reflect on the sexist ideology around the morality of black women, specifically the scrutiny of public opinion.

While *Their Eyes Were Watching God* exemplifies the Harlem Renaissance success for black women, as one of the first novels to tell the story of how one black woman found out about living for herself, Morrison continued Hurston's efforts. *The Bluest Eye* portrays a young black girl's poignant yearning to merge her desire for blue eyes (as beauty) with a society that deems her *blackness* as ugly. Before Morrison, Hurston based the standards of beauty on America's prodigious whiteness, especially in the eyes of black girls. As a child, Janie, who is biracial, expresses discontent about her darker complexion:

> So when we looked at de picture and everybody got pointed out there wasn't nobody left except a real dark little girl with long hair standing by Eleanor. Dat's where Ah wuz

> s'posed to be, but Ah couldn't recognize dat dark chile as me. So Ah ast, 'Where is me? Ah don't see me.' Everybody laughed, even Mr. Washburn. Miss Nellie, de Mama of de chillun who come back home after her husband dead, she pointed to de dark one and said, 'Dat's you, alphabet, don't you know yo' ownself?' (Hurston 9)

Blackness is marked as unrecognizable and absent in the six-year-old Janie, especially contrasted against the visibility of the white children. This theme of internalized racism and black self-hatred resurfaces in Morrison's eleven-year-old Pecola. Looking at the store owner, young Pecola observes her absence in his eyes, "She looks up at him and sees the vacuum where curiosity ought to lodge. And something more. The total absence of human recognition-the glazed separateness" (Morrison 48). Young Pecola's existence, like Janie's, is critically scrutinized or ignored under the visibility of beauty as white. According to Hurston and Morrison, defining beauty in terms of race thus creates a binary system that negates black women's sense of individuality. Hence, the two author's collectively illustrate how the *goodness* of black women remains invisible by the overwhelming symbolism of whiteness in stores, books, photos, etc.

Morrison harmoniously blends the voices of black men, women, children, and even ghosts in her multilayered novels. Through language, Morrison decodes the past, muddles the present, and awakens hope for the future. Morrison's *Beloved*, *The Bluest Eye*, and *Sula* demonstrate her commitment to history and her unapologetic exploration of racism, sexual abuse, and violence. In my broken English, as a young black Somali girl, I remember reading Morrison with exhilaration and horror. At a young age, Morrison's raw and uncomfortable novels made the invisible visible and engaged my perception of ugliness, while at the same time evaluating beauty. As a Master's candidate, Morrison's colloquial, magical, and masterful

command of language confounds my perception of black female *goodness*. However, through her use of stream-of-consciousness, a writing technique strongly associated with the modernist movement, Morrison recognizes the exceptional degree of endurance by black women across time and space, which is an element of *goodness*.

Morrison's *Beloved* has a hint of modernism and magical realism, which softens the horror of slavery. Morrison focuses on illustrating the unfathomable love of a slave mother, who commits infanticide in order to save her daughter from the dehumanizing act of slavery. In doing so, Morrison must have faced the challenging decision of deploying traditional linear style of realism, to tell history with clarity, or engage a modernist approach, to tell history through multiple perspectives, including a ghost's. Unlike realism, modernists "connect [storytelling] to various forms of phenomenological process: shifting habits, streams of consciousness, [and] nonrational feelings" (Fletcher 3). The internal and psychological focus of modernism allows Morrison to be in the mind of enslaved women and use their fragmented voices, while applying a modernist approach by focusing on the *who* rather than the *what*. By streamlining the thoughts of black women, Morrison spotlights intention over actions, thus giving readers a deeper understanding of the *goodness* of black women as subjective rather than comprehensive. Sethe's repressed memories depict a broken sense of time and space, "I was talking about time. It's so hard for me to believe in it. Some things go, pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory. You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do" (35). Sethe's measurement of reality, or lack of, displays black women's devastating effort to grapple with slavery. Morrison assigns the habit of *rememory* to Sethe throughout the novel, spotlighting a fractured and haunted character. In addition, Morrison's use of stream of consciousness details Sethe, Beloved, and Denver's overwhelmed relationship, while displaying the unforgiving

trauma of slavery. Originally coined by William James in his research, *The Principles of Psychology*, the "Stream of Consciousness" is the hallmark of modernist literature. As noted in the book *Fictions of Authority: Women Writers and Narrative Voice*, by Susan Lanser, this style of writing cemented women's place in Modernism:

> Modernist fiction was indeed associated with women in a way that the classic realist novel was not...'the whole 'stream of consciousness' movement is a return from an exaggeratedly masculine literature to a feminine one. Wherever fiction turns from outdoors to indoors, from field to boudoir, from flight to love, from action to analysis, from reason to sensibility the female persona becomes, even for male authors, an inevitable mouthpiece. (Lanser 2)

The feminine characteristics of stream of consciousness include subjective thoughts, flow of feelings without conventional grammar, and constant flashbacks of the past. Grammatically perplexing, Beloved's stream of consciousness portrays the ugliest image of slavery possible-death: "I am not dead I sit the sun closes my eyes when I open them I see the face I lost Sethe's is the face that left me Sethe sees me see her and I see the smile her smiling face is the place for me it is the face I lost she is my face smiling at me doing it at last a hot thing now we can join" (Morrison 213). Beloved's unordered flow of feelings reveals an obsessed and afraid child yearning for her mother, Sethe. In an emotional climax, Morrison invites readers into the minds of Sethe and Beloved, an approach that begs the question, "What does it mean to be a *good* black mother?" While providing the possible answer that such privilege is preserved only for white women. By communicating the characters' minds, Morrison makes the history of black women the focal point.

Morrison, who completed her master's degree on "suicide as a literary construct in the fiction of William Faulkner and Virginia Woolf" (Gillespie 5), teeters between the language of fantasy and reality. The novel's supernatural dimension is best demonstrated by the 1992 journal article, "The Haunting of 124," by Carol Schmudde. Schmudde pinpoints the remote haunted house feature in *Beloved*, a time-honored horror signal, and the unforgiving spirit that seeks revenge:

> The article on "Haunting" in the *Encyclopedia of Occultism and Parapsychology* says that 'tradition established two main factors in haunting: an old house or other locale and restlessness of a spirit. The first represents an unbroken link with the past, the second is believed to be caused by remorse over an evil life or by the shock of violent death. (3)

The ambivalence of Morrison's standard features of the supernatural allows an opportunity for the reader to navigate historical trauma, especially knowing that Morrison was inspired by the true story of Margaret Garner, a slave mother who killed her child in 1856 (Carroll). Morrison executes the use of the supernatural to explain history's relation to the modern human mind. Linda Wagner-Martin, in the book *Toni Morrison: A Literary Life*, highlights Morrison's reason for the ghost of Beloved by highlighting Morrison's own words, "I realized that the only person really in a place to judge the woman's action would be the child. But she couldn't lurk outside the book...I could use the supernatural as a way of explaining, of exploring the memory of these events" (65). The resurrection of American history via supernatural elements clarifies the relationships and identities of Sethe, Denver, and Beloved. Beneath the supernatural hauntings lies a single important historical portrait of the ever-present trauma of slavery.

Beneath the darkness and ghostly supernatural elements, Morrison creates a powerful woman-slave-preacher who draws on black women's lived experiences. Morrison's character

Baby Suggs is the healer of her community and the symbol of empowerment in disempowering social and cultural circumstances. A *womanist*, a term coined by author Alice Walker (Napikoski 1), Baby Suggs is victorious for her community. The journal article "The Restorative Power of Sound: A Case for Communal Catharsis in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*" reinforces the image of a *womanist* according to Walker, mainly in relation to Baby Suggs:

> Walker stated that womanist means 'committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female...traditionally universalist...traditionally capable'...Walker introduced her concept of *womanism* through the maternal, the imparting of survival wisdom from mother to daughter. In Morrison's *Beloved*, the community at large becomes the daughter in need of direction, and Baby Suggs becomes the communal mother. (Reed 5)

Baby Suggs innately conceptualizes the attributes of a *womanist* to face down and save her ailing and desperate community. She brings self-love in a space filled with atrocity, preaching in a time when black people, let alone black women, were not permitted to produce language. Although Baby Suggs defines loss, her character conjures up the will to care and protect her community by offering her heart, "She had nothing left to make a living with but her heart-which she put to work at once" (Morrison 102). Baby Suggs' *goodness* transcends and overcomes hate with the repetitive emphasis on self-love:

> Love your hands! Love them. Raise them up and kiss them. Touch others with them, pat them together, stroke them on your face 'cause they don't love that either. *You* got to love it, *you*!..So love your neck; put a hand on it, grace it, stroke it, and hold it up. And all your inside parts that they'd just as soon slop for hogs, you got to love them. The dark, dark liver – love it, love it, and the beat and beating heart, love that too. More than eyes

> or feet…More than your life-holding womb and your live-giving private parts, hear me now, love your heart. For this is the prize. (Morrison 103)

With an expressive and truthful sermon, Baby Suggs declares and demonstrates in words and actions the power of love as a trophy, illustrating the influence of love as a form of *goodness*. Baby Suggs transfers the intensity of love as the noblest and purest emotion, particularly self-love, to fight against the evils of the world. Unfortunately, the debilitating reality of racism resigns even in the greatest of leaders. The worst of racial dehumanization prevalent throughout the novel, a mother's act of infanticide, destroys Baby Suggs's progress toward communal affirmation and autonomy. Finally, Baby Suggs' practical wisdom and resignation reveals her truth, her lived experience that "There is no bad luck in the world but whitefolks" (Morrison 105). Through the use of "but," Morrison signals the unending story of black women's inhumanity as the direct result of "whitefolks." Like Baby Suggs, the *goodness* of black women cannot stand against the power of "whitefolks." Morrison accentuates the magnitude of black women's suffering in the empty and defeated tone of a black-woman preacher.

Language is power, and through language Morrison has managed to elevate black women to a highly prominent position in literature. The great public intellectual Cornel West has called Morrison "The great storyteller, the great literary artist, of black folk. She's our Tolstoy, our Joyce, our Walter Scott" (Leitch 900). West recognizes Morrison's ability to describe characters' unconscious motives, solidifying Morrison's ability to speak for and about black women. With each novel, Morrison exhibits the influence of language: in *The Bluest Eye* language creates a new reality, in *Sula* language transforms perception, and in *Beloved* language evolves ideas and beliefs. In her Nobel Prize acceptance speech, Morrison expressed her firm belief in the power of language, in her attempt to challenge the dominant white-masculine culture:

> It is the language that drinks blood, laps vulnerabilities, tucks its fascist boots under crinolines of respectability and patriotism as it moves relentlessly toward the bottom line and the bottomed-out mind. Sexist language, racist language, theistic language – all are typical of the policing languages of mastery, and cannot, do not permit new knowledge or encourage the mutual exchange of ideas. (Morrison 1993)

Essentially, Morrison understands the fundamental value and power of language in storytelling; however, in her speech, she demands that writers make more conscious and insightful choices in interpreting the lives of the underrepresented, specifically black people. Literature does not only interpret norms and values, but literature, through language, also reveals the character of culture. In an *Entertainment Weekly* interview, actress Viola Davis quoted Morrison in expressing her frustration with culture:

> Toni Morrison said that as soon as a character of color is introduced in a story, imagination stops…I mean, I'm a black woman from Central Falls, Rhode Island. I'm dark-skinned. I'm quirky. I'm shy. I'm strong. I'm guarded. I'm weak at times. I'm sensual. I'm not overtly sexual. I do so many things in so many ways, and I will never see myself on screen. (Sylla 2015)

A more accurate representation and visualization of and by black women through language and pictures provokes those in power to see black girls through a wider lens. Like Hurston and Walker, Morrison fiercely centers the voice and image of black girls from beginning to end. Sadly, Morrison's ambition has created some anxiety throughout the media, as when Australian journalist Jana Wendt implied to Morrison that she should include more white characters in her novels; Morrison's response has gained over 80,000 views on Youtube. In the video Morrison authoritatively answers, "You can't understand how powerfully racist that question is, can you?"

she asked. “You could never ask a white author, ‘When are you going to write about black people?’ Whether he did or not, or she did or not. Even the inquiry comes from a position of being in the center’” (Dasent 1:55-2:20). As she does in her novels, Morrison holds journalists, writers, and readers accountable for their role in structural racism and sexism.

Beyond her political activism, Morrison communicates her deep concern, passion, and love for black girls. Through her piercing and thoughtful language, Morrison captures the reality of black girls in her most remarkable novel, *The Bluest Eye*. Haunted by a little black girl’s desire for blue eyes during her elementary school days, Morrison revisits the girl’s sorrowful voice and imagines Pecola inside an enormous world controlled by blonde-haired, blue-eyed images (Russel 232). Living in a community that supports standards of beauty as white—“Adults, older girls, shops, magazines, newspapers, window signs-all the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every girl child treasured” (Morrison 20-21)—Pecola, as an “ugly” black girl, is stuck between a dream and the reality of being black, poor, and a girl. Morrison denies Pecola a chance to be like the other kids, whether through conformity or freedom. Instead, “Pecola is continually robbed of her innocence, she holds on to the scraps of her dreams with a steadfastness that breaks the heart” (Als 2019). The unfair treatment of Pecola, who struggles for her dream, is most apparent during her encounter with Geraldine: “Eyes that questioned nothing and asked everything. Unblinking and unabashed, they stared up at her. The end of the world lay in their eyes, and the beginning, and all the waste in between” (Morrison 91-92). Morrison lyrically expresses Pecola’s unspoken pain through a child’s eyes in connection to the world. The image of Pecola’s eyes are essential to the understanding of black girls in America. Morrison shifts the reader's perspective to make space for real empathy by spotlighting a young black girl’s point of view of the world, a moment in

literature that inspires consideration and reflection. *The Bluest Eye*'s use of powerful language in connection to broken dreams sustains its relevance to current perspectives.

Malcolm X in 1962 said, "The most disrespected person in America is the black woman. The most unprotected person in America is the black woman. The most neglected person in America is the black woman" (X 24:25-24:50). Black women struggle to find a place in society; however, their resilience does not go unnoticed. In conclusion, Morrison indirectly communicates the *goodness* of black women in storytelling, using language and voice to transcend history and the future. Humans have communicated through storytelling since the beginning of life. According to Morrison's approach, the *goodness* of black women aligns with "Morrison's...very particular goal: to offer readers stories about blacks, women, and other marginalized characters which hadn't been told before" (Als 2019). *Goodness* is found in one's willingness to imaginatively experience narratives, feel the raw emotions of other black women, and listen to the stories of black women.

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