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Female sexual identity in Toni Morrison's *Love*

by

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

“People tell me I am always writing about love. I nod, yes, but it isn’t true—not exactly. In fact, I am always writing about betrayal. Love is the weather. Betrayal is that lightning that cleaves and reveals it”—Toni Morrison ¹

In Toni Morrison’s foreword to her 2003 novel *Love*, the author positions her latest work as a continuance of themes explored in the body of her literary career. The foundational plots of Morrison’s novels, in which these themes are carried out, typically consist of African American characters struggling to form identity in a world where racial inequality and sexism are inescapable. Family often forms the primary grouping through which Morrison explores the development of identity, not only as a powerful unit on its own, but as a microcosm of the pressures placed upon the individual by society. It is within the family— whether biologically, maritally, or platonically formed— that Morrison confronts the themes of love and betrayal, and the struggle these conflicting forces create within the individual.

The continuation of love and betrayal as subjects central to her works demonstrates a persistence of female characters and strong female relationships that have been shaped by the intertwining of these two forces. For Morrison, betrayal is not irreparable, though this mending may be difficult to achieve, especially for female characters whose identities have been warped by the struggle to love one another in the face of abandonment. Abandonment as a form of betrayal is central in the

¹ Morrison, Toni, “Foreword,” *Love* (New York: Random House, 2003) x.

characterization of the prominent female figures—Heed the Night, Christine, and Junior — in *Love*. The lives of *Love*'s characters have been shaped by the betrayals they have suffered, largely at the hands of one another. Further, the plot centers on the trauma that each woman has suffered in her past, and the ways in which these past traumas affect the women in present. While every woman has a history of individual experiences that shape their psyches (involving poverty, racial oppression, and sexual abuse), their identities are intertwined.

Morrison asserts that the relationship central to the novel may not be the more obvious pairing of Heed and Christine, but the triad of Heed, Christine, and Junior.² She writes: “among the things Christine, Heed, and Junior have already lost, besides their innocence and their faith, are a father and a mother, or, to be more precise, fathering and mothering” (Foreword). Their families have betrayed them all through neglect; unfit parents who hinder their achievement of self-actualization have abandoned the three women.

Though the three women avoid feeling connected to one another, their reactions to betrayal manifest in similar ways. Struggling to gain agency and overcome the traumatic experiences of her past, each character becomes consumed by the sexual aspects of her identity. Each has relied on heterosexuality as a means to remedy the trauma of abandonment and as a way of obtaining power. In the opening chapter, the omniscient voice of the ghostly ‘L’, describes the tale of the Cosey family that is about to unfold as a story of “female recklessness” (Morrison 4). The women are both reckless with

² Morrison, Toni, “Foreword,” *Love* (New York: Random House, 2003) xii.

themselves and reckless with each other, embracing their sexual power, while forsaking the strength that can be found through strong female bonds.

In place of identifying with one another based on shared experience and sisterhood, the women allow patriarchal family constructs to become the major formative force in shaping their identities. They continually rely on a father figure, Bill Cosey, to inform their concepts of identity. The psychoanalytic tradition has investigated the influence of the family unit on the individual, particularly in the development of sexual identity. The frameworks from this tradition, when used to view the relationships between members of the Cosey family, demonstrate how the destructive influences of patriarchal society are inflicted upon women through the family unit. Further, the standards of the patriarchally dominated family that the Coseys attempt to adhere to are damaging to the triad not only as women, but as African American characters upholding a white ideal of family. *Love* provides a strong example of Morrison's examination of female African American characters failing to overcome oppression because their identities are inextricably bound within the systems that oppress them. Heed, Christine, and Junior are bound to each other in a triangular structure that supports a unity between the three women, and the women are individually bound to Bill Cosey in triangular structures of sexual identity, within which the consequences of sexism, racism, and classism damage their self-actualization, and consequently, their relationships with each other.

CHAPTER 2: CRITICAL VIEWS OF FEMALE SEXUALITY

While Heed, Christine, and Junior present themselves as assertive women in possession of enough agency to care for themselves, they are unable to obscure the dependence of their identities upon membership in a family unit. Before the characters are introduced, “L” asserts that the women share the same tale “about dragon daddies and false hearted men, or mean mamas and friends who did them wrong. Each story has a monster in it who made them tough instead of brave, so they open their legs rather than their hearts where that folded child is tucked” (Morrison 4-5). Their families caused the trauma experienced by the women, and so they rely on their sexuality to avoid the pain of addressing their disrupted childhoods. Yet, they are painfully unaware of the roles their families played in constructing the sexual identities they embrace as a means of escape.

First, in their formative pre-adolescent years, the women’s sexual psyches develop around their membership in a family structure. Feminist amendments to Freud’s psychoanalytic theory of the Oedipal complex provide the best framework from which to examine the early development of the women’s sexual identities. Second, the women’s sexual identities encounter another disruption when they must reconcile their identities with one another. The maternal figure from the triad in the Oedipal complex is replaced by one of the other women, and a situation of triangular desire and rivalry results. Lastly, the women discover the possibility of recovery from trauma by embracing their unity, and by doing so they may create their own triad, free from the racial and sexual oppression inherent in the first two triangular patterns of identification.

Oedipal Configurations and Female Sexuality

Freud's positing of the Oedipal Theory in which children develop their sexuality within a familial situation has generated response from feminist critics since the earliest appearances of foundational essays. Responding to Freud, feminist critics often focus on the issue of lack: first, the lack of a penis that Freud uses to define women's psychological development, and second, the lack of consideration he gives to the differences between the psychological development of women and men. Nancy Chodorow³ has argued extensively that Freud's views on female sexuality as expressed in the Oedipal Complex are oversimplified. Amending Freud's theory through a feminist perspective, Chodorow examines the function of the triadic relationship between mother, father, and daughter,⁴ also asserting that the formation of sexuality in women should be approached as relational instead of libidinal (Chodorow 139).

For Chodorow, Freud has neglected the continuing role of the mother in the girl's developing psyche. Rather than struggling with a direct libidinal and heterosexual attraction to her father, the girl develops these desires in great part as a response to the relationship she shares with her mother:

A girl generally does turn to her father as a primary love object, and does feel hostile and rivalrous toward her mother in the process. This 'change of object' may be partly a broadening of innate sexuality, and it is probably in part a reaction to her heterosexual father's behavior and

³ Nancy Chodorow has written extensively on female psychology and Freudian psychoanalysis. Her descriptions of the Oedipal paradigm, specifically, will be applied in this examination of *Love* with a few amendments from other feminist scholars.

⁴ Abel, Elizabeth, "(E)Merging Identities: The Dynamics of Female Friendship in Contemporary Fiction by Women," *Signs* Spring 1981: 413-35.

feelings toward her and his preoccupation with her (hetero)sexuality. The turn to the father, however, is embedded in a girl's external relationship to her mother and in her relation to her mother as an object. It expresses her hostility toward her mother; it results from an attempt to win her mother's love; it is a reaction to powerlessness vis-a-vis maternal omnipotence and to primary identification. (Chodorow 150-1)

Rather than forming an Oedipal attachment to the father at the expense of the mother, as Freud suggests, girls develop an Oedipal attachment to both the father and the mother, and one is not at the expense of the other.⁵ The three women in *Love* were largely deprived of a relationship with their mothers, and the relationships they did have with their mothers were often riddled with irresponsibility and misguided motivations. Instead of forming strong maternal bonds in their developmental years, each girl was pushed to value herself in terms of a paternal figure.

As Chodorow argues, when the triangular relationship between mother, father, and daughter is dysfunctional, the psychological development of the girl's identity (and particularly her sexual identity) will be incomplete. She posits that: "the dissatisfactions of contemporary women stem not only from their experience of social, political, and economic inequality, it stems from their continuing sense of unmet emotional and relational possibilities as well" (Chodorow 155). Though the possibilities Chodorow refers to would be derived from a girl's relationship to her mother, feminist critics of her female Oedipal complex have insisted that there also exists a wealth of emotional and relational possibility through strong, platonic female bonds and that the impact these

⁵ Chodorow, Nancy, "Mothering, Object-Relations, and the Female Oedipal Configuration," *Feminist Studies* Feb. 1978: 137-58.

friendships have on a girl's sexuality should not be underestimated.⁶ Elizabeth Abel accepts the premises that Chodorow puts forth and asserts the importance of her findings on mother-daughter relationships and identity formation, but pushes further to argue that female bonding (same-sex female friendship) is just as important in identity formation (416). Abel's critique of Chodorow aligns with Morrison's critique of patriarchal family structures, which often underestimate the formative function of female friendships in women's sexual identities.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues that Chodorow utilizes the erotic triangle as a tool, "as a sensitive register precisely for delineating relationships of power and meaning, and for making graphically intelligible the play of desire and identification by which individuals negotiate with their societies for empowerment" (27). The power struggle within a triangular relationship between mother, father, and daughter, in which a girl may be torn between identification with her mother and identification with her father, can be reflective of social power structures, particularly of a patriarchally dominated social system that reinforces heterosexuality at the expense of female relational development. Heed, Christine, and Junior struggle with one another in response to a patriarchal arrangement of power. Deprived of parenting with absent fathers and inept mothers, each woman turns to Bill Cooney as a paternal figure.

⁶ Janice Raymond, though largely agreeing with Chodorow, has pointed out that Chodorow's paradigm may fail when applied to the psychological development of women who do not identify as heterosexual. Though the criticisms of Chodorow are valid, none apply to the situation between the women in *Love*. In fact, Raymond's analysis of Chodorow may demonstrate why her reworked Oedipal paradigm applies to these characters so well, in understanding their reliance on their self-identification as heterosexual.

Here, the existences of triangular relationships within the novel take an interesting turn. The Oedipal complex provides not only a basis for examining relationships between parents and children, but also for examining romantic relationships. The theory of triangular desire describes a situation in which two individuals share an object of desire, one of whom possesses the object and one of whom struggles against the rival for possession of the object. Heed, Christine, and Junior are rivals, but they are fighting over a patriarchal figure, causing their relationships with Bill Cosey and with each other to be as complex and intertwined as Morrison's slow revelations of the nature of these relationships. The Oedipal complex enhances the understanding of the women in relation to Bill Cosey as a paternal figure. The three women view Bill Cosey, not just however, as a "papa," but also as a lover. Heed and Junior engage in erotic experiences with Cosey, and Christine uses her grandfather as a model for the sexual relationships she seeks as an adult. The Oedipal complex, when paired with Girardian triangular desire, provides a fuller analysis of these triangular relationships as representative of the influences of society on the family and on individual sexual identity.

Triangular Desire and Female Sexuality

In his foundational psychoanalytic work *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, René Girard posits a psychoanalytic theory for considering sexuality in literary characters based on triangular relationships, which is largely dependent on Freud's Oedipal

triangle.⁷ Triads, he posits, consist of the desirer, the object of fixation, and a mediating presence, which prevents the desirer from obtaining the object. When desire goes unrequited, a form of the betrayal Morrison describes, jealousy and envy result. For Girard, desire and envy are inseparable: “jealousy and envy imply a third presence: object, subject, and a third person toward whom the jealousy or envy is directed” (11). These two “vices,” or emotional responses, are therefore triangular⁸: the subject’s desire is focused on the object, but their jealousy is focused on the mediator. Further, he argues that “true jealousy is infinitely more profound and complex; it always contains an element of fascination with the insolent rival” (Girard 12). The desirer, unable to obtain the object of fixation, shifts their fixation to the mediating rival.

Increasing the complexity of this dynamic, Girard asserts that “the impulse toward the object is ultimately an impulse toward the mediator; in internal mediation this impulse is checked by the mediator himself since he desires, or perhaps possesses, the object”(10). As Girard describes it, triangular desire occurs between two men vying for the affections of the same woman, which limits the application of his theory. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick complicates this arrangement in *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, exploring the possibilities for triangular desire between different gender configurations. For Sedgwick, as well as in the study of *Love* undertaken here, this key aspect of Girard can be summarized as such:

⁷ Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

⁸ Girard, Renee, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins Press, 1965).

Girard traced a calculus of power that was structured by the relation of rivalry between the two active members of an erotic triangle. What is most interesting for our purposes in his study is its insistence that, in any erotic rivalry, the bond that links the two rivals is as intense and potent as the bond that links either of the rivals to the beloved: that the bonds of ‘rivalry’ and “love,” differently as they are experienced, are equally powerful and in many senses equivalent. For instance, Girard finds many examples in which the choice of the beloved is determined in the first place, not by the qualities of the beloved, but by the beloved’s already being the choice of the person who has been chosen as rival. In fact, Girard seems to see the bond between rivals in an erotic triangle as being even stronger, more heavily determinant of actions and choices, than anything in the bond between either of the lovers and the beloved. (Sedgwick 21)

These important aspects of Girard’s theory are applicable, even when the genders of the individuals in the triangle are different. Sedgwick complicates the function of the erotic triangle through her consideration of gender arrangements within these structures. She asserts that both Girard and Freud assume the power relations within an erotic triangle are symmetrical, and that what has been overlooked is how this dynamic changes when the gender of at least one participant is different from the typical heterosexual arrangement.⁹ This divergence from typical heterosexual gender arrangement within a triangle can occur within a triangular relationship between three individuals of the same sex, or as is the case in *Love*, between two women and a male object of desire.

⁹ Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985) 23.

Sedgwick demonstrates that prohibitive cultural systems are reflected in these triangular relationships, even when complicated with varying gender arrangements.¹⁰ In *Love*, the prohibitive system is the dependence on heterosexuality in identity formation. The women position Cosey as an object of desire because they only know how to achieve agency, or compensate for a lack of power, through heterosexual relationships. Yet, as Girard and Sedgwick would suggest, the women are struggling to form identity in relation to their interaction with the rival. They explore their homosocial bonds with one another through reliance on the culturally acceptable heterosexual connection to the male object of desire.¹¹ Heed, Christine, and Junior ultimately limit the depths of their explorations of their bonds to one another by understanding their relationships in terms of desire for a male object.

Black Feminist Criticism and Psychoanalysis

While psychoanalytic theory based on triangular relationships can provide a helpful framework for analyzing the sexual identities of female characters in *Love*, it should also be considered that Morrison depicts characters who are African American, and whose sexual identities will necessarily be shaped by a patriarchal society that promotes not only sexism, but also racism. Freudian psychoanalysis in general, as well as feminist psychoanalytic theories which have stemmed from Freud, have been

¹⁰ Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky, *Epistimology of the Closet* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991) 15.

¹¹ Butler, Judith, "Capacity," *Regarding Sedgwick: Essays on Queer Culture and Critical Theory*, eds. Stephen M. Barber and David L. Clark (New York: Routledge, 2002) 112.

interpreted as ethnocentric due to Freud's methods for collecting data, which came largely from his Caucasian, middle-class patients.¹² Further, feminism in general (and particularly feminist psychoanalytic criticism) has been criticized for ethnocentrism and classism for focusing primarily on sexual oppression as it applies to middle-class, white women.

Therefore, feminist studies undertaking a psychoanalytic analysis of Morrison must consider not only how characters are gendered, but also how they are racialized. Aoi Mori describes the differences that exist between a traditionally white, middle-class feminism and African American feminist criticism, asserting that Morrison develops her female characters as explorations of how self-hood develops in relation to specifically African-American concerns. Mori argues that Morrison who is "acutely aware of the place historically assigned to black women and suspicious of white middle-class feminism, refuses to be influenced by stereotypes but rather attempts to depict her female characters as subjects that emerge from an oppressed situation and who seek survival" (29). In *Love*, the dynamic female characters lack parenting (and subsequently, healthy development of sexual identity) due to the inability of their families to overcome racial adversity.

Jane S. Bakersman posits that Morrison explores "the results for black women when the values are real and powerful but are designed primarily for middle-class

¹² Walton, Jean, "Re-Placing Race in (White) Psychoanalytic Discourse: Founding Narratives of Feminism," *Critical Inquiry* 1995, 776.

Walton provides an in-depth analysis of the application of psychoanalytic theory to subjects of varying racial identities, demonstrating that this discussion dates back to the 1920's. She argues that race and sexual identity must be considered together, and that separating the two will not lead to a more "pure" psychoanalysis of any given case.

whites” and “what happens to women whose values (and value) are determined by the men who control their lives” (542). In *Love*, the powerful values are those of a patriarchally dominated household and the controlling male figure is Bill Cosey, who fraught with racial self-loathing, gives these values power over his family. Morrison’s depiction of “female characters searching for love, for valid sexual encounters, and, above all, for a sense that they are worthy” (Bakersman 541) is manifest in *Heed*, *Christine*, and *Junior*. In response to the values upheld by Bill Cosey, the women all seek self-worth and love through their sexual identities.

Morrison further complicates the convergence of racial identity and sexual identity through *Love*’s time frame from the 1940s through the 1990s. This particular expanse of time allows Morrison to address how the Civil Rights movement failed to better the lives of many African American women. Barbara Christian describes a discrepancy between the figment of the idealized African American family, which was perpetuated from the 1960s on, and the actualities of domestic violence and struggle that took place within these families (124). She asserts that violence and struggle within these situations led to internalizations of this destruction, particularly for women (124) and that that destruction goes “against the monumental image of the strong black woman who could bear anything, would bear anything, an image so often invoked by black society” (125). In reality, Christian argues, the value of black women in familial arrangements was questionable, due to the fact that these idealized families were often an “imitation of the Western Christian family” (125), which was inherently flawed in its subordination of women. Bill Cosey treats his family as such an imitation, in which he is

the dominating paternal figure who provides his family with material wealth to compensate for a lack of affection.

Through exploring the psyches of these women in her novel, Morrison provides a map for us to see how these systems of racial and sexual oppression affect the development of the individual. Using the psychoanalytic paradigms provided by the traditions of feminism and gender studies allows a fuller revelation of how conforming to patriarchal standards is disruptive to individual development, and how trauma occurs within families who limit their interactions in terms of heterosexual roles. Applying these psychoanalytic triangular paradigms to each of the three main female characters in *Love* explicates the reliance of Heed, Christine, and Junior on their heterosexual identities and leads to an overarching triangular unity as the reconciling force between their identities as women encountering gender prejudice and their identities as African Americans encountering racial prejudice.

CHAPTER 3: *LOVE* AND THE CONFLICT OF ABANDONMENT, RIVALRY, AND UNITY

Love's tension results from the conflicting feelings of abandonment, rivalry, and unity experienced by each member of the female triad in regard to their conceptions of family. Familial abandonment creates emotional vulnerability among the women, causing them to seek agency, or control, over their lives; without paternal and maternal figures to guide them, they continue to cling to the broken structures that have shaped their identities. Lack of parenting, and even the absence of one or more parent, does not preclude the Oedipal complex from being manifest in the women's psyches. Rather, the fact that the women's psychological development may have been unfulfilled explains why they so aggressively seek approval. They still search for validation from the father, even overcompensating for the love they never received with overt heterosexual behavior. When the women find a common source of validation, rivalry occurs, obscuring the unity that exists between the members of the female triad. Ultimately, the women are not able to recover from trauma without relying on the strong homosocial bonds they share.

All three motivating forces (abandonment, rivalry, unity) manifest around various family structures. During the jumbled timeline of events which form the structure of the novel, family becomes a shifting entity; all family units can be labeled as the Cosey family, whether or not the patriarchal figurehead is present. Morrison characteristically avoids chronological plot construction, which emphasizes the traumatic shifts that the characters experience. If the genesis of the family unit is tracked chronologically, the

structure changes according to who is caring for whom. The issue of inheritance creates the most dysfunction within the family.

After the death of his son, Bill Cosey becomes the absolute patriarchal figure in the family, providing for his daughter-in-law and his young granddaughter. He marries Heed, who inhabits the role of wife and daughter simultaneously, creating a struggle between May and Christine and their new mother-in-law/ grandmother. When Bill Cosey dies, with Christine gone, Heed becomes the primary caretaker of an ailing May; with the help of L, Heed's agency in the home peaks. Then, when May dies and Christine returns, Heed becomes the family member who needs caring for. At this point, Heed and Christine share their agency; the two older women cannot survive without one another and they live in this arrangement for years, until Junior "joins" the family as an additional caretaker, causing the disruption that begins the novel.

Oedipal Configurations in Love

The sexual identities of the Cosey women are formed by their relationships with the paternal figure of Bill Cosey. Often, the dominance of the Oedipal complex in forming female sexual identity obscures the influence of female companionship upon women's developing sexual identities, demonstrated here by the triad of Heed, Christine, and Junior. Chodorow describes sexual identity as contingent upon relationships with both the mother and the father, however, in the cases of Heed, Christine, and Junior, their relationships with their parents are less than ideal, and in some cases, nonexistent.

Searching for validation from a paternal figure results from not just the absence of the father, but also the absence of a mothering force.

As Morrison states in her Foreword, Heed, Christine, and Junior have been deprived of mothering and fathering. Heed feels no connection to her family, and when she does reflect on them, she only feels a connection to the stigma of growing up poor. In a sense, her parents abandon her to Bill Cooney in exchange for two hundred dollars and a pocketbook. Christine's mother deferred all parental worry to the pleasing of her father-in-law, before her mind deteriorated and she was unfit to parent her daughter. Junior's mother failed to protect her from abusive uncles, allowing her to endure traumatic experiences that drove her to run away.

The three have been deprived of the nurturing and protection from racial and sexual discrimination that the institution of family should, ideally, provide. Andrea O'Reilly argues that for Morrison, mothering is "concerned with how mothers, raising black children in a racist and sexist world, can best protect their children, instruct them in how to protect themselves, challenge racism, and for daughters, the sexism that seeks to harm them" (1). Heed, Christine, and Junior have mothers who have failed to instruct their children, abandoning them to societal constraints and forcing them to seek independence without proper instruction. Thus, each woman gains her sense of self through reflecting the roles prescribed to her by society, instead of reflecting an empowered sense of self that is the ultimate goal of mothering. Abandonment, the primary form of betrayal in *Love*, is the shaping force of sexual identity. The three women possess a false sense of power, derived from sexuality.

Additionally, class is positioned as a central issue to the sexual identities of the main female characters in *Love*. Each experiences a lack of opportunity, and attempts to gain social mobility, and therefore acceptance, through using her sexuality. In trying to utilize what they perceive as sexual power, each commits herself to a form of slavery in which she trades her sexuality for a false sense of security. For African American women, the convergence of compulsory heterosexuality and ownership become more complex. Sexual identity and issues of possession relate to systems of ownership, both slavery and patriarchy, through which African American women have been doubly victimized. Heed, Christine, and Junior all see themselves as gaining control in a masculine world by clinging to their heterosexuality and seeking reinforcement of their identities through relationships with men, when in reality they have each submitted to a life of limitations and abuse.

Each woman in the triad gains a false sense of power through reliance on heterosexual behavior, learned through early psychological development. The most tragic case of the three is in Heed, who at the age of eleven trades herself to an old man in exchange for physical comfort and social elevation. Part of Heed's naiveté results from her identification with Bill Cosey as her "papa." Still a prepubescent girl coming to terms with her own sexuality, Heed (in accordance with the Oedipal paradigm of development) turns to a father figure to reify her sexuality. Wen-ching Ho describes Heed's recollections of her relationship with Bill Cosey as "sugar coated" (665). She only reflects upon how her marriage benefitted her, unaware of how her early union with a man several times her age could harm her development. Heed views her husband as

someone who protected her: “when he was around, everybody backed off. Time after time he made it clear—they would respect her” (127). Heed views the hostility of her new family members as a response to her former position as lower class, and not as a reaction to the age difference between she and her new husband. Though she may have difficulty looking inward, Heed does understand that she married to protect herself from class discrimination. Her desire for parenting cannot be separated from her desire for financial security.

Outwardly, Heed believes that she is elevating her social standing, and therefore her worth, by marrying Bill Cosey. Heed, though naive about Bill Cosey’s pedophilic motivations, understands her external motivations for marrying him. Recalling her lower-class upbringing, she reflects: “marriage was a chance for me to get out, to learn how to sleep in a real bed” (Morrison 127). By becoming a Cosey, Heed hoped to escape her impoverished and lonely familial situation, and to shed her identity as lower class. Trading the innocence of her sexuality for an exploitive marriage and sleeping in a bed with an old man is better than a life with no bed at all.

Perhaps Heed fails to see her union with Bill Cosey as ugly and wrong because she appreciates the opportunity for social mobility that is the result of his interest in her, and because she is only eleven years old. With no parental guidance, she is never informed of the consequences of her choice, that her marriage to Bill Cosey will result in the loss of her innocence. She uses the only asset she feels she possesses, herself, in order to elevate her social standing. Outwardly, Heed believes that she has increased her worth by marrying Bill Cosey, feeling excited over her “wedding” and new belongings.

Yet she is stung by the accuracy in Christine's judgment of her: she is less his partner and more his slave. She willingly submitted to the old man's desires, relinquishing her agency as an individual more than taking control of her own destiny. Her identity as a Cosey is subordinate to the patriarchal figurehead of the family, her husband.

Emphasizing both the abrupt change in her relationship to Heed and the shocking emergence of sexual identity in the child, Christine describes the marriage of her friend and her grandfather as something that was done to her by Heed: "one day we played jacks; the next she was fucking my grandfather" (Morrison 132). Here, Christine grants Heed a sexual agency in acting against her that Heed never perceived and which likely never existed. Christine's commentaries on the actions that caused the rift between herself and Heed consistently have a dual function, expressing two ways in which she experienced psychological trauma. First, Christine perceives that her friend has abandoned her. Consequently, Christine's relationship with her grandfather is permanently altered¹³. The insertion of an intermediary, or a rival, in their relationship becomes another source of trauma. Both aspects influence the development of Christine's sexual identity.

Christine, having condemned her friend and feeling alienated from her family, leaves her paternal home to attempt to gain her own agency and becomes a slave much like Heed. In an additional instance of abandonment, her mother and grandfather arrange for her removal from the home before she willingly leaves. After her first removal,

¹³ Because Christine so strongly associates her grandfather as representative of her entire family unit, she feels abandoned by her family as a whole because her role in it has been permanently altered.

Christine returns educated and refined with a strong sense of self, which she flaunts in front of her weaker friend. The second time she is forced from her family, her grandfather openly chooses his wife over his granddaughter:

The real betrayal, however, lay at the feet of the friend who grinned happily as she was led down the hall to darkness, liquor smell, and old-man business. So who had to go? Who had to leave her bedroom, her playhouse, the sea? The only innocent one in the place, that's who. Even when she returned, a sixteen-year-old, poised and ready to take her place in the family, they threw her away, because by then Heed had become grown-up-nasty. Mean enough to set her on fire. (Morrison 133)

Christine is left with little choice. If she does not leave her home, then she risks her life in struggling to gain control over her triadic relationship with her grandfather and younger step-grandmother. She sees Heed as flaunting her placement within the patriarchal hierarchy of the Cosey family in Christine's face, reasserting her heterosexuality and depriving her of the parental bonds she needs to reinforce her own sexual identity. Christine does not recognize the immense pain and sense of inequality Heed is trying to mask with her anger, or that Heed views Christine as the primary recipient of praise from their shared paternal figure.

Bill Cosey attempts to shape his family around white standards of success, and Christine, as an individual in his family, is also held to those standards. Christine gets pedestalized as "proof and consequence of racial uplift and proper dreams"(Morrison 168). The rift between Christine and Heed grows deeper when Christine realizes that she can hold her education and etiquette over her step-grandmother. Despite Christine's

feelings of abandonment, Bill Cosey privileges Christine over Heed in providing her with opportunities beyond the traditional marital role prescribed to Heed. Though she is driven from her home, she is afforded an education and an opportunity to develop her self-identity as something other than a Cosey woman.

Christine is positioned as the most educated of the three dominant female characters, and is therefore the most attuned to how social influences affect her. For a period of her life, Christine seems to address the repression she has experienced. After leaving home, Christine attempts to confront the sexism and racism she witnesses in society. She endeavors to gain power through her involvement in the civil rights movement, but finds that the mistreatment of women is still prevalent among her colleagues in resistance. As an activist, she is not satisfied by her endeavors because she never confronts the internal struggle for paternal approval that has formed her identity.

Morrison's portrayal of Christine as a civil rights activist connects the issue of gender inequality to the issue of racial inequality. Deborah McDowell argues that Morrison is critical of the results of social justice movements, challenging "the uplifting black movement of the sixties, which she feels overlooked the real voice of black women. She disagrees with the creation of an unrealistic 'perfect' African-American hero and a positive black who should be 'already unified, coherent, and stable'" (78). In *Love*, Christine is the vehicle for Morrison's questioning of the effectiveness of the Civil Rights Movement. Though Christine experienced what was the most productive and empowering period of her life while living and working alongside her activist lover Fruit, she becomes disillusioned about their accomplishments after an instance of rape among

the members of their group goes unpunished. Here, she undergoes a substantial shift in her perceptions of female sexuality.

Christine's psychological issues in relation to validation from a paternal figure resurface. She finds a means of survival in her heterosexuality in a warped form of prostitution where she trades sex for physical comfort. Christine begins a relationship with an older man who offers her comfort in exchange for her sexuality, mirroring the arrangement between Heed and Bill Cosey. She acknowledges that she ended up a "kept woman to a mimeographed copy of her bourgeois grandfather" (Morrison 167). She may receive compensation for her loss, but she is still a slave to an identity from which she tried to escape. Her description of Heed as a slave can now be aptly applied to herself.

In terms of sexual identity, the most seemingly free of the three women is Junior. From the first description of Junior at the beginning of the novel, her sexuality is her dominant characteristic. Junior falsely assumes that pleasure is the main benefit of her extroverted sexuality. Perhaps Junior does receive pleasure from her sexual encounters. Still, the only power she attains is by inciting feelings of passion in men. Her misguided attempts at sexual control can never compensate for the internal void created by the deprivation of parenting.

In many ways, she uses her sexual identity as a facade to mask the trauma she experienced as a child and the impact it has had on her fragile identity. "L" describes the dichotomies that often exist within the identities of sexually aggressive women almost immediately before Junior enters: "wild women never could hide their innocence" (4). With her wild hair, thigh-high boots, and parking lot trysts with younger boys, Junior

seems to outwardly embrace her identity as a wild woman. She uses her overt sexuality as a defense mechanism. Yet, as “L” observes, despite what outward appearances suggest, Junior tries to protect the innocent child that is a part of her identity.

Junior grew up fatherless and “kept looking out for the tall handsome man who named her after himself to show how he felt about her. She just had to wait” (Morrison 55). When Junior arrives at One Monarch street, she feels this search has ended and finds in the specter of Bill Cosey “a reassuring smile that pledged days of hot tasty food; kind eyes that promised to hold a girl steady on his shoulder while she robbed apples from the highest branch” (Morrison 30). She clings desperately to the reassurance she has found, even harming an old woman to prevent the collapse of the perfect family she has engineered for herself with the aid of her ghostly confidant. Her reliance on her created family occurs simultaneously with her initiation into a heterosexual relationship with Romen. In fact, she refers to him as a “gift,” given to her by Bill Cosey, the fruit that results from the presence of a male figure, which he helps her procure.

Reliance on heterosexuality creates a desire, not just for the man, but for the agency he possesses and the sense of physical comfort and emotional well-being he is able to bestow. What the women desire is more complex than a sexual partner, though they embrace sexuality in unsuccessful attempts to gain patriarchal agency. They have equated sexual desire with the desire for control. Their rivalry is not about sexual desire, but power; and the power they seek is a substitute for love. The three women are all part of a shifting family structure in which they have in been neglected in various ways. The parenting they were deprived of shaped their sexual identities, causing them to seek

validation through harmful heterosexual relationships. Each woman utilizes what she feels to be her most powerful asset, her sexuality, to promote her self-interest while paradoxically injuring her psyche in the process.

Rivalry and Triadic Formations

While their endeavors to find stability through heterosexual relationships lead the three women on separate paths of conformity and rebellion, their sexual identities are all influenced by the presence of Bill Cosey in their lives. As Morrison's section titles suggest, Bill Cosey inhabits many roles for many people (friend, lover, father, etc.). Anissa asserts that the presence of these bracketed titles demonstrates a "continuation of identifying roles" (205). His character exists in the novel not as an active participant, but as a passive, but still powerfully influential, object.

Information about Bill Cosey is divulged by the roles he fulfills for other characters and may be one of the most elusive characters in the novel. We are more aware of how racism, rather than childhood sexuality, affected his identity. Wen-ching Ho describes the women's representations of him as "twisted" by their own desires (664). For Heed, he is both the startling combination of the partner (husband, lover) and the care-taking, disciplining "papa." For Christine, after her father's death, he is the absolute paternal figure. For Junior, he is her "Good Man." All of the women hold him up as the dominant male figure in their lives.

In *Love*, triangular desire is shaped by the family unit and mirrors, to an extent, the triadic relationship between father, mother, and child. For all three women, Bill

Cosey functions the desired object, and is the inactive figure in the middle of shifting triangular relationships. Though he is only an object of obvious sexual fascination for two of the women, he is a paternal figure for all three. Even Christine experiences a latent attraction to her grandfather, becoming involved with a man who she herself says is exactly like him. Consequently, due to the abandonment experienced by Heed, Christine, and Junior, Bill Cosey comes to represent the positive male attention the women have been missing all their lives. Heed, Christine, and Junior all form subordinating identities with Bill Cosey as a patriarchal figure; he becomes a paternal figure of desire, in which another of the three women becomes the intermediary in a formation of triangular desire.

The most obvious triangular formation, one that has been discussed in other feminist analyses of *Love*, consists of Heed, Christine, and Bill Cosey. Complicating the situation, each woman sees herself as the desirer and views her former friend as the intermediating rival preventing her from receiving the affections of the desired object, Bill Cosey. Heed views Christine as the favored member of the family, and her hostility culminates on the night of Christine's sixteenth birthday party when Heed sets her former friend's bed on fire. Similarly, Christine harbors hostility that her relationship with her grandfather, and therefore her position in the family, is subordinate to Heed's relationship with Bill Cosey. For Heed and Christine women, sexual desire is mixed with desire for a paternal figure; this same intermingling of desires exists in Junior. When she perceives that Bill Cosey was the "Good Man" she longed for her throughout her life, the other women in the house become an intermediary force, one which she easily overcomes until

the novel's close. As Bill Cosey is no longer alive, the women's desire manifests around the possession of his material legacy.

Material comfort drives each of the women to claim possession over Bill Cosey's inheritance, and early in the novel, appears to be their primary motivation. Yet, as the complex pasts of Heed, Christine, and Junior are revealed, their motives for material comfort betray an underlying desire to receive love from a paternal figure. The women's struggle over Bill Cosey's inheritance demonstrates the intersection of class and reliance on heterosexuality. Systems of inheritance are patriarchally dominated, and the women struggle to claim inheritance in order to reinforce their heterosexual identities.

Love is consistent with, as O'Reilly describes, Morrison's critical views of the traditional nuclear family, which "is structured both by male dominance and the privileging of "white" hegemonic values— money, ownership, individualism" (O'Reilly 25). Bill Cosey is a figure who embraces the ideals prescribed by a sexist, racist society. As an influential force upon the women, he creates more dysfunction than normalcy. Ownership is a prevalent characteristic of Bill Cosey, one that the women inherit. When Bill Cosey dies and the women can no longer fight over his love, they fight over the patriarchal symbol of his inheritance. For much of the novel, the underlying desire for the paternal figure is disguised by a desire for the family home. Heed and Christine continue their feud over the possession of Bill Cosey by struggling over their claims to his inheritance.

Heed relishes her legal claim over the house, and the opportunity to elicit servitude from the other women. Christine forces her way through the front door, then

responds to her servitude by cooking shellfish that her step-grandmother won't eat, and commanding the kitchen with thirteen symbolically-charged diamonds on her fingers: "the rings, themselves a commodification of women's dreams, romanticize heterosexual relationships, which, as Cosey's poker game unmasks, are easily bargained—bought and lost—by men" (Anissa 208). Cosey's possession of these rings demonstrates his flippant treatment of women and his failure to commit to his family emotionally; just as a wedding ring can be a symbol of ownership, the Cosey women are symbols of his success, and their outward shows of family mask the hollow emotional relationships beneath the facade of perfection. Bill Cosey becomes the all-important paternal figure to the women in his family, wins in his conquest of Heed, and then attempts to forsake the Cosey women of their inheritance in favor of his mistress. Junior takes possession over the house as though Bill Cosey has bequeathed it, like Romen, to her. She uses it as a playground for her sexual pursuits, and luxuriates in wearing his clothing, particularly his old boxers. Unlike Christine and Heed, Junior understands the powerful connection between the home and the man who owned it, and that Bill Cosey is still the dominant force inside One Monarch Street.

Junior also realizes that, as Girard and Sedgwick have described, triangular desire is often based primarily on the rivalry between the desirer and the intermediary. As a way of compensating for the loss of one another, Heed and Christine struggle over their claims to Bill Cosey as a way of interacting without having to address the break down of their relationship. Compounded by the pain of having a distorted triangular parental relationship and their subsequent compensation for lack of parenting, the women cannot

embrace a relationship in which the approval of a patriarchal figurehead is not the ultimate source of love. Their relationship has not progressed beyond the point of rivalry because a triangular relationship with Bill Cosey as the coveted entity is the only framework from which they feel they can achieve completeness.

Each can not view the other woman as an object of desire because the women do not comprehend the existence of a family structure in which they rely on friendships with other women. Still living under Bill Cosey's roof, the Heed and Christine struggle between supporting one other and disengaging from one another. Junior has a clear perspective on the complex nature of the relationship Heed and Christine, and realizes the front of separation based on patriarchal alliance and the underlying need for female companionship: "it seemed to her that each woman lived in a spotlight separated—or connected—by the darkness between them" (Morrison 25). Heed and Christine, though tethered together in codependent roles of caretaker, refuse to recognize their need for a confidant. Nevertheless, beneath the external reality of anger, betrayal, and rivalry, the women have subconsciously created a triangular relationship, which allows them to struggle for, and eventually realize the importance of their unity in attaining completeness. With the arrival of Junior, both Heed and Christine begin to confess their secrets, creating an opening for reconciliation through a triangular relationship, within which Junior is the intermediary confidante.

Unity

From a feminist psychoanalytic standpoint, reliance on familial structures as a framework for understanding the development of the female psyche presents a limited view of how female sexuality develops. Abel argues that “recent fiction by women points to the alternative that Chodorow slights: women friends, as well as children, play a crucial role in relaxing ego boundaries and restoring psychic wholeness” (418). The three women’s struggles with desire are more easily understood when considered alongside the essentiality of friendship in the actualizing of their full identities.

The trauma inflicted upon Heed, Christine, and Junior by parental figures drives them toward patriarchal norms (heterosexuality) at the expense of their homosocial bonds, because to value those bonds for their importance in identity formation would be a denial of the socially constructed importance of a male figure. As Jean Wyatt posits, “from the time that Heed is jolted untimely into the world of sexuality and marriage up until the present, when the women are in their sixties, she and Christine occupy a world of patriarchal meanings that precludes their understanding what the loss of their friendship means to them; they can see each other only as rivals” (197). The Cosey family is dominated by Bill Cosey in both life and death; in their longing to receive validation from their membership in a family, the women respond to trauma by embracing a system of patriarchal privilege that allowed the trauma to occur.

Love is not only typical of Morrison's thematic choices,¹⁴ but also of her narrative structure. Though the first half of the novel deals largely with the rivalry between Heed and Christine, the second half is involved with revealing the friendship that once existed between the two women and arranging their reconciliation. Wyatt observes that, "we are privy to the beginning of things—to the deep love between Christine and Heed when they were young girls—only at the end of the novel, after 183 pages of witnessing the two women's bitter enmity" (194).

Morrison withholds information central to understanding the relationship between Heed, Christine, and Bill Cosey, emphasizing the women's struggle over the patriarchal home and inheritance, rather than on the trauma they suffered and their lost friendship. According to Wyatt: "Morrison expands the time frame to make a point, to illustrate the force of patriarchal discourse: after Cosey's death, Heed and Christine remain preoccupied with the signifiers of capitalist patriarchy, with the terms that the Law of the Father endows with meaning: inheritance, property, legitimacy" (98). The women are unable to come to terms with the loss they have suffered in the cessation of their friendship, and so they focus on the recovery and assertion of their identities as heiresses to Bill Cosey's legacy. They believe that asserting their legitimacy to Cosey's inheritance will legitimize their own identities.

Whether wife, granddaughter, or newly initiated stranger, the women of the Cosey family conflate sexual identity with class identity in their desire for claim to the Cosey inheritance. Cosey's bracketed title of "Benefactor" references the false sense of material comfort he creates for his family, and which he bequeaths to the women of his family, who absorb the desire for the material into their identities. Heed draws Junior into the family through material desire: "trusting that whoever answered her ad would need money, she'd been lucky that the first and only applicant had been slick as well as greedy" (Morrison 72). The greed Heed perceives in Junior stems from Heed's understanding that greed is often derived from need. For Heed and Junior, familial abandonment relates directly to class; their parents failed to provide both emotional and physical comfort. Conversely, Christine was provided with physical comfort, but felt emotionally abandoned. She fulfilled the superficial role of the obedient, princess-like daughter and was still forced to leave her family. Unable to claim strong bonds of familial love, Christine focuses on the reclamation of her material inheritance rather than the reclamation of the emotional comfort she formerly found with Heed.

In addition to its significance as a patriarchal symbol and as an object of desire, the physical setting of One Monarch Street becomes a manifestation of the rift, and underlying union, between Heed and Christine. Apart from the two areas of the house where Heed and Christine ruminate, which demonstrates their voluntary removal from one another, the rest of the house remains as it did when Bill Cosey was still alive and is symbolic of how the women's relationship is frozen in time. Within the house, Junior functions as the bridge between the two women: "neither woman was interested in her—

except as she simplified or complicated their relationship with each other” (119). When talking to Junior, rather than forming bonds with the young woman, Heed and Christine experience profound realizations about the nature of their own relationship.

Christine reveals her true motivations for her rivalry with Heed, the reason why she clings so desperately to their feud:

This was important. Her struggle with Heed was neither mindless nor wasted. She would never forget how she had fought for her, defied her mother to protect her, to give her clothes: dresses, shorts, a bathing suit, sandals; to picnic alone on the beach. They shared stomachache laughter, a secret language, and knew as they slept together that one’s dreaming was the same as the other one’s. (132)

When Heed lacked a strong familial relationship, Christine attempted to become her family. She cared for Heed, provided for her, and in these ways, mothered her. For Christine, the relationship was reciprocal. The importance of the connection the two girls felt for each other outweighed Christine’s connection to her own family. Here, Christine reveals that her forfeited relationship with Heed, which results from the desire for patriarchal legitimacy, is the underlying motivation for their continued struggle. She had attempted to recover from her lack of parenting through valuing friendship as a replacement for family, and was betrayed as a result. Heed, her only friend, forms a family with her grandfather, which Christine views as an attempt to subordinate her placement in the Cosey family, and as a betrayal of the family she was attempting to create through an emotional connection to Heed.

Just as the feelings of attachment between Heed and Christine were reciprocal, so were their feelings of abandonment. The rift that Heed experiences between herself and Christine first manifests upon her return from her honeymoon: “Heed was bursting with stories to tell Christine. Wobbling in her new sling-back pumps, half falling up the steps, she was met not just by May’s scorn but Christine’s sulk as well” (127). Neither ever intended to abandon the other, yet both in fact do so, and recognizing the ways in which other forces controlled their behavior is important in coming to terms with the reconciliation that occurs at the close of the novel. Junior’s presence allows the women to have cathartic experiences that are essential to their ability to forgive. Junior’s entrance into the family becomes the catalyst for the chain of events leading up to the reunion of Heed and Christine. In her role as confidant and caretaker, Junior allows the women to relive their pasts through recalling their memories as Junior attempts to learn more about their relationship.

Though the women devote little time to the consideration of Junior, she feels a unity with the two older women and expresses her desire for their reunion and to function with them as a triad: “in time the women would tire of their fight, leave things to her. She could make it happen, arrange harmony when she felt like it” (Morrison 120). Junior’s expression of her desire to reunite the women demonstrates her own need for female companionship in attaining self-actualization. The fact that Junior relates to the women and feels close to them shows through her normally tough facade as she colors Heed’s hair. The close physical proximity and the act of preening over another woman recalls her time spent in a correctional facility. She talks about the lovingness one can

feel through contact with another woman's hands (Morrison 124). Junior had spent much of her life living with only the company of women before arriving at One Monarch Street, and though she also feels a special closeness with those women characterized by mutual understanding, respect, and companionship, she feels the need to reconcile the absence of a father figure in her life.

Junior's facade may be successful at masking her desperation to most of the people she encounters, but her despair cannot be hidden from Heed or Christine. Their ability to see the past trauma behind Junior's current act of strength points to the kinship experienced within the triad as the women share a household and become their own unorthodox family unit. Christine describes Junior as having "the unnerving look of an underfed child. One you wanted to cuddle or slap for being needy" (Morrison 23). The women share the trauma of abandonment, and so they are easily able to recognize Junior's past damage and lack of recovery. Beyond Junior's "wild woman" appearance, Heed and Christine see the innocent child within Junior. Confronted with the embodied parallel to their own pasts, they feel a mix of pity and anger that reflects the internalized struggles with their own identities and informs their proclivities for self-destruction.

Unable to engage in the monumental task of confronting a lifetime of mistakes, Heed and Christine endeavor to substitute unity for isolation; however, they cannot reconcile the two, and their internal strain manifests in violence. Though essentially living in separate physical spaces, they occasionally merge these spaces in fits of rage: "once—perhaps twice—a year, they punched, grabbed hair, wrestled, bit, slapped. Never drawing blood, never apologizing, never premeditating, yet drawn annually to pant

through an episode that was as much rite as fight” (73). The violent expression of their contempt for one another provides a mask, beneath which the two women share an “unspoken realization that the fights did nothing other than allow them to hold each other” (74). They can have these “reunions” without having to give up their insistence on their continued feud.

The sorrow Christine feels at the loss of her friend also manifests in secret ritual behavior, through which she attempts to relive her childhood and re-experience the unbroken friendship the two shared as young girls. Christine still eats from a spoon given to her as a child, with double Cs fading from the handle: “Christine ate every meal she could with it just to hold close the child it was given to, and hold also the pictures it summoned” (Morrison 22). She clings to this spoon, keeping it in her pocket always. In particular, using this spoon allows her to recall the first picnic she had on the beach with Heed, when Christine gladly shared her ice cream as a token of friendship. The girls share their most meaningful moments of mutual identification during picnics on the beach, and it is on one such occasion that both girls lose their innocence in interactions with Bill Cosey. Both girls encounter Bill Cosey engaging in lascivious acts in the same day. Heed meets Bill Cosey and he fondles her undeveloped breasts. Immediately after, Christine sees her grandfather masturbating in her bedroom.

Junior inevitably functions as a unifying force between the two older women, but she receives her most profound sense of agency from the ghostly figure of Bill Cosey. Though she reunites Heed and Christine, she causes the accident that kills Heed and physically abandons the older women in the desolate hotel, and it is her malicious

betrayal, not intentions of unity, that brings them together. When she sees a chance to destroy them both, and to claim the house and her “Good Man” in the process, she abandons her unity with the women. The duality of Junior’s unity/discord with Heed and Christine can be illuminated by her similarities to the mysterious character Celestial. Junior reminds “L” of Celestial, who is simultaneously Cosey’s lover and the woman who threatened to usurp his inheritance, and a private joke between the two girls that is a part of their shared language (Morrison 67). As the secret confidant of Bill Cosey’s spirit, Junior also develops a sense entitlement to his inheritance. The menace she presents by threatening to take his inheritance from Heed and Christine, and the malicious actions she perpetrates in attempting to claim his legacy, become the catalyst for the other two women to find what they desire most—each other.

In the pivotal moment of confrontation when Heed falls through the floorboards of the hotel attic, “the feeling of abandonment loosens a loneliness so intolerable that Christine drops to her knees peering down at the body arching below” (Morrison 177). Having been pushed by Junior, Heed lands in Christine’s childhood bedroom. Without intending to, Junior forces the women to comprehend each other as the abandoned children they once were, and to realize that they each hold on to the pain they suffered as innocent children. Unified by this shared betrayal, Heed and Christine no longer view each other as rivals, but as confidantes. In this neutral setting from their childhood, the women are able to understand the mistake they have made in abandoning their friendship and relying on their patriarchally dictated heterosexual identities in their search for self-actualization.

Huddled together in the desolate hotel, the women's anger turns to sorrow and regret when they realize the loneliness they have inflicted upon each other. The shock of Heed's fall, and her landing in a familiar, and long neglected neutral space leads to revelation. Heed recognizes her mistake in marrying Bill Cosey, and explains to her friend that it was not an act done against her, but rather, for her: "I wanted to be with you," Heed says "Married to him, I thought I would be" (Morrison 193). The love between the two women is openly expressed, and finally learning from their mistakes, they begin their friendship again as though time has not passed since they were having picnics on the beach.

Heed and Christine summarize their misguidance with regret in a statement that reveals the central themes of the novel: "we could have been living our lives hand in hand instead of looking for Big Daddy everywhere" (Morrison 189). Finding an old set of jacks, the women engage in play, returning to the activities they bonded over as children. Realizing the set is incomplete, Christine removes her symbolically charged rings and mixes them with the jacks. With that act, she easily lets go of her reliance on patriarchal values in favor of reuniting with her friend.

Eventually, during the course of Heed and Christine's overdue conversation, their separate voices are nearly indiscernible because their betrayals, and their regrets are similar. Christine says: "he took all my childhood away from me girl"; Heed replies "he took all of you away from me" (Morrison 194). The traumas caused for each of them by Bill Cosey were shared; the loss of innocence, the loss of childhood, and the loss of each other are intertwined. The damage caused to their psychological development can never

be healed by recovered innocence or childhood; the loss of those aspects is irreparable, in a sense, because they can never undo the damaging relationships they have had with men.

The third cause of their shared trauma, the loss of each other, is the central factor to escaping their reliance on heterosexual identities attaining self-actualization.

Individually, they cannot repair themselves. Together, they can achieve healing, and beyond that, happiness.

CHAPTER 4: CONCLUSION

Christine— “Well, it’s like we started out being sold, got free, then sold ourselves to the highest bidder.”

Heed— “Who you mean ‘we’? Black people? Women? You mean me and you?”

Christine— “I don’t know what I mean” (Morrison 185).

Appearances of unity at the end of the novel are confused by the final dysfunction of the triad. Junior’s final betrayal and abandonment of Heed and Christine and the ambiguity of Junior’s fate is indicative of Morrison’s characteristic open-endedness.¹⁵ Unity only occurs between the two older women, who reconcile the trauma that has damaged the ability to achieve self-actualization. The duo remains intact, but a generational rift occurs within the triad.

Demonstrating that she has not overcome the trauma of abandonment, Junior chooses her relationship with her “Good Man” over her relationship with Heed and Christine. She cannot accept a family absent of a dominating patriarchal figure, even one with as much love to offer as is shared between the two older women. If *Love* is truly a love story, then Morrison attempts to rewrite the standard ending of unity between a man and a woman with the reunion of Heed and Christine. Yet, the novel does not end with the bittersweet reconciliation of love and betrayal between these characters. As Wyatt posits: “Morrison’s larger project, however, is to expose the male-centered norms of love stories that usually go unchallenged and to disturb the complacency with which readers

¹⁵ Duvall, John N, *The Identifying Fictions of Toni Morrison*, (New York: Palgrave, 2000).

habitually accept them” (201). Morrison points to the unrealistic difficulty of reclaiming the love story with the complexities of Junior.

Junior becomes a character representing the complex dichotomy of unity and disunity. Without her presence, Heed and Christine could never have achieved the unity they sought; yet ultimately, her character creates disunity within the triad, that as Morrison suggests in her Foreword. Her actions, though unifying, cause Heed’s death, turning triumph into tragedy. Morrison’s ending is particularly troubling due to the particularities of Junior’s name, which implies the carrying on of a family legacy. The problems that were prevalent in the sixties and seventies, the reliance on white patriarchal values that privilege heterosexual identity over strong homosocial bonds, continue to affect women today. Even though through feminist analyses of real and fictional situations can unmask insidious societal influences, these influences are still perpetuated through generations of women.

In the above epigraph from Heed and Christine’s final conversation, Morrison voices the questions that have incited interpretations of her works through the mouthpieces of her characters, who also wonder at the underlying forces that shape their lives. In *Love*, Morrison continues to consider the issues of gender and race and their impact on how women are prevented from forming a strong sense of independence, and how their self-identities are damaged due to societal influence. The tragedy of *Love* is the manifestation of these societal influences on a microcosmic, interpersonal level, where betrayal occurs. While this disruption is ultimately tragic, recognizing the betrayal

may be the only way to reveal the love that can be found, not simply through family, but through the recovery of sisterhood.

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