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Female teaching and learning in Morrison's *Paradise*

by

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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

The Convent girls are dancing; throwing their arms over their heads, they do this and that and then the other. They grin and yip but look at no one. Just their own rocking bodies. The local girls look over their shoulders and snort. Brood, Apollo and Spider, steel-muscled farm boys with sophisticated eyes, sway and snap their fingers. Hurston sings accompaniment. Two small girls ride their bikes over; wide-eyed, they watch the dancing women. (Morrison 157)

The passage above is excerpted from *Paradise* (1997), the first novel Toni Morrison published after winning the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993. As the final work in what Morrison considered a trilogy that begins with 1987's *Beloved*, followed by 1992's *Jazz*, *Paradise* completes the “trilogy of novels united by a common theme—excessive or obsessive love that leads to violence” (Reames 21). Though there are many types of love portrayed in the novel, “as *Beloved* explores maternal love and *Jazz* romantic love, *Paradise* explores religious devotion” and the effects of unquestioning and overzealous devotion to the confines of patriarchal values (Reames 21). The plot, told through numerous characters’ perspectives, illustrates the importance of communal narrative in Ruby, Oklahoma, and warns of the risks inherent in a community’s inability to evolve (Davidson 355).

Unrelenting and ambiguous, *Paradise* “insists on the impossibility, even the danger, of earthly perfection” that many of the characters strive for in the novel (Mayberry 223). By attempting to achieve earthly perfection in the forms of wealth and social status, the citizens of Ruby endanger their existence as a community because they value material things over spiritual gifts.¹ Excessive love of humankind enabled through the artificial constructs of patriarchy is shown as an empty aspiration that leads to an emotional death for some. In contrast, the spiritual rewards of connecting spirit and body

are life-empowering for those who undergo the learning process and the change to which it leads. The novel's exploration of themes and its structure have been studied under philosophical, literary, mythic, and other critical lenses because of how Morrison presents the relationship among violence, rigid gender-based hegemony, and the non-physical, or spiritual, being.²

Paradise explores the place that humans conceive of as “paradise,” ending with Morrison's interpretation that it is “down here” instead of an idyllic, imagined place (318). Originally titled *War* and changed as an editing decision, the novel opens as a group of men invade the Convent, an “embezzler's folly” converted into a Catholic school for Native American girls and later as a refuge for wayward women, with the intention of killing the women who live there (3). The five women living there at the time of the raid are Mavis, Gigi, Seneca, Pallas, and Connie, one of whom is white. The men “have set out to rid their town . . . of the evil that has infested it, and they believe—or have convinced themselves—that these women are its source” (Reames 22).³

Obsessive religion, fear, and death in the novel leave readers with a haunting vision of paradise because at the novel's close, readers have only just begun “shouldering the endless work they were created to do,” Morrison instructs (318). Just as readers must work to understand the novel's structure that skips around between different times and perspectives, they must also work to understand how a group of defenseless women comes to be seen as the embodiment of evil. Morrison links violence, religion, and love together in her portrayal of a community that needs to understand the important connections between one's physical body and spiritual peace. It is the women's ability to

learn from each other, instead of following patriarchal rules that constrain and oppress them, which so enrages the men.

In order to create the alternative system of learning to counteract the male-dominated structure of Ruby, Connie and the four women she teaches expand their definition of “seeing” in the world. In seeing more than they thought they could, they understand more fully that Connie’s requirement never to let body and spirit separate can be accomplished. Mavis, Gigi, Seneca, and Pallas learn to value themselves in a world dominated by male constructs of power that devalue women. In finding the motivation to value themselves, the women develop and practice a womanist philosophy that ignores the problems patriarchy invites and instead focuses on different kinds of loving communities people can create.

As Morrison explores the complicated relationships portrayed in the novel, it is clear that she proposes various alternatives to many of the problems created by Ruby’s patriarchal power structure. Magali Cornier Michael contends that the novel “seeks to re-imagine agency as a function of coalition processes that are communal and caring in impulse . . . that complicate and finally gesture away from dominant conceptualizations” described in Ruby (643). As the plot unfolds, the agency developed by female characters is more “accommodative, caring, and loving, rather than exploitative, and that [is] aimed principally at survival and at moving toward a new, alternative form of non-hierarchical justice, rather than at maximizing power and winning” (Michael 644). In addition to fulfilling the criterion Michael highlights, the agency developed in the Convent shows how the connections among violence, gender relationships, and spirituality can be

understood by examining the historical, social, and racial context through the lens of womanist spirituality.

“Womanist,” defined in Alice Walker’s preface to *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens*, denotes “A black feminist or feminist of color . . . Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or *willful* behavior . . . Loves music. Loves dance . . . Loves the Spirit” (xi-xii). Therefore, a womanist spirituality refers to the spiritual philosophy that develops in black female communities similar to that of the Convent women’s. As opposed to the conflicts developed by patriarchal social systems, “operating within the constructs of an Africana womanist paradigm . . . grounded in three key interconnecting components—the centrality of family, the love for each other, and the commitment to the liberation struggle for ultimate survival,” allows for individual freedom (Hudson-Weems 83). As such, the values listed require the ability to adapt to particular places and circumstances. Because womanism constructs a system of values that transcends “era, place, culture, and history . . . human definitions cannot limit God’s meanings: [humans] are constantly learning” just as the Convent women learn to do (Mitchem 23). Analyzing the “roles assigned to African American women by their families and the dominant culture, the persistent stereotypes about black women, the combination of race with gender, and recognition of diversity among women” is “empowering” because people “discover truths” about themselves (Mitchem 23). These personal truths pave the way for further personal growth and enable social change.

The possibility for change that Morrison uses in her pronouncement that paradise is an earthly undertaking for the people “down here” requires a thorough re-seeing of life

for the women and readers. The process of acquiring and following intuition can be painful and difficult because it requires vulnerability, but it ultimately leads to self-acceptance, responsibility, and empowerment. The arduous work is detailed as a learning experience the Convent women undergo in order to develop themselves into citizens of paradise instead of oppressed women in a patriarchy. In seeing a new life for one's self, the continuing work of learning and acceptance can be achieved and continue to progress.

Female characters learn valuable lessons from each other that allow them to subvert the patriarchy ruling Ruby. The ability to "see" in literal and metaphorical ways differentiates people in the town between those who understand the changing intricacies of life and those who wish to remain firmly planted in a faltering ideology. Men in the novel are more indicative of the ability to see that is based entirely on physical senses, as Morrison points out numerous times that male characters' senses are failing them to the extent that they can only perceive the most obvious forms of stimuli from foods, relationships, and community.

Characters that can see in a different, spiritual, sense are adaptable and capable of creating their own agency. By being able to understand the power of one's own story, the female characters at the Convent, led by Connie, are able to find agency and mature independence as "they c[o]me to see that they c[an] not leave the one place they [are] free to leave" (262). The four women show that recognition and reconciliation with their pasts are the only ways to understand the necessity of change. The learning process that leads to this understanding is difficult but rewarding work, and through learning, they emerge more aware of their individual power and better equipped to enable change.

CHAPTER 2. LEARNING IN PARADISE

The trappings of a patriarchal-based value system, particularly the emphasis on physical certainties of seeing and acquiring material wealth, and by extension, power, serve men and aim to control women. Learning in the Convent occurs as the direct result of the oppressively narrow roles ascribed to women who are all clearly searching for something different than they know, since they have all, for various reasons, elected to leave their homes for the freedom of uncertain wandering. Without a variety of options, women are forced into living in ways that leave their spirits neglected, their bodies bruised, and their overall being ignored, abused, and deemed worthless of anything other than scorn. The social options for women exemplified in Ruby are the same debilitating options available to the women who stay at the Convent; the only difference is that the women who stay at the Convent (as opposed to those from town who visit periodically) are less successful at thriving in traditional female roles. The roles include mother, sexual tempter, pitiful object, and victim, and prove too limiting for any of the Convent women. Though Mavis, Gigi, Seneca, and Pallas each fulfill these roles to differing degrees in their respective lives, as characters they become symbolic of these four roles. Connie, as the woman who teaches, has experienced each role in some capacity as well, and she uses her personal experience to help the women see beyond those roles and deeper into their own personalities. The work of the women's learning is quite different from that of the male characters'.

To the male patriarchs, lineage and history are important to the extent that all changes are subject to utmost scrutiny by the men in power, predominantly Steward and

Deacon Morgan and other male church officials. As the descendents of the founding fathers of Ruby, the male characters have a stake in maintaining the social power structure so that it gives them continued monetary and social advantages. Like white society that will not accept them because of their skin color, the black founders of Ruby have replicated the same measures of discrimination to ensure their power over others, including overt racism to prohibit individuals from marrying into the families of power. The fear that underlies their rejection of certain shades of skin and any degree of change also applies to anything that strikes the ruling men as strange, uncontrollable, or progressive.

Based on the early description of the Convent from the perspective of the males that invade it with the intention of killing its inhabitants, it is clear that the men of Ruby do not understand anything about the Convent or what occurs there; their only reaction is disgust and fear of the building and the rumors describing what happens there. They think the women are “. . . detritus: throwaway people that sometimes blow back into the room after being swept out the door” (4). They bring “rope, a palm leaf cross, handcuffs, Mace and sunglasses, along with clean, handsome guns” to eradicate the women, never realizing that all these items are useful for only physical, not spiritual, control (3). The desire to control completely the physical bodies of the women highlights the profoundly superficial and fearful motivators that have brought the men to the Convent. The depth of their “sight” is indicated by the novel’s first sentence: “They shoot the white girl first,” though Morrison is careful not to reveal which Convent woman is white (3).⁴ The men are described as seeing the world through a dichotomous system of black and white, and

right and wrong, that seems to be lethal to anyone wishing to live outside such an inflexible system of beliefs. In order to understand the mostly incommunicative male characters, it is necessary to examine the actions of male characters through female narratives better attuned to the details that define the seemingly simplistic patriarchal outlook.

Soane and Dovey Morgan, the respective wives of Deacon and Steward Morgan, offer readers insights into the most common views controlling Ruby. The male characters exemplify the effects of a stagnant and unchanging worldview that suffocates and oppresses positive progress, evidenced by the continued squabble over what the words above the Oven should be: “Beware the Furrow of His Brow” or “Be the Furrow of His Brow” (93). Like the nuances of the Oven’s motto, Steward and Deacon have individual reasons for wanting to exterminate the Convent women, but they are both intimately tied to the male desire portrayed in the novel to contain female sexuality and lineage, in other words, to control women in all ways that might result in negative consequences for men. Furthermore, the view of the male characters offered by Soane and Dovey explains the debilitating effects of a narrow and unchanging outlook on male characters’ physical, emotional, and spiritual well being. The central conflict between those who struggle to maintain static power in a dynamic society and those who can see beyond the reality to the possibilities causes the chaos that enables learning; through the difficulty comes reward. Without challenge, the town seems dead, and “how still it was, as though no one lived there” (45).

As they encounter descriptions of the Convent women, readers learn that open

female sexuality and sensual spirituality are the embodiment of the men's fear of female freedom that leads to their violent attack, foreshadowing the connections throughout the novel that connect violence and freedom, especially sexual freedom. The fear of female independence is linked to the male desire to control the social hierarchy based on dark skin color ("8-rock"), and the fear becomes so strong that the men feel they must eradicate the source of their anxiety, even if that means killing anyone with a viewpoint they do not condone. However, through life-long oppression, the Convent women have learned from their individual experiences that men cannot always be trusted to recognize women's worth. Thus, they must learn to find their own worth in each other and in their collective learned power to prosper. As they work to find fulfillment, the Convent women begin to identify with an alternative style of living, which includes unorthodox behaviors deemed odd and strange by the citizens of Ruby.

Because women are perpetually disadvantaged in Ruby, the Convent women's means of subverting the power structure cause disruption that male characters, with their insatiable yet subdued and lazy desire for control and power, have no sensible way of appreciating and instead turn to eliminating the offensive women. Though the men can feel the tightening pressures of progressive political action occurring during the time, they cannot comprehend that the underlying worldview of patriarchal hegemony complicates and perpetuates the problems they see. The problems of patriarchy's narrow sight have drawn Mavis, Gigi, Seneca, and Pallas to the Convent, and the process of learning a new value system different from everything they have ever known is their daunting task.

As they develop, the Convent inhabitants transform religion into a more complete version of love that combines physical and spiritual aspects of worship into an unnamed pagan or mystical religious spirituality. Through an alternative religion based on the concepts of womanist communal teachings, the women change their individual lives and the lives of other women as a result. It is important to notice that the transformation is intricately tied to the physical mansion, a character in itself, and not just the ideals, until Connie teaches her final lesson in the dark basement so that the women can emerge into the light with greater awareness of their agency. The educational experiences inside the house are not complete until they are exposed to the outside world, and when the women apparently have disappeared after the massacre, it seems that the process has been completed successfully.

In order to understand the men's extreme fear of the things that happen in the Convent, it is also useful to discuss qualities that distinguish the religious aspects of the Convent philosophy from Ruby's patriarchal Christianity. In fact, the religion offered at the Convent, due to Connie's direct and indirect teaching, contains many of the same characteristics of Ruby's Christian religion. They both feed and nurture, are concerned with others' well-being, and respect the value of loving relationships, shown by Reverend Pulliam's marriage benediction at Arnette and K.D.'s wedding that states that God "is interested in love and the bliss it brings to those who understand and share that interest" (142). However, though Ruby's Christian community recognizes the value of love and "learning how to learn," the structured formats, such as heterosexual marriage, must be followed as part of the religion (142).

The difference between the styles of religions concerns the types of expression of Ruby's townspeople and the Convent. The townspeople are more focused on the physical being of people and material wealth whereas the Convent women emphasize the spirit and the complex interaction between body and spirit. Therefore, religious aspects appear to relate in some ways, and the differentiating characteristic is the object of one's worship. The difference in the religious styles seems closely—if not directly—related to the gender of the people supporting each type of religious expression. The male-directed Christianity of Ruby is dominated by the importance of the physical self while the female-led Convent spirituality is aimed at attaining a greater connection with a higher spirit and thus with one's own self and power. As previously mentioned, it is the excessive and obsessive elements that are problematic for people; the women who stay at the Convent are there because they have devoted too much of themselves to men in their lives that have not appreciated them.

The way they learn in the Convent exacerbates the difference in the Christian ideology espoused by the men in Ruby and the Convent's more open spiritual religion or ethos of living. While the women in Ruby cook for their husbands, who have lost their taste for everything except the purple-black Convent peppers, the Convent women are self-sufficient gardeners and share the food production responsibilities and enjoyment. Men care about the appearances of love relationships such as marriage and the women are more concerned with deeper, truer relationships that are less dependent on familial relationships and more on a common outlook on life. While the men also care about the results of physical power such as power of lineage and history, material goods, and

supposed social progress, women celebrate self-understanding and value foods as a spiritual experience. The uncommodified experience of eating, loving, and living exempts the women from living by the mandates of Ruby's population that observes the rules of social interaction and conduct. The Convent women threaten Ruby because they disregard patriarchal values and embrace their own, which profoundly frightens the men.

Though it might seem to be a clear dichotomy between men and women, Morrison is careful to show that it is the excess of devotion to human ideals in general that is dangerous, not a particular religious sect or gender. The women in the Convent have as much to learn as the men in Ruby; the ability to adapt is what saves some individuals from stagnation while others suffocate themselves because of their fears or overzealous adherence to floundering ideologies.

Therefore, instead of clear instructions or an easily decoded and accepted didactic moral, what Morrison offers readers is a paradise that cannot be strictly divided into any categories. Instead, she intermingles the physical and "real" truth of humanity with a spiritual intuitive capability that combines the physical and spiritual selves in ways that are incomprehensible to the ruling patriarchy that decides to exterminate the female population inhabiting the Convent. By writing of an alternative religion, Morrison imagines an inexperienced place and calls it paradise to suggest that the work of humans is to amend the limited thinking that leads to the events in the novel.

The women in the Convent are able to learn because they come to the Convent in search of fulfillment in a patriarchal society that has few available routes for women to choose, and all of the routes lead to a powerless existence. The options available to

Mavis, Gigi, Seneca, and Pallas range from mother, mistress, whore, and child, but none of these roles adequately stimulate the women's needs because the stereotypes of "[a]moral Jezebel, safe Mammy, and castrating Sapphire . . . construct some negative form of black women's sexuality" (Mitchem 139). In the face of incomplete social options, the Convent women fail at the expectations of each respective role and remain powerless. Through the development of a "Christian womanist sexual discourse of resistance, based on human- and God-created goodness," they "destroy the power [of stereotypes] . . . over black women's self-image and esteem" (Mitchem 139). Until they are aware of the powerlessness of appropriate female roles, they are trapped in the patriarchal system; once they pursue alternative avenues of expression, they are finally free to obtain real power, and they are so satisfied by the new power that they do not want to leave the place of their learning once they have found independence.

With the help and example of Connie and the Convent camaraderie, the women learn the importance of their spirituality as the means to becoming free individuals. They reclaim aspects of their respective personalities and emerge from the darkness of the basement into the dawn of morning on the very day that the men have chosen to hunt them down for transgressing the patriarchal confines. Moments and characteristics such as Mavis's Cadillac theft, Gigi's evocative wardrobe, Seneca's simplicity, and Pallas's defiance enrage the men because they cannot be suppressed, just like the women whom they describe. These vehicles of female power, be they action oriented or a physical trait, are not learning experiences in themselves, but as immature attempts at earning personal freedom, they are successful steps. With the help of Connie and each other, and the

separation from male influence, they learn more about themselves and their own histories. As the women learn to find positive alternative outlets of expression instead of rebellious ones, they gain greater agency. The positive outlets of expression include dancing, singing, storytelling, growing food, cooking, eating, caretaking, enjoying nature, changing one's circumstances, and recognizing the unique power of an individual, though there are many other examples of empowering expression. By exemplifying traits that outline a new, nonconformist power that the Convent women celebrate, Morrison shows that the women are successful in their flights from oppression and no longer hide, free to move as they please. Though the male characters seek vengeance in the end, the women succeed in their creation of an alternative to the patriarchy that controls and condemns Ruby.

CHAPTER 3. THE WOMEN WHO LEARN

During the years that Mavis, Gigi, Seneca, and Pallas live at the Convent with Connie, their experiences in patriarchal societies both unite and divide them. The five women are united in their collective strength earned from overcoming their negative experiences in romantic, familial, and violent relationships. Through this strength, they have developed tough exteriors to keep others away from them as a means of self-protection and survival. In addition to the internal protection of defense mechanisms, the effects of this self-defense are manifested in the women's physical bodies. Cut off from their emotions, the women have lost the ability to cry at different moments. Although they each have internal pain and outer defensive behaviors, the women find collective solace in comforting others in both emotional and physical ways through affection and nourishment.

The divisions between the women are related primarily to differences in their personalities that cause tension. These personality differences affect the kinds of patriarchal symbols they bring into the Convent, which causes additional conflict. For example, Mavis is appalled by Gigi's insistent nudity and Seneca cannot stand Pallas's endless crying, while Gigi is angered by social injustices and Pallas is annoyed by Mavis and Gigi's constant bickering. The clothing, behaviors, stories, and relationships that the women bring to Connie's male-less sanctuary are the patriarchal symbols to which each woman clings, and these can cause disruption in the harmonious silence for which Connie longs.

As the women grow more comfortable in their Convent life, Connie uses her

experiences to teach each woman in a personal way that also links them with the other women. Detailed in the description of each of the four women in this chapter, the particular female stereotype each woman takes creates the background for Connie's relationship with her, respectively. Therefore, Connie (and each other woman) is connected to each individual based on a common female experience, though the specifics of each narration differ.⁵ The role that each woman identifies with most clearly is the obstacle that keeps her from reaching empowerment, and it is Connie's mission to dissolve their ties to patriarchal confines in order to merge their spirituality with their physical being so that each can find her balance of personal power.

Mavis

Mavis Albright is the first character to take refuge in the Convent as a Ruby outsider. Her status of unfamiliar outsider in Ruby parallels her outsider status in her own family unit, which her husband, Frank, encourages. Ostracized from her family and the town she lives in when she accidentally suffocates her young twins, Merle and Pearl, by leaving them alone in the back seat of her husband's mint green Cadillac, Mavis is a flawed character in need of help from others. Mavis's story foreshadows the misunderstandings and misconceptions that occur due to the difference between visual or social perception and personal, intuitive perception. Mavis represents the female expectation to appear as a competent mother and the consequences of failure to achieve this expectation.

The chapter that focuses on Mavis opens as a reporter interviews her about the accidental death of her children, and her perception is shown as muddled and unreliable.

When her twins die, Mavis's neighbors act as people are expected to in that situation by bringing food and offering consolation, but "the shine of excitement in their eyes was clear," signaling the divergence among actions, sight, and unspoken emotions (21). Although her neighbors act in the appropriate ways, the unspoken emotion of their actions betrays their conciliatory gestures.

More significant, Mavis is first encountered giving an interview while a photographer clicks away, deciding the best way to show Mavis to suit his and the newspaper's agenda. Mavis, unable to decide whether or not to brush the crumbs off the sofa before the photographer starts clicking because "the journalist want[s] the photo taken first," is acutely aware of the importance of physical image to others, though the way her thoughts are presented obscures this characteristic (21). As the photographer moves around her living room, examining the "possibilities" of the shot, Mavis is speechless and seems sullen with the savvy female journalist, whose eyes also shine like "that of the neighbors" as she questions Mavis for the story (22). Although she is a woman, because of the reporter's place of authority as a representative of patriarchal news reporting, she cannot empathize with Mavis just as most other characters are unable to sympathize with her seemingly fragmented way of perceiving the world.

Mavis's understanding of the unspoken importance of a glance introduces her as a perceptive character, and her defense of her alcoholic husband implies that she cannot simply be ignored by readers as a negligent mother. Mavis defends Frank, explaining, "You can't expect a man to come home from that kind of work and have to watch over babies . . . I know that ain't right" because she understands the expectations of her to

provide a meal for her husband, even if he is not successfully providing monetary support for his family (23). However, her understanding of patriarchal values is limited because she does not fully understand her place in the system. Therefore, Mavis “know[s]” it is not “right,” but she is unable to explain exactly why she cannot expect a male figure to watch babies while she makes dinner, because then she would have to admit that the car and her family’s life is all about the show of acquiring wealth without actual security to support it; to admit that she leaves the twins in the car while she goes to the grocery store because Frank’s drinking prohibits the use of a working refrigerator is unacceptable.

Though the neighbors already know that any wealth indicated by the Cadillac is superficial because Frank must borrow necessities such as a lawnmower and their house has mismatched, unpainted posts on the porch, Mavis revels in maintaining the illusion of wealth as best she can. Mavis values the signs of wealth, showing that she is not guiltless in the conspicuous consumption of her family or in the death of her children. She enjoys wearing sunglasses even on cloudy days, Morrison is careful to point out, as she drives her children to eat at White Castle (28). Mavis’s sunglasses are representative of the flashy life her family tries to present and her denial of reality, and for this quality, she exemplifies the danger of worshipping materials instead of acknowledging reality.

The Cadillac itself represents the extent of the importance of material goods to the patriarchal society and Mavis’s attempt to achieve material status, even down to its green color indicating monetary wealth. During the interview, the Cadillac is personified as the watchful eye of patriarchy:

From where they sat no one in the room could see the Cadillac parked in front of

the house. But it had been seen for months by everybody in the neighborhood and could now be seen by anybody in Maryland since the photographer had taken more shots of it than he had of them . . . But the color wouldn't show in the newspaper. What would show was the size, the flashiness of the place where babies had died. Babies forever unseen now because the mother did not even have a snapshot of their trusting faces. (24)

The importance of a photograph to the newspaper emphasizes the need for a physical image of a person or thing to “prove” that is real, that it has value. The fact of being seen and recorded registers the innate value in objects and people that are recorded images; the unseen or forgotten is not valued by patriarchal society, and Mavis's lament that she does not have a picture of her children indicates the degree to which she lives within the confines of patriarchal expectation.

The interview scene foreshadows the open animosity that adherents of patriarchal society have for women who do not exhibit competence at reliable, linear perception, and the depiction of Mavis's home life that evening further clarifies the oppressed and abusive situation Mavis lives in. When Frank comes to bed later that evening, Mavis searches “the darkness for a sign, trying to feel, smell his mood in advance. But he was a blank, just the way he was at supper” (25). Frank will not talk to her, though he does joke with the children, and Mavis is constantly forced to untangle possible meaning from his actions because he will not speak to her, and when he does, she never seems to know what he is talking about.

After years of living in a world where she must pretend her material and

intellectual circumstances, Mavis's perception seems especially unreliable because she has trained herself to perceive what other people do not. For example, when Frank climbs into bed, she does not know if he is "looking to have sex," so she tries to find out whether or not he is wearing his shorts as he climbs into bed, but she cannot discern this without touching him (25). When he does surprise her with his desire, he quickly covers her face with her nightgown, making it impossible for her to see, and Mavis can only imagine her daughter "Sal's eyes as cold and unforgiving" as they are during the interview, showing how Mavis's sight is compromised and narrated by others (26). Like the nightgown that blinds her physically, Frank's cryptic statement severs Mavis's connection with her own thoughts and perception because before he comes to bed, Mavis is dreaming, but she cannot remember her dream once awakened. After he "rub[s] himself to climax while chewing a clump of her hair through the nightgown that cover[s] her face," he speaks to her in the dark, seemingly unable to find a solution (26).

Because of the chaos she has unwittingly brought upon herself, Mavis chooses to leave instead of staying to continue living the life she has created. Throughout the night, she waits, "not closing her eyes for a second" because it is crucial that she leave the house at dawn and as she leaves, her "eyes wide to the darkness," she does not "look toward the kitchen and never [sees] it again" (27). The signal that she will never return to the house or her life there is solidified because she never looks at it, and Morrison directly informs the reader that she will never see it again. What is more, Mavis will never be in the same social position again, either; she is already a freer woman escaping from her life with Frank, who will not realize she is gone until he does not see the *car*,

which Mavis has stolen, the next morning.

The change in Mavis's vision and her attitudes toward others as she stays at the Convent and benefits from Connie's teachings is led up to by her night escape in the apparent freedom of the Cadillac. Mavis decides to travel to her mother's house, where she and her mother eat lunch, after Mavis becomes "presentable" with clean skin and clothes (30). Her mother informs her that she could "see this coming, you know. Anybody [can]," though Mavis clearly did not "see" the situation the way "anybody" else might (30). Like the newspaper reporter, Frank, and patriarchal society in general, Mavis's judgment is questioned by even her own mother, and Mavis's worth as a mother and wife is lacking. She cannot please her mother any more than she can please Frank, showing how patriarchy is perpetuated by both men and women.

Sensing Frank's arrival, Mavis flees her mother's house and embarks on the second leg of her journey, during which she picks up numerous female hitchhikers who share their life stories with her, foreshadowing the importance of sharing stories in a female community. Eventually, Mavis gets lost, runs out of gas, and stumbles upon the Convent. She at first does not realize what occurs at the house, but as she learns more through observation, Mavis comes to appreciate herself and her abilities. As she walks toward the Convent, the house looks different the closer she gets to it. At first it looks "small and close," but as she travels toward it she realizes it is neither and discovers it is made of stone "dark with age" and seems without windows, though she then sees the reflection of giant windows on the ground floor (37). The house's appearance symbolizes how anything can seem one way but be another way, and this warns of the possible

deception inherent in relying entirely on physical sight to determine what is real.

When she first meets Connie, Mavis asks many questions, still concerned with the superficial elements of life, and Connie's responses puzzle Mavis. Mavis imagines many rooms in the Convent and asks Connie if she gets scared, and Connie replies that "[s]cary things not always outside. Most scary things is inside," indicating her knowledge that the unseen is as important an aspect of life as the outside that others can see (39). Mavis's impressions of Connie also extend to her first impressions of Connie's work at the Convent. For example, Mavis's first appraisal of Connie's garden is that it is a wild weed patch: "A part of the garden [Mavis] originally [thinks has] gone to weed [becomes], upon closer inspection, a patch of melons. An empire of corn beyond" (41). Like the vast reflection of the house, Connie's garden is symbolic of the importance of moving beyond initial visible impressions, which is the central belief of patriarchy to which Mavis has ascribed. The garden also indicates Connie's self-sufficient example she sets for the others and the importance of physical nourishment through food.

Food and the physical space of kitchens hold significance in Mavis's life as a place she has never been comfortable. Neither in her husband's or mother's kitchen does Mavis feel appreciated, but in the Convent's kitchen, Mavis begins her transformation by watching what Connie does in the kitchen. There, Mavis has "an outer-rim sensation that the kitchen [is] crowded with children—laughing? singing?—two of whom were Merle and Pearl. Squeezing her eyes shut to dissipate the impression only strengthen[s] it. When she open[s] her eyes, Connie [is] there" (41). Connie's watchful manner sets the first example for Mavis; by learning from Connie's example to watch, Mavis learns the

importance of seeing beyond her own perception, which leads to growth.

The first indication of Mavis's learned self-development occurs in the kitchen when Connie asks Mavis to help her shell pecans. The dialogue between the two women shows how Connie will encourage others directly by asking that they appreciate their strengths and use them to help others. Mavis asks Connie, "[t]hink of something else I can do to help. Shelling that stuff would make me crazy," but Connie encourages her to try it (41). Mavis tries to distract Connie by asking if they should put down newspapers so it will be easier to clean up, but Connie responds that there are "No newspapers in this house. No radio either. Any news we get have to be from somebody telling it face-to-face," illustrating the complete denial of all patriarchal forms of media in the Convent (41). When Mavis still protests shelling pecans, Connie says to her, "You give in too quick. Look at your nails. Strong, curved like a bird's—perfect pecan hands. Fingernails like that take the meat out whole every time. Beautiful hands, yet you say you can't. Make you crazy. Make me crazy to see good nails go to waste" (42). Unlike people she has encountered in her life thus far, Connie thinks Mavis has beautiful, strong, perfect features that, like the freedom represented by a bird's ability to fly, can help get out the whole part of something else. Never before has anyone said anything like this to Mavis because, as she later looks at her hands, "watching her suddenly beautiful hands moving at the task," she remembers her sixth-grade teacher (42). Mavis's direct connection between Connie and a teacher indicates the teaching relationship Connie will develop with Mavis and the other women.

As Mavis works and appreciates her newly discovered and acknowledged beauty,

Soane arrives and Mavis remembers Connie's entrance "like an apparition" (43). Though Mavis learns about nurturing others through Connie's instruction, Connie gleans energy from Mavis and does not feel like cooking again after Mother Superior's death until Mavis returns. Mavis and Connie foster and maintain a strong bond throughout the rest of the novel because of their shared ability to perceive the usefulness and beauty of others, and Mavis learns more the longer she stays at the Convent. Later, before her primary learning experience with Connie, Mavis's main burden is revealed to be her continued worry for her twins and her inability to move on away from her sensitive perceptions and forgive herself.

Mavis's narrative initiates the theme that perception is not a straightforward activity, and that seeing and recalling what one sees are subjective senses and activities for each person. During her stay at the Convent, Connie teaches Mavis the value of her talents and her intuition by encouraging Mavis to try and allowing her to observe, through which Mavis learns that personal talents and experiences can be redeeming even if people are flawed. The senses Connie develops and encourages in Mavis undermine the stressed values of linear and visual perception valued by male society, and Mavis's personal development represents her female empowerment as she finds an alternative to the oppressive existence she has led until finding acceptance at the Convent.

Gigi

Originally named Grace, Gigi arrives in Ruby on a bus, an ethereal vision to K.D. and the other men that keep perpetual watch outside the Oven. A vision of overt physical sexuality in "pants so tight, heels so high, earrings so large they forg[e]t to laugh at her

hair,” Gigi’s physical appearance appeals to the men’s visually-based comprehension of the world and women’s primarily sexual place in that world (53). As the second woman to arrive at the Convent, Gigi represents the role of sexual awakening and all-encompassing physical desire.

Gigi’s physical excesses of sexual promiscuity and drug use mediate her experience in the patriarchal world, and when she begins her affair with K.D., Gigi becomes a threat to Ruby’s social hierarchy because not only is she purposefully tempting male characters away from their responsibilities in relationships with Ruby women and children, she is successful in her persuasion. However, any semblance of Gigi’s power over men is undercut by Morrison’s choice to narrate much of Gigi’s story through the eyes of her lover K.D., symbolizing his control over her even as he seems to be controlled by her and his desire for her. As illustrated through his fantasy of her as he brushes his dog, Gigi is not a real person to him because she is confined to a status as fantasy object. She represents the problematic devotion to physical lust for males and females in a patriarchal system. Because she is seen through a male perspective at her introduction in the novel, her experiences indicate that sexual prowess, while a powerful motivator for men, is not real female power and should not be confused with genuine empowerment.

Like Mavis’s lunch outings in the Cadillac with her children in tow, Gigi searches for power through patriarchal, if decidedly more radical, means in her life. She participates in Civil Rights demonstrations and indulges her sexual appetites with boyfriend Mikey and his stories of Wish, Arizona, where he claims a rock formation in

the shape of two lovers exists. Her love of his description of the desert rock formation that is “[m]oving, moving, all the time moving,” indicates her worship of physical fulfillment and sensual longings (64). Undeafened when he stands her up, she leaves, searching for something stable, something she can depend on, something serious. In her search for the formation, Gigi ends up in Ruby, coughing at the dust blowing into her eyes and mouth, symbolizing her obstructed senses when she arrives (67). She hitches a ride with Roger Best, who takes her to the Convent, and though uncomfortable at first, Gigi ends up staying at the Convent because Connie asks her to stay and watch.

Gigi’s presence at the Convent introduces overt sexuality into the dynamic created by Mavis and Connie, which enables greater connections with the violent nature of patriarchal sexuality. The violence of Gigi and K.D.’s relationship coincides with the violent descriptions of the Convent during the raid scene, as he watches her and cannot stop staring while she enjoys watching the “war waged in his eyes” (74). Gigi is the physical embodiment of K.D.’s perception of women, as “an easily had woman,” and the connections between physical worship, sexuality, and misogyny create a fear of female control in him that always seems to manifest in physical violence, as it did with Arnette (4). Once the affair is ended after Gigi has “teased, insulted or refused him once too often, and he chased her around the house, grabbed her, smacked her,” it is Mavis and Seneca who pull him off her (using kitchen equipment) to save her (256). Though Gigi’s powerful sexuality seems impermeable at times, she has been hurt and finds it difficult to release her guard and let others help her, but she can and does as she learns to trust others. Eventually, she is able to reach the vulnerability to change.

During a bath, Gigi verbalizes a moment of self-abuse that has led to her defensive behavior. Girls in high school and college do not take her “seriousness seriously,” and all her experiences seem to ignore her existence: “If she hadn’t been able to print, no one would have known she was there” (257). Without her literacy, Gigi is powerless and feels suddenly enraged, “not knowing which of the bastards infuriated her most,” and speaks aloud to herself during the critical moment that allows Connie to transform her defensive rage into progressive social power (257).

In her monologue, Gigi reveals a sensitivity unseen during the novel as she says to herself, “No, you stupid, stupid bitch. Because you weren’t tough enough. Smart enough. Like with every other goddamn thing you got no staying power. You thought it was going to be fun and that it would work . . . You thought we were hot lava and when they broke us down into sand, you ran” (257). As she breaks down in anger and shame, she still does not cry. Not the “crying type,” Gigi maintains her composure because “when she realized she had not approved of herself in a long, long time, her eyes were desert-skull dry” (257). Like the erotic rock formation in Wish that so intrigues her, others do not approve of Gigi or her liberal ideals, and her schemes to find worldly fulfillment all fall flat: the box she unearths in the Convent yields nothing but worthless certificates and none of the “[p]rovacative demonstrations, pamphlets, bickering, police, squatters, leaders and talking, talking, so much talk . . . was serious” because “the point of it all was lost to entertainment and adventure” (257). Defensive and finally separated from her relationships with men, Gigi is ready to undergo the Connie’s direct teaching style—as opposed to a teaching through example or listening model to gain further

understanding of herself.

Seneca

Seneca's tale begins as she is following Sweetie, "a black woman weeping on a country road" who breaks Seneca's heart "all over again" (126). Seneca, a broken woman, has been beaten down and has almost lost herself entirely as a symbol of caregiving femininity. Seneca, "the girl whose heart was breaking," follows Sweetie to the Convent, not knowing where she is headed (126). Without knowing anything else about Seneca other than that she is a "brokenhearted hitcher," readers are introduced to the most important aspect of Seneca's character, her empathetic and profoundly injured nature (126). As a victim, Seneca symbolizes the perverse power that can be found in welcoming pain and inflicting pain on one's self. Like other forms of superficial power the Convent women have, self-mutilation and victimization prove unsatisfactory as ways to achieve power in patriarchy.

Seneca experiences a loss of her sister in her early life and she is habitually abused by people she trusts. Sexual victimization in particular has been at the center of her torments. Her initial circumstances indicate the degree to which she is powerless to male figures in her life; her boyfriend Eddie is in jail and she agrees to do whatever he demands of her, even though he shows little to no care about her life. The episode depicting her visit to Eddie in jail shows the psychological effects of relationship abuse. He requests that she bring a Bible, and when she visits him in jail, he berates her verbally: "Can't you get anything right? Just a *small* Bible!" (131). Though he has known Seneca for only six months, "already he knew how hopeless she was" (131-32). While

the other inmates and prisoners seem “to be having a lovely time,” Eddie yells at her and does not want to hear about her new job, asking only about the dogs’ habits (132).

Although Eddie is unresponsive and abusive, Seneca agrees to do as he has asked her to until she is thrown off course by the request of an older woman, Mrs. Fox. Seneca’s seemingly directionless wanderings show that she, like the other Convent women, is on a journey.

Approached by Mrs. Fox’s driver David, Seneca climbs into the limousine and learns about the “complicated and easy” work available for her. Seneca takes a job as a sex worker with Mrs. Fox, who treats her as a nameless sexual object just as the men in her life do. In Norma Fox’s beautiful house with “food too pretty to eat,” Seneca participates in a variety of degrading sexual acts with the woman, “moving from peacock feathers to abject humiliation; from coddling to playful abuse; from caviar tartlets to filth,” and is allowed to leave whenever she likes (137). Although Norma is not a male character, her treatment of Seneca as a sexual object parallels the way men treat her and continues the cycle of relationship abuse prevalent in Seneca’s life. Her time with Norma is characterized by opposing treatments that both confuse and enthrall her, due to their exotic nature (peacock feathers and caviar) and their familiarity (coddling, abuse, filth). The luxurious material elements of Norma’s lifestyle serve as markers that Seneca does not realize she is habitually abused because it is the psychological and emotional effects of the physical abuse that she remembers, not the food too pretty to eat or the gorgeous rooms.

Though she does not have to stay with Norma, the pain she endures there as a

silent, nameless sex servant “framed the pleasure, gave it edge,” while “humiliation made surrender deep, tender. Long-lasting” (137). Physical and mental exploitation characterize Seneca’s life and she learns to enjoy and seek out circumstances that subject her to the selfish needs of others. As a coping mechanism for the way she is treated by all representatives of masculinity and patriarchal authority, Seneca cuts herself to displace the pain she feels.

When she leaves Mrs. Fox’s house because Mr. Fox has returned, Seneca is dropped off at the bus station where David had found her and “picked her up for Norma like a stray puppy,” which, in Seneca’s narration of her thoughts, is even too much to describe her existence (138). Seneca decides that she is more like a pet that someone would want to “play with for a while—a little while—but not keep. Not love. Not name it. Just feed it, play with it, then return it to its own habitat” (138). Seneca’s appraisal of her worth shows how very undervalued she is by others, which contributes to her continued undervaluing of herself and her power. She completely understands how she is treated in the world, but she does not or cannot find an alternative to her mindset until she arrives at the Convent and begins to take on new roles in life that nurture her as much as they nurture the lives of the people she serves.

During the closing moments of Seneca’s section, the narration of her thoughts signals the possibility for change that she realizes at the Convent. She remembers that no one other than Eddie knows where she is, and “[m]aybe she ought to keep it that way,” indicating a slight shift into a mindset that helps her take care of herself first instead of letting others abuse her (138). After Seneca hitchhikes across the country in cars and as a

stowaway on flatbed trucks, she finds herself in Ruby, following Sweetie toward the Convent. As the “first pointedly uninstructed thing she [has] ever done,” Seneca’s choice to follow a woman to the Convent further signals her transformation into an independent person and contributor (138). As Seneca lives at the Convent, she learns how she can help others in need instead of inflicting pain on herself.

The opening passage describing Seneca’s arrival at the Convent after she follows Sweetie there, the shadow following the wraith, aligns Seneca’s journey of learning with Sweetie’s caretaking nature (126). Sweetie, a Ruby woman who has devoted her entire life to being a wife and mother to sickly children, cannot decide if Seneca is laughing or crying during their first meeting (129). While Sweetie decides she must return to her captivity watching her children, Seneca finds herself sleeping on a cot in the Convent, welcomed by Gigi and Mavis immediately. Whereas Seneca remains unnamed and too insignificant to name during most of her interactions with other characters, Mavis and Gigi act comfortably with her and are interested in where her name comes from. The simple act of being called by her name represents the way that the Convent women value individual worth in a way patriarchal society does not. Still unused to people caring for her, Seneca feels exhausted and nauseous when she is asked to nap until the dinner of fried chicken Mavis suggests. However, for the first time, Seneca is cared for in even the smallest ways of being asked to sleep, eat, and stay at the Convent, and she begins to contribute to the relationships the longer she stays and learns about the dynamics of the relationships of the other women.

Seneca understands that Mavis and Gigi dislike each other and she assumes the

role of equalizer between them: “If one cursed and joked nastily about the other, Seneca laughed. When the other rolled her eyes in disgust, Seneca shot her an understanding look. Always the peacemaker. The one who said yes or I don’t mind or I’ll go” (131). In her comprehension of the dynamics of the other women’s relationship, Seneca is shown as a character that creates stability between other characters. Her submission at the Convent, while not completely divorced from her actions before she arrives at the Convent, has a distinct differentiation from the kind of submissive behavior she assumes before coming there. As described above, Seneca constantly tries to please those around her, even if it means subjecting herself to abuse. In contrast, at the Convent, she is a self-described peacemaker, which, though she has not completely begun to understand her own power, is an improvement on her previous existence as a recipient of others’ whims. Her fear of rejection that they “might not like her. Might cry. Might leave” carries into her time at the Convent, but in a non-abusive environment, she is able to find solace in something other than pain (131).

Seneca helps the other women, bringing water from the stove for Gigi’s baths and comforting Pallas, though both women seem to annoy her, and she uses her own body as a means of emotional expression. When she arrives at the Convent, Seneca feels safe, but when Pallas arrives, incessantly crying, Seneca starts cutting herself again. Though a hapless hitchhiker in life, Seneca finds direction in her own skin. As she cuts herself, she finds a perverse map on her own arms and thighs, enjoying “with pleasure the traces of old roads, avenues that even Norma had been repelled by,” showing Seneca’s connection between physical pain and emotional release and pleasure (260). As her habit has grown

through the years, she adds aloe cream to her arsenal to help assuage the pain, and her memories of how she began cutting herself are linked with sexual violence of her experiences with men, when “the line of blood excite[s]” the boy to whom she loses her virginity (260).

Like Mavis and Gigi, Seneca does not cry in self-pity because she has developed a coping mechanism only she understands and that distances her from other people. Instead, Seneca’s moment that allows her the vulnerability to be taught is reached when she realizes that it is precisely her method of self-medication that keeps her from peace because, while she can pretend otherwise, the sight of others’ painful crying is a sight that “touch[es] off a pain so wildly triumphant she [will] do anything to kill it” (261). Therefore, though Seneca can hide her emotions from other people, Connie’s intuition understands Seneca’s struggles, which is the recognition Seneca needs to finally admit her problems and learn new ways of coping.

Pallas

Patricia and Roger Best’s daughter Billie Delia meets Pallas Truelove at the medical clinic in Demby, when Pallas arrives appearing to be an abused and perhaps raped woman. Pallas’s story and the comfort she finds during her stay at the Convent are significant because her narrative expresses an immediate serenity found at the house of women, as opposed to Mavis, Gigi, and Seneca’s initial uneasiness in the mansion. Introduced to the Convent by Billie Delia as a place where she “can stay for a while,” Pallas stays at the Convent and, like the other women, shares her experience with Connie (175). Pallas represents the injured childhood experiences of all the Convent women and

the destructive possibilities of severed mother-child bonds.

When crying Pallas arrives, Connie's caretaking is the only influence that can soothe her. Billie Delia's recommendation of the Convent as a place to find comfort proves true for all the Convent women and Pallas particularly as it concerns her pregnancy because there are no questions asked. Visitors are instead given the time and space they need to collect themselves and "think things through, with nothing or nobody bothering [them] all the time"; Billie Delia continues that the Convent women will "take care of you or leave you alone – whichever way you want it" (175-76). The freedom to do what she feels she needs to do instead of what is expected helps Pallas heal and come to terms with her painful life experiences.

Pallas's relationship with her mother relates to her pregnancy and completes the scenarios of mother-daughter relationships in the novel. When she arrives at the Convent, Pallas remembers her past relationship with Carlos, who eventually leaves Pallas for her mother. Carlos's betrayal of her trust leads her to flee into the circumstances where she is found at the clinic. As she snuggles with Seneca, Pallas's narrative oscillates between memory and real-time observation inside the Cadillac. Her observations indicate her ability to comprehend abstract events and signal the depth of her pain, and like the other women, Pallas, at least initially, is unable to cry because "the pain [is] down too far" (172). Seneca takes care of Pallas, aware that when the pain surfaces through tears, Connie needs to help Pallas. Her physical loss of a child echoes the loss of children and mothers the other women have experienced and connects her with Connie, who refers to Pallas as her "poor, poor little one" (173).

When Pallas's narrative continues, Seneca wraps Pallas in a cashmere serape she was given by Norma Fox and "carrying a candle, [leads] her down to Connie" (172). The light to the basement represents the help that the Convent women can offer each other, and Connie's darkness is where the women's true stories are told, away from the prying eyes of society. Pallas's introduction to Connie is powerful because Pallas has requested to see Connie, and Connie immediately senses that Pallas has been hurt in some way, asking her: "Who hurt you, little one?" (173). As with the other women, Pallas has been hurt by many others, and her story shares similarities with Connie's life as well. Pallas's voracious, "gulping" hunger as she remembers a truck ride with the Indian boys who abuse her is reminiscent of Connie's own hunger for her former lover (173). Connie tells Pallas, as Billie Delia has promised, that she can stay as long as she wants and can "tell [her] the rest when [she] wants to" (176).

The "loose, relaxed" Convent attitude Billie Delia describes can be found in Pallas's narrative because of how little Connie and the others require of newcomers before they accept them (176). They require nothing at all, offering themselves unselfishly to others for whatever they need, without tainting the experience with judgment. As she walks up the stairs, Pallas seems to sense "images of a grandmother rocking peacefully, of arms, a lap, a singing voice . . . The whole house [feels] permeated with a blessed malelessness, like a protected domain, free of hunters but exciting too. As though she might meet herself here – an unbridled, authentic self, but which she thought of as a 'cool' self – in one of this house's many rooms" (177). Pallas can also hear the children the other women hear, indicating again the significance of mother and daughter

relationships for her because the chapter that contains the majority of Pallas's narrative is found in the chapter named after her mother, Divine. Gigi says that Connie is good for Pallas, and the women share a delicious meal of chicken and cheese crepes, buttered early corn, bread pudding, and wine that ends with the women all dancing, first with imaginary partners, then with each other. The meal and dancing unites various scenes of eating and dancing of the novel together, indicating a wholeness and completion of a ritual that is indicative of the communal womanist philosophy Connie encourages.

As the final female to arrive at the Convent, Pallas's childlike presence helps complete the types of roles available to women in patriarchal society because she seems completely powerless, unable to care for herself at all or even stop herself from crying once she has begun. Though she tries to leave the Convent, Pallas returns in Connie's section of the novel, now undoubtedly pregnant, showing that she cannot leave until she has admitted to herself that she cannot fool anyone. As all of the Convent women learn, they must each admit the truth to themselves before they can live whole lives with others, and Connie's teaching style allows the truth to surface.

The four women's narratives show the process of travelling and re-establishment in a place to create a home. The process of relocating can be challenging, but each woman seems driven to find a new place and eventually does. In the next section, Connie and Lone's descriptions illustrate their teaching principles through listening to others and setting examples. The way they live sets a valuable precedent for the Convent women and sends a powerful message that teaching and learning can occur both formally and informally through Morrison's text.

CHAPTER 4. THE WOMEN WHO TEACH

Connie and Lone DuPres are the primary female characters that teach others during the time covered in the novel, but they are certainly not the only women who teach, based on the fact that the learning experiences of each woman are contingent upon their development within the larger context of other women and society. For example, Mother Superior, who Connie keeps alive for years before her death, and Piedade, the mystical presence whose teachings are the basis for Connie's philosophy, are female characters that are responsible for teaching her; and Lone is taught by Fairy, a midwife who dies during Lone's life. Though the community of learning through development is much larger than the characters explored most in the novel, their learning is most compelling because it requires such a radical break from traditional, patriarchal values.

Connie, who is taught first by Lone to explore her spiritual abilities to save the physical bodies of others, and Lone, taught by Fairy to save women and their babies during childbirth, represent the characters who best undertake the challenge of seeing the world as flawed and attempting to change it. The experiences that allow these women to teach are rooted in events from their lifetimes, but the message they share with others is one that attempts to find spiritual peace over human power. As antagonists of patriarchy in basic, physical ways through religious chastity and forming personal relationships with women that cannot be mimicked by male-female relationships, Connie and Lone first resist patriarchy in their lives and then continue the work of teaching others.

In keeping with the chronological events of the novel, Connie's chapter is placed before Lone's, though Lone is one of most influential women on Connie's life. Lone, as

Connie's teacher, is responsible for giving Connie the tools to understand her spirituality that she then imparts to others. However, it is significant that the woman who has taught Connie how to reach the spirits of others is discussed after Connie's teaching has been described because readers are not given the source of Connie's knowledge, thus forcing them to question the text and participate in piecing the novel together. Following the empowering learning Connie helps the Convent women achieve, Lone's chapter serves as a conclusion to the plot of the novel that takes place in the Convent and Ruby. Readers are left with a haunting sequence that forces them to contemplate the horrendous results of not learning or changing as well as the brutal confrontation between opposing social systems of power.

Connie

The character Consolata, known by most as Connie, exemplifies how the women learn from each other to be self-dependent and, thus, she is the woman who teaches other women how to be independent of men and free from the restrictions patriarchy imposes on women's lives. More than freeing them from dependence on men in their lives—though that is an important step in the lives of Mavis, Gigi, Seneca, and Pallas—Connie frees them from the demands of a culture that devalues womanist ideals.

Through her own negative experiences with men, Consolata has learned difficult lessons about living in a society dictated by male desire. In fact, Connie has learned her abilities to understand men in the society because she has watched the actions of men and the women who marry them. Connie's experiences allow her access to many emotions, and her ability to see beyond physical realities makes her the representative of

understanding and intuition to guide the other women in the Convent. As the chief example of Convent values, Connie teaches the other women through her actions, her counsel, and her approach to living. Through watching Connie and later being directed by her, the women learn that valuing human life and multiple perspectives is the only way to effect positive change in one's own life and in larger society, a revelation that is never fully grasped by the male characters.

Although Connie is responsible for the teaching of the other women, she does not readily accept her ability to “see,” to feel, and to heal; she initially rejects it (245). She must first come to trust another person, in this case Lone DuPres, the town midwife, though her services are no longer needed because of the inability of Ruby women to conceive healthy children, indicative of Ruby's failed patriarchal lineage. Through her work with Lone, Connie exemplifies how, like race, personal growth and understanding are not physical characteristics but inner attributes invisible to the human eye. “Lone called it ‘stepping in.’ Consolata said it was ‘seeing in.’ Thus the gift was ‘in sight.’ Something God made free to anyone who wanted to develop it . . . The dimmer the visible world, the more dazzling her ‘in sight’ [becomes]” (247). As Connie masters her supernatural powers, she learns more about herself because she can physically inhabit the gaze of another.

As the representative that teaches the female community at the Convent, Connie is responsible for causing, indirectly and directly, the changes in the other women. Her influence encourages each woman to achieve her own sense of self through looking at the world in multiple ways. In the “good clean darkness,” Connie shows that physical sight is

not necessary to find truth and what appears to be darkness can be clearer than what can be seen (221). By listening to the women, she shows them they matter, which allows them to recognize their worth and contributions.

“Consolata” is narrated through the structure of Connie’s preparation of a meal, a central event that repeatedly brings the Convent women together. As she reminisces about her life, Connie prepares a sumptuous dinner, symbolizing the way multiple elements must be combined to form a coherent whole. The scenes of surrender of each woman’s pride to vulnerability described previously are interspersed between the cooking process.

Connie’s philosophy of life is distinctly contrary to the patriarchal society outside the Convent. Instead of a world of absolute physical truths, Connie imagines the world in terms of presences and spirituality. Examples of her ability to sense include a “great hovering foot” that she imagines will kill her in her sleep and her ability to transcend boundaries of life and death through her mystical powers encouraged by Lone DuPres (221). She sleeps often in the basement, in a small space “tight enough for a coffin,” but ventures upstairs occasionally, “at night or in the shadowy part of the day” and walks outside, annoyed by the other women’s chatter (221). Already living a half-dead existence, Connie’s talents to revive the dead and dying allows her a unique perspective on life that others, even the women who stay at the Convent, do not at first appreciate. It is fundamental to note that Connie’s philosophy on life is not appealing to anyone, including women, initially because it is so radically divorced from the patriarchy normally perpetuated. Even though abused by patriarchy, it is a comfortable system

because the Convent women know what to expect, and like male characters, the women are first confused and uncomfortable, then they learn to understand her perspective after they have transformed. The reason Connie's perspective on life is altered from the normal patriarchy adhered to is a direct result of her own previous excessive faith in the physical world and the pain it causes her, which leads her to separate herself from the world that has hurt her.

Although Connie allows women to stay at the Convent for as long as they like, which might imply that she enjoys the community of the other women and their communal nurturing through shared meals and conversation, she grows frustrated with their inability to observe what she considers the most important thing in life, the unseen spirit and its connection with the body. She even thinks to "snap their necks" and "kill them all" (222-23). The superficial discussions and bickering of Mavis, Gigi, Seneca, and Pallas mock the values that Connie wishes to instill because they are focused entirely on the earthly, physical world. As a result, Connie begins to fade into the darkness she has created. For example, she finds it hard to remember which woman is which, and it increasingly seems "less and less important to remember," as she begins to separate further and further from earthly values (221). In addition to confusing the women, Connie downplays the importance of their concerns, which, during the eight years that begin with Mavis's arrival at the Convent, never seem to change because of their pride and defiance.

The incessant noise of talking comes to be the only way Connie can differentiate the girls, based on their "wishes—foolish babygirl wishes": "Talking, talking, always talking . . . of surefire moneymaking ventures . . . a treasure chest of money . . . the queen

of scars . . . a sort of cabaret life” (222). Though they all talk of wishes and schemes, the underlying theme of their talk tells “the same tale: disorder, deception and . . . drift” that “paved the way to perdition . . . the greatest of these was drift” (221-22). Given that Connie is not concerned with the specifics of worldly life and grows increasingly immersed in the spiritual life that disregards all of the values of the distorted Christian and race centered religion of the patriarchs of Ruby, “drift” might mean that someone has drifted from their history or their spirit, allowing their inner desires to depart from their actions, and losing touch with their internal direction.

Instead of nurturing their inner being, the women bring symbols of patriarchy into the Convent: “badly cooked indigestible food, the greedy hammering music, the fights, the raucous empty laughter, the claims” (222). Her lack of concern for the meaningless distractions of the girls shows that she is divorced from the purely physical world altogether because she does not care at all about the physical existence except in the ways that she can teach the other women how to appreciate the relationship between their bodies and spirits more fully. The “broken girls, frightened girls, weak and lying” connect Connie with her life before the Convent in painful ways because, as she listens to their immature longings with growing annoyance, “they did not infuriate her as much as their whispers of love which lingered long after the women had gone” (222). The lingering emotions that have led to Connie’s existence as an earthly phantom correspond with her perception of shadows that hover and memories that cannot be forgotten.

The shadowing theme is best represented in Connie’s perception of the world. She notices that each woman asks “. . . permission to linger a few days but never actually

leav[es]. Now and then one or another packed a scruffy little bag, said goodbye and seemed to disappear for a while,” but they always return, hurt by the patriarchal world that makes the Convent so enticing (222). Connie sips smoky Jarnac, indicating her view that is perhaps blurred and cloudy due to her physical circumstances and alcoholism as well as her mental capacity to perceive. For example, like other female presences in the novel, Connie sees the women “float” down the stairs to the basement, living apparitions in her home, like the nonliving apparitions she also perceives. Her ability to perceive such a great amount of stimuli causes her to have short patience with the trivial world-centered talk of the younger women, particularly the talk focused on love, which they talk of “as if they knew anything at all about it” (222). The girls speak of “men who came to caress them in their sleep; of men waiting for them in the desert or by cool water; of men who once had desperately loved them; or men who should have loved them, might have loved, would have” (222-23). The similar stories of unrequited love are all too familiar to Connie, and her narrative describes her journey that leads her to reject patriarchy as a system to live by. Because she can identify and empathize with the pain of the women, Connie becomes the Convent mentor who encourages their development through her own example and unorthodox teaching methods.

The ability to help others see is intricately tied to Connie’s negative experiences with men that led her to the Convent to find a refuge from the dominant modes of patriarchal vision. Remembering her past thirty years spent at the Convent, she recalls one man in particular, and “the wing of a feathered thing, undead, flutter[s] in her stomach” (226). She lets the “feathers unfold and come unstuck from the walls of a stone-

cold womb,” signifying her vulnerable submission to a man she thinks she can trust (229). The lovemaking with the man she loves is different from the “dirty pokings her ninth year subjected her to,” indicating the connection of sex and violence in a female perspective (228). Instead, the moment is “un-memorable, -controllable or -translatable”; it only leans toward language, showing how precise language and male-focused sight are both geared exclusively at obtaining the truth through seemingly absolute and certain situations (229). Furthermore, language’s inadequacy at conveying her love for him is indicative of her spiritual intuition overshadowing her literal verbal expression. Like the language that cannot convey strong emotion, physical sight is not enough to register his appearance or interpret what his actions mean. Connie does not see “him clearly even once during the whole night,” foreshadowing her blurred and, like Mavis’s, perhaps unreliable perception (229). She can only look at herself when he is there and asks, “Do you know how beautiful you are? Have you looked at yourself?” Connie answers him, “I’m looking now” (231). Only through the eyes of the other can Connie even “see” herself, and it follows that this male vision is ultimately harmful to her because it undermines her perception of herself. Viewing herself through the eyes of the other is a decision that curtails her development as a sexual woman because the gaze of the male other, so predominant in the novel, is not one that appreciates women for anything other than their worth as sexual objects and their procreative abilities.

In addition to her negative experiences with men after she is taken into the Convent, Connie is indoctrinated with the fear and disapproval of human-specific love that overshadows love of and devotion to God. When the nuns arrive at the mansion they

transform into a school, they destroy all of the evidence of patriarchal wealth and revelry, though they can never fully eradicate the masculine presence of the erotic sculptures.

Connie learns from the other nuns and works hard to please them as she tirelessly “slept in the pantry, scrubbed tile, fed chickens, prayed, peeled, gardened, canned and laundered” (225). She learns to cook, discovers and cultivates the hot peppers, and attends classes with the Indian girls, though she does not become attached to any of the students (225).

After the years of work devoted to a cause beyond herself, Connie is ill-prepared when she meets the man who betrays her, Deek Morgan: “those thirty years of surrender to the living God cracked like a pullet’s egg when she met the living man” (225). The transition from worshipping God to worshipping man is such an understandable transition for Connie that the main theme of the novel that disapproves of the ascendance of man to God-like status in the patriarchal hierarchy emerges as the catalyzing agent for all of the lessons that Connie learns. The excessive religious devotion to a Christian, Catholic God that is similar to romantic love in the patriarchal system causes Connie to reject both earthly religion and romantic love, but her process of self-discovery is an invaluable experience that allows her to help others who have fallen prey to the excesses of religious and human love.

Before teaching the Convent women, Connie helps teach the Native American girls, and again readers gain insight into her character through the gaze of another. The Native American girls with “beautiful knowing eyes that could suddenly go blank” watch Connie wait for the man with “eyes aglow” (231-32). When he does not come to her, the

girls sit by the fire, singing softly, watching her “just as they always did,” and later women also watch Connie (238). During a moment of rejection, Connie rises “from her chair as if summoned by the sheriff or an angel. In a way it was both, in the shape of a young woman, exhausted, breathing hard but ramrod straight” (238). Connie’s dual presence is indicative of her ability to embody the point of view of another, though she has not yet developed her own strengths enough.

When Connie meets her lover’s twin, he does not openly admit the situation, instead closing his eyes, and when he opens them, he is looking away, denying what he has done (232). She thinks he is dead, and she wakes “watching the world of living things dribbling away with his absence” (324). Her heart, “clogged with awfulness, weakened” leads her to become convinced that “a stranger sat behind the steering wheel, inhabiting the body of him, but not him” (234-35). She backs away, “staring at the exact face of him, repelled by but locked into his eyes, chaste and wide with hatred” and the “pale sky above them is ringed with a darkness coming, which they could not have seen had they looked” (235, 237). Connie’s affair with Deek Morgan and Steward’s betrayal of her shows how the collective blindness of men and women in love and lust can also obscure the human ability to empathize with alternative points of view.

The return to the meal preparation guiding Connie’s narrative signals a return to the Convent women’s stories and also indicates the progression to the novel’s climax. Just as she had done during her beginning years at the Convent, Connie labors in the kitchen as she “cleans, washes and washes again” two hens, feeling out their organs and filling the loosened skin with thick butter (252). Pallas’s narrative interjects with a

passage from a conversation with her father, and then the cooking ritual resumes, as she salts and rubs the hens, adding onion to the roasted hens. Gigi's story then cuts in with the scene of her bath. Then Connie is again cooking, this time peeling potatoes, simmering them and seasoning them with black pepper, pleased with the progress of the meal. The structure of stories interrupting Connie's steady, simmering narrative continues with Mavis thinking again about the Cadillac, and then Connie returns to core and bake apples filled with sweet, warm fluid. Seneca remembers Norma's treatment of her and cuts herself, and then the last supper is completed and ready for consumption.

Connie's life has led to preparation of this moment, the moment when she will impart her knowledge forcefully on the Convent women to teach them all she knows. "The table is set; the food placed. Consolata takes off her apron. With the aristocratic gaze of the blind she sweeps the women's faces and says, 'I call myself Consolata Sosa. If you want to be here you do what I say. Eat how I say. Sleep when I say. And I will teach you what you are hungry for'" (262). No longer a stereotypical Mammy, Connie announces her purpose to the women to teach them that they must be disciplined in order to learn and change. As the women look at each other and Connie, they do not recognize her as the "sweet, unthreatening old lady who seemed to love each one of them best; who never criticized, who shared everything but needed little or no care; required no emotional investment; who listened; who locked no doors and accepted each as she was" (262). Connie requests one final time that if the women have a place to go where someone loves them, they should leave, but everyone else should stay. All the women stay, and thus "they came to see that they could not leave the one place they were free to

leave” (262).

During the timeless basement ritual, Connie introduces her educational pedagogy and life philosophy to the women to teach them how to free themselves from patriarchal control. Connie systematically works through the lessons, first requiring the women to “scrub the cellar floor until its stones [are] as clean as rocks on a shore” (263). Next, they are instructed to encircle the room with glowing candles to create a flattering light under which they are told to undress and lie down. They are to lie however they feel and try different positions before deciding on the one that feels most comfortable. Like the role they assume in patriarchal culture, each woman chooses the position she will take and “tolerate on the cold, uncompromising floor, [and] Consolata walk[s] around . . . paint[ing] the body’s silhouette” (263). The floor represents rigid social confines, and once the silhouettes are painted, the women are told to remain on the floor, naked and silent, “wriggl[ing] in acute distress but . . . reluctant to move outside the mold they [have] chosen” (263). Connie represents society’s watchful observance of women and pressures the women not to deviate from her instructions; they do not because “none wished to be the first to give in before those pale watching eyes” (263). Once humbled on the floor and already taking part in the collective learning process, the women are prepared to hear Connie’s story.

Connie’s monologue explains how she came to realize the importance of incorporating bodily and spiritual needs together:

My child body, hurt and soil, leaps into the arms of a woman who teach me my body is nothing my spirit everything. I agreed her until I met another. My flesh is

so hungry for itself it ate him. When he fell away the woman rescue me from my body again. Twice she saves it. When her body sickens I care for it in every way flesh works. I hold it in my arms and between my legs. Clean it, rock it, enter it to keep it breath. After she is dead I can not get past that. My bones on hers the only good thing. Not spirit. Bones. No different from the man. My bones on his the only true thing. So I wondering where is the spirit lost in this? It is true, like bones. It is good, like bones. One sweet, one bitter. Where is it lost? Hear me, listen. Never break them in two. Never put one over the other. Eve is Mary's mother. Mary is the daughter of Eve. (263)

Several characteristics of her allegorical monologue are significant markers of a Womanist religion. She first describes her bodily pain in terms of a child's pain that can only be healed by the teachings of a woman. Following her first lesson, she falls in love with a man physically to satisfy her spiritual longings, who then leaves her. When abandoned by men, she finds solace again in the arms of the woman, who heals her again. When the teaching woman becomes ill, the younger woman cares for her, holding her, replacing men's significance in her life with the woman. Only when she can forsake her purely physical attraction for the man for her deeply spiritual care for the woman does she realize the importance of spirit and body working together, opposites that belong together, never unequal, always two sides of the same relationship.

She then tells of an idyllic place, where "white sidewalks [meet] the sea and fish the color of plums [swim] alongside children . . . [with] fruit that taste[s] the way sapphires look and boys using rubies for dice . . . [and] scented cathedrals made of gold

where gods and goddesses [sit] in the pews with the congregation” (264). The place Connie describes seems to be a description of paradise or a heavenly place, free from the earthly problems that have brought the Convent women to the Convent, in need of Connie’s teaching. Following the mystical description of the place, Connie tells them of a woman named Piedade, “who sang but never said a word,” which is how the “loud dreaming began” (264). The loud dreaming is the process of remembering the events of one’s life to tell the story and then understand one’s self more fully.

Each of the women in turn remembers the stories of her life; “Half-tales and the never-dreamed escaped from their lips . . . it was never important to know who said the dream or whether it had meaning” (264). Through the dreaming, they understand each other’s stories; “they step easily into the dreamer’s tale,” showing that they can empathize with each other’s struggles (264). Furthermore, in “loud dreaming, monologue is no different from a shriek; accusations directed to the dead and long gone are undone by murmurs of love” (264). The loud dreaming represents the painful events the women have endured and the shared love of their female community has the ability to heal those emotional wounds. While not able to erase the painful dreams and memories, the shared stories are essential to claiming personal empowerment in an alternative, woman-centered theology of acceptance.

The women’s transformation after Connie’s spiritual intervention is all-encompassing and changes their perception of the world completely. “With Consolata in charge, like a new and revised Reverend Mother, feeding them bloodless food and water alone to quench their thirst, they altered. They had to be reminded of the moving bodies

they wore, so seductive were the alive ones below” (265). Changed so greatly that they relinquish entirely the bodies that have been controlled for so long under the confines of male desire and male expectation, the Convent women are able to fall in love with their own spirits. They are seduced by the very element that has been stifled and beat out of them by the men in their lives, and, in being seduced by a new kind of love, are able to bring that love to reconcile with their pasts.

Lone

Following Connie’s chapter, the events that lead up to the Convent shootings and the raid itself, the destructive culmination of limited patriarchal views, are vividly depicted through Lone DuPres’s narrative. Lone, the midwife who encourages Connie to use her healing powers to help others live, serves an important function because her existence shows that those responsible for teaching must learn first in order to teach. Lone learns to teach through the gained responsibility and empowerment of performing a job that mystifies men. Fairy describes the role of the midwife as “the interference, the one giving orders, on whose secret skill so much depended, and the dependency irritate[s] [men]” (272). Lone’s influence on Connie creates the blueprint for Connie’s teaching method that relies upon observation and immersion in the unfamiliar:

For more than twenty years Lone had watched them. Back and forth, back and forth: crying women, staring women, scowling, lip-biting women or women just plain lost . . . women dragged their sorrow up and down the road between Ruby and the Convent . . . the men never walked the road; they drove it, although sometimes their destination was the same as the women’s . . . (270)

On the night Lone overhears the men meeting by the Oven planning what to do about “how Ruby was changing in intolerable ways,” they do not think about “extending a hand in fellowship or love,” instead choosing to create a defense based on “evidence”: women kissing each other, fighting in the dirt, offering Sweetie poison, growing a secret patch of marijuana, and flirting (275-76). Deeming the women’s lifestyle unnatural and a threat to the “peaceable kingdom” of Ruby, the men cannot continue to ignore the women’s presence because it so enrages their patriarchal ideals of rigid power. Deek and Steward are the main culprits because “neither one put up with what he couldn’t control” (276, 278). One of them states the reasons intended to convince the others that killing the women is the only option:

These here sluts out there by themselves never step foot in church . . . [t]hey don’t need men and they don’t need God . . . If they stayed to themselves, that’d be something. But they don’t. They meddle. Drawing folks out there like flies to shit and everybody who goes near them is maimed somehow and the mess is seeping back into our homes, our families. We can’t have it, you all. Can’t have it at all.
(276)

The Convent women, rather than being viewed as products of a flawed social ideology, are instead considered the source of the problems; it almost seems that the limited sight of men is actually an overused ability to deny reality. In fearful denial, the men agree to follow through with the plan.

After the meeting that ends with alcohol-laced coffee and thick, pan-fried steaks, the men prepare for battle while the women enjoy the rain that pours down, the rain they

have been waiting for and dance, “holy women dancing in hot sweet rain” (283). The women are peaceful; “Consolata, fully housed by the god who sought her out in the garden, was the more furious dancer, Mavis the most elegant. Seneca and Grace danced together, then parted to skip through fresh mud. Pallas, smoothing raindrops from her baby’s head, swayed like a frond” (283). Though differentiated by their dancing styles, the women are finally united in their celebration of self and spirit experienced in their female community. The final moments of the women’s lives before the raid imply that regardless of the earthly consequences, they have learned the internal guidance they need to survive and prosper, *in the ways most important to them*.

The Convent raid scene is depicted in fragments from the men’s perspective as they search for and shoot the women, killing the forces that they do not understand and fear. Nonetheless, they are mesmerized by the women’s dwelling and lose track of where the women are, so that, when Roger Best drives to the Convent to collect the bodies, he finds evidence of only one death; all the rest have disappeared, and the Cadillac is gone, too. It appears that the ambiguous final scene of the Convent leaves room for multiple interpretations because nowhere does Morrison explicitly state who has been injured or killed, or who “the white girl” is. When Roger cannot find the victims, the narrator states that the women “are not hiding. They are loose” (287). Finally free through an ambiguous death or escape, the women are not going to keep their independence inside any longer.

Connie and Lone’s chapters describe the types of listening and observation that enable them to teach others. Connie’s decision to move beyond those practices to a more direct teaching method and Lone’s decision not to warn the Convent of the impending

attack show how female characters can enable change through teaching but still not act to create direct change or stave off danger. Just as all the novel's characters have varying degrees of intuition and flexibility to change, the female teachers have different ways of acting in society, showing how important it is to recognize the personal aspects of teaching, learning, and change in each individual.

CHAPTER 5. CONCLUSION

Paradise ends with a sequence of scenes depicting Mavis, Gigi, Seneca, and Pallas encountering family members one final time, and concludes with a mystical passage that implies that Connie has reconnected with her muse Piedade. The final pages presenting the reader with alternatives for characters' lives after the implied finality of the opening murder scene seems to suggest that change is possible. The added endings for certain Convent characters imply that those characters have a special significance, if only because readers are given additional material on their lives in a remembrance or flashback format. Mavis, Gigi, Seneca, and Pallas—each identified by name in the passage—have final scenes that show how the learning and change that result from it can create positive difference in the lives of the characters that is not seen in *Ruby* as a whole. It is significant that only the female characters have flashbacks that show healing and balance, and only after the pivotal humbling scene with Connie and their implied exodus from *Ruby* altogether. The events in the final pages of “Save-Marie” support a learned and learning relationship between the women and invite readers to continue the work of the women. In the version of paradise Morrison presents:

Combative Gigi appeases her hunger for overly idealistic men with a real childlike Seneca woman. Inept Mother Mavis comforts her no-longer difficult daughter, Sal; abandoned daughter Seneca smiles at her child mother, Jean; betrayed daughter Pallas ignores her disloyal mother . . . [and] Connie's solace comes to her in the songs of Piedade, a wordless nurturing figure. (Mayberry 257)

Each woman's story seems to continue in a way that is satisfying for the woman yet

puzzling to the people they encounter, further contributing to the ethereal close of the story.

Mavis is recognized by daughter Sal, now Sally, in a diner. Mavis orders a hearty breakfast but Sally requests only coffee. Mavis relishes her meal while Sally talks about their past family life and Frank's alcoholism and sexual abuse. Mavis will not promise to return or visit Sally's kids, but Sally still reassures her mother, saying, "I don't know what you think about me, but I always loved, always, even when" and Mavis responds that she has known this (315). Following their brief encounter, Mavis disappears into the crowd. Though her disappearance is similar to her disappearance after the twins' death, Mavis has come to terms with her shortcomings as a mother in the life she led before finding the Convent. Once a woman who agreed with Frank's declaration that she is "the dumbest bitch on the planet," Mavis has grown to know herself and accept the past, moving forward with confidence in herself (37).

As opposed to Mavis's meeting with her daughter, Gigi's conciliatory moment occurs when she meets with her father, who has been in prison for many years. In her camouflage fatigues, boots, and T-shirt, Gigi has relinquished her sexualized clothing for the lifestyle she had wanted to live. Following her reunion with her father, Gigi's story ends as she relaxes on the shore of a hidden lake with her female lover, free to live and love whomever she wants without answering questions.

Seneca is recognized by her "huge chocolate eyes" by the woman who abandoned her as a child (316). Treated as an object her entire life, when Jean recognizes Seneca after mistakenly seeing her many times, Seneca denies knowing her; perhaps, in learning

to be in charge of her own life, Seneca decides to control who she will talk to and when. By making small decisions, she is no longer the object of others' control.

Like Seneca, Pallas encounters her mother one final time as an empowered woman. The significance of Pallas as a child is shown in the novel because it is Divine, or Dee-Dee, who recognizes Pallas, but Pallas, looking to see where her mother's grunts are coming from, cannot see where the sound is and walks past her mother's home. Pallas leaves the house with the Convent women, and Dee-Dee cannot tell if the other passengers are men or women, signifying Pallas's growth as they drive "off into a violet so ultra" it breaks her heart (312). Pallas's growth is shown by her ability to deny her mother's power in her life and take charge of her emotions and responsibility for her actions.

The section that seems to be devoted to Connie describes a "younger woman whose head rests on the singing woman's lap" and there is "nothing to beat this solace which is what Piedade's song is about, although the words evoke memories neither one has ever had" (318). The peace the woman finds in Piedade's song and company shows the Womanist values Connie encourages in the Convent women. The words sing of "reaching age in the company of the other; of speech shared and divided bread smoking from the fire; the unambivalent bliss of going home to be at home—the ease of coming back to love begun," which are precisely the values the Convent women learn to appreciate and seek in their lives (318).

The bittersweet reunions in "Save-Marie" offer a hopeful admonishment to readers, though the Convent women still decide to separate from their family members.

The significance of the meetings (real or fantastical) is in the fact that, with loving relationships and value of family, change is possible and paradise, however conceived, is reached through the work and the results of learning. Each woman experiences a positive result after Connie teaches them in a different way that helps the reader understand how learning through enlightened sight and experience enables positive change. The solution to the conflict between worldly values and spiritual transcendence “is to locate the balance between within a single psyche” (Mayberry 260). The balance, as opposed to giving equal attention to all areas of one’s life, is shown to be an acceptance of one’s own abilities and limitations, and then living in a way that values the spirit at all times.

Locating the balance Mayberry references shares characteristics with Womanism because *Paradise* celebrates and “embraces the inextricability of the heavenly and the not-so-divine” and “articulates then extends Africanist, European, African American, and womanist spiritual and artistic sensibilities” (223). These sensibilities can be summarized by Marsha Foster Boyd’s description of “WomanistCare”:

WomanistCare is the intentional process of care giving and care receiving by African American women. It is the African American woman finding her place and her voice in this world. It is the bold expression of that woman caring for her circle, be it small or large. It is the expression of that woman influencing her circle, be it small or large. In this process, the focus is on the holistic care of body, mind, and spirit in order that healing and transformation occur for African American women and their circles of influence. (198)

Furthermore, the concept of WomanistCare “speaks of the importance of narrative and

voice in the healing and transformation process of African American women . . . content that is self-directed, not other-directed [and] . . . encourages African American women to see themselves as the subject of conversation, no longer the object” (Boyd 199). By telling her own story, each woman “claims her story and establishes her own boundaries [and] . . . the telling of one’s story and finding comfort and power in that story are essential for healing and transformation” to show “the importance of one’s personal and cultural history as well as the impact of one’s family of origin on one’s choice making . . .” (Boyd 199). By refusing to sacrifice self and spirit to institutionalized social mandates, the Convent women are able to overcome the physical conditions of their lives to understand life and love in more complete, life-affirming ways.

Using the model of womanist theology and WomanistCare described above as a means of understanding the Convent women’s alternative lifestyle is helpful because it emphasizes both aspects of Connie’s teaching. First, the Convent women are able to gain understanding of their history; second, they tell their own stories, claiming power in their lives and reaching a comfortable balance between self and other. The place of balanced understanding is the manifestation of paradise Morrison seems to encourage because the women acknowledge past, present, and future truths in order to work for equality and power in a (still) patriarchal hegemony.

Paradise, while a difficult and painfully honest text at times, offers rewarding insights into the possibility of change in race and gender relations in America. Womanist ideals seen in the novel also surface in the words of many other writers and artists, such as Alice Walker and Zora Neale Hurston, indicating the importance of progressive social

change and the continuing interest in developing new alternatives to oppressive and limiting patriarchal social hierarchies. By developing an understanding of their worth, the Convent women learn to realize that they have the power to escape and live the way they feel. Finding paradise is revealed as a continuing journey for readers, and though the task is daunting, incorporating the understanding gained from Womanist teachings allows anyone to search for the self-empowerment to imagine possibilities for positive change.

NOTES

1. Andrea O'Reilly emphasizes that Ruby "is *not* a community—modeled as it is on patriarchal values of power, status, ownership, and control" (140). Furthermore, the values allow discrimination to prosper because they ignore the contributions of anyone not holding status, namely, women and the racially disadvantaged (Mayberry).
2. Parallels between *Paradise* and Dante's *Il Paradiso* (Mayberry 223); myth of American West (Mayberry) reader-response activity (Krumholz 22, Aubry); maternal relationships (O'Reilly 140); cultural criticism (*Toni Morrison's (Hi)stories . . .* 44).
3. Kirk-Duggan shows how African American Spirituals reflect racial and female oppression that can be seen in Ruby in *Exorcizing Evil: A Womanist Perspective on the Spirituals*.
4. Morrison's only short story "Recitatif" also explores racial markers while being racially ambiguous. She writes that it is "an experiment in the removal of all racial codes from a narrative about two characters of different races for whom racial identity is crucial" (*Playing in the Dark* xi).
5. Elaine Showalter's description of the experiences of female writers mimics that of the Convent women's because "women's culture forms a collective experience within the cultural whole, an experience that binds women writers to each other over time and space," showing how "the emphasis on the binding force of women's culture that this . . . differs from Marxist [patriarchal] theories of cultural hegemony" (27).

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