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“One Was a Woman, the Other a Man”

A Psychoanalytic Study of Sexual Identity in the Novels of Toni Morrison*

This paper explores the links between sexuality and subjectivity in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, *Song of Solomon*, and *Paradise*. The theories of Jacques Lacan and Nancy Chodorow are employed to examine the anatomical and social / symbolic factors that lead Morrison's subjects to adopt a gendered self. Chodorow's argument that the mother's gender and preoedipal relationship with her child have a profound bearing on the child's gender identity and subsequent sense of self is cited in addressing gender formation and male-female relationships in Morrison's novels. Lacan's view of gender formation as positioning the gendered subject in a particular position in relation to language / the Symbolic system is also considered. Lacan's and Chodorow's concepts are applied in a study of a number of issues pertaining to sexuality and identity, including: homosexuality and 'deviant' sexuality as perceived threats to normative patriarchal gender systems in *The Bluest Eye* and *Paradise*; the discord apparent in male-female relationships in Morrison's novels; and the marginalisation of mothers and women as 'other.'

Throughout Morrison's novels, sex, sexuality, and gender identity are sources of uncertainty and struggle for both characters and communities. As the following passage from *Paradise* indicates, even a natural rock formation that resembles “[a] man and a woman fucking forever”¹ can become a site of sexual controversy and confusion, a place where the social regulation and regularisation of the sexual identity and interaction of subjects in Morrison's novels are revealed:

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1. Toni Morrison, *Paradise* (London: Vintage, 1998), p. 63.

The committee members said their objections were not antisex at all but antiperversion, since it was believed by some, who had looked very closely, that the couple was two women making love in the dirt. Others, after an equally careful examination (close up and with binoculars), said no, they were two males – bold as Gomorrah.

Mikey, however, had touched the body parts and knew for a fact one was a woman, the other a man.²

Although natural and neutral in itself, this geological landmark acquires social significance and becomes an object of censure as it appears to bear some semblance to human forms, and because it proves impossible to attribute “sexual” specificity to either of these forms with any sense of certainty.

The attempt to assign sexual identity to an apparently anthropomorphic rock formation reflects Nancy Chodorow’s observation that:

The social organization of gender, and people as sexed and gendered, are an inextricable totality or unity: the social organization of gender is built right into our heads and divides the world into females and males; our being sexed and gendered (our sexuality and our gender identity) is built right into social organization. They are given meaning one from the other.³

The “antiperversion” actions of the “committee of concerned Methodists” in *Paradise* are mirrored elsewhere in Morrison’s works in the endeavours of parents and authority figures to enforce and reinforce a system that produces heterosexual subjects. As with any system, however, the organisation of gender identity in Morrison’s novels is far from flawless, since it is predicated upon laws which lend themselves to (gender-)bending and breaking. Furthermore, as psychoanalysts since Freud have stressed, the subject’s sexual orientation and gender identity entail more than the sum of mere body parts, and consequently frustrate any attempt to neatly or naturally determine whether a subject is a woman or a man.

This paper will explore the links between sexuality and subjectivity in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, *Song of Solomon*, and *Paradise*. These works provide examples of a number of sexual issues which may be addressed adequately within the scope of this paper, while providing an analytical paradigm that can be applied in a reading of Morrison’s entire oeuvre. The psychoanalytic theories of Jacques Lacan

2. Morrison, *Paradise*, p. 63.

3. Nancy Chodorow, *Feminism and Psychoanalytic Theory* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1989), p. 168.

and Nancy Chodorow will be employed both to examine the anatomical and social / symbolic factors that lead Morrison's subjects to adopt a gendered self, and to address the various crises of identity such sexualised selves are constantly prone to.

Offering unique insights into the lives of Morrison's protagonists, Lacan's and Chodorow's theories are also inextricably tied to Freud, who, as Hortense J. Spillers notes, eschews the issues of race, social standing, and political empowerment. Although Freud's Oedipal family is representative of the "sociometries of the bourgeoisie household of Viennese society of [his] time," he nonetheless writes "as if his man/woman were Everybody's, were constitutive of the social order, and that coeval particularities carried little or no weight."⁴ Since the racial and social "particularities" of Morrison's protagonists weigh heavily on the gender identities they assume, this reading of Morrison will rely upon writers who, like Spillers, challenge and correct traditional psychoanalytic theory at the same time as they highlight and employ "the major topics of its field" which are not only relevant for but also "stringently operative" in the African American community and in the works of African American writers.⁵

"The Body Parts"

He peed standing up. She squatting down. He had a penis like a horse did. She had a vagina like the mare. He had a flat chest with two nipples. She had teats like a cow. He had a corkscrew in his stomach. She did not. She thought it was one more way in which males and females were different.⁶

We clearly lead an embodied life; we live with those genital and reproductive organs and capacities, those hormones and chromosomes that locate us physiologically as male and female. But, as psychoanalysis has shown, there is nothing self-evident about this biology.⁷

For Morrison's protagonists, a sense of embodiment is intrinsic to the development of a separate and singular self, and the recognition of bodily boundaries is essential

4. Hortense J. Spillers, "All the Things You Could be by Now, If Sigmund Freud's Wife Was Your Mother": Psychoanalysis and Race," *boundary 2* 23.3 (Autumn, 1996) 75-141, pp. 86-7.

5. Spillers, p. 87.

6. Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon* (London: Vintage, 1977), p. 143.

7. Chodorow, *Feminism*, p. 101.

for the establishment and maintenance of a sense of psychical separation from others and from the world at large. Such a sense of corporeal completeness and discreteness, Jacques Lacan contends, is instilled in the "mirror stage," the point at which an infant first finds in its reflection or the image of another person a representation of its body as a totality. Previously plagued by the belief that its body was composed of various parts it could neither connect nor control, the mirror stage infant embraces its counterpart as a paragon of physical integrity and the source of its sense of "self."⁸

Reliant upon an external image rather than an inalienable inner certainty of self, the subject's feeling of physical stability is far from fixed. Accordingly, the countless crises and uncertainties faced by Morrison's protagonists are frequently accompanied by feelings of physical fragmentation, merging, and/or incompleteness. Like Milkman Dead in *Song of Solomon*, many of Morrison's characters often feel that their bodies lack "coherence, a coming together of the features into a total self."⁹ In light of the often unreliable or indeterminate ties between the corporeality and identity of the subject in Morrison's fiction, it is not surprising that, in contrast to the views of certain protagonists in *Paradise*, the question of whether a subject is – or becomes – a man or a woman involves more than the "fact" that it has specific "body parts." As Dylan Evans notes, although the "anatomy/biology of the subject plays a part in the question of which sexual position the subject will take up, it is a fundamental axiom in psychoanalytic theory that anatomy does not determine sexual position."¹⁰ Chodorow, similarly, emphasises that the manner in which the subject "experiences, fantasizes about, or internally represents [its] embodiment grows from experience, learning, and self-definition in the family and in the culture" which oversee its socialisation.¹¹ This view provides a valuable perspective on Pilate's assumption, in *Song of Solomon*, that her lack of a navel is a trait she shares with all women, and is simply a sign of men and women's anatomical and sexual difference.¹²

In *The Bluest Eye*, a similar uncertainty surrounding the navel and its link to biological sex is revealed in the question posed by Pecola to Maureen Peal: "[I]f the belly buttons are to grow like-lines to give the baby blood, and only girls have babies,

8. Jacques Lacan, "Some Reflections on the Ego," *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 34.1 (1953) 11–7, p.13.

9. Morrison, *Song*, pp. 69–70.

10. Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (Sussex/Philadelphia: Brunner & Routledge, 1996), p. 179.

11. Chodorow, *Feminism*, p. 101.

12. Morrison, *Song*, p. 143.

how come boys have belly buttons?’ ”¹³ Pilate’s assumption that navels naturally belong to boys and not to girls, and Pecola’s bewilderment that both boys and girls have them, indicate that the meanings each associates with particular body parts are neither natural nor innate. Rather, the significance with which they endow any body part, particularly those that they associate with sexual difference and sexual reproduction, derives from their childhood experience and from their development in a society that produces and is predicated upon heterosexual men and women.

Given Pilate and Pecola’s confusion as to which body parts are signs of sexual difference, it is perhaps unsurprising that some of Morrison’s characters find that although certain body parts may mark the difference between biological males and females, they do not naturally endow the subject with masculine or feminine traits. This is apparent from the sexual perversion and incertitude of Soaphead Church in *The Bluest Eye*. Although Soaphead Church is biologically male, he is subject to continual struggle and evasion in his attempt to find both a sexual identity and gratification for his “rare but keen sexual cravings”:

He could have been an active homosexual but lacked the courage. Bestiality did not occur to him, and sodomy was quite out of the question, for he did not experience sustained erections and could not endure the thought of somebody else’s. And besides, the one thing that disgusted him more than entering and caressing a woman was caressing and being caressed by a man.¹⁴

Soaphead’s convoluted path to patronage of little girls demonstrates that both the development of sexual identity and the choice of a sexual object are fraught with difficulties for the subject, for whom, Chodorow argues, the assumption of any sexuality is always a compromise.¹⁵

Chodorow maintains that patriarchal society’s privileging of heterosexuality as both normal and normative and its dismissal of other sexualities as pathological or perverse is an invalid polarisation which is based on “ad hoc criteria” and misguided assumptions. These include the belief in “biological normality” – the supposed encoding of sexuality in the body – and in the equivalence of sexual orientation and gender roles.¹⁶ Consequently, while Shadrack’s eschewal of adult heterosexual relations and favouring of little girls may be perceived as perverse, such a view reflects

13. Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (London: Vintage, 1970, 1999), p. 54.

14. Morrison, *Bluest Eye*, p. 131.

15. Nancy Chodorow, *Femininities, Masculinities, Sexualities: Freud and Beyond* (Kentucky: University of Kentucky Press, 1994), pp. 34–5.

16. Chodorow, *Sexualities*, p. 66.

the idealisation and normalisation of heterosexual fantasies in patriarchal societies rather than the inherent unnaturalness of Shadrack's sexual orientation. As the experience and confusion of Morrison's protagonists prove, any sexual identity is a compromise and, consequently, no more normal than that which Shadrack adopts.¹⁷

Shadrack's characterisation of boys as "scary" and "stubborn" and his view of girls as being "usually manageable" draw attention to the fact that, apart from body parts, sexual development for Morrison's protagonists involves the recognition and assumption of a socially constructed gender role, together with the traits that typify that role. Chodorow argues that the patriarchal perpetuation of gender roles and the sexual division of labour aim at feminine domesticity and docility and, conversely, at masculine motility and forcefulness. These gender traits are also salient in men and women's assumption and provision of their appropriate parts in a cyclical system of reproduction.¹⁸ Surveying fictional families who "for one reason or another [escape] the imperatives of male dominance," Jean Wyatt ventures that the oedipal stage is "not necessary to development, [but] only to the maintenance of patriarchy. If the value system that sustains male dominance did not require that girls learn to love submission and that boys learn to derogate women and women's work, there would be no oedipal stage."¹⁹ While Wyatt's suggestion is compelling, and follows from her identification of the central role played by strong mothers in Morrison's fiction, the patriarchal and gender systems she sees as inevitable profoundly inform the lives of Morrison's protagonists.

In *The Bluest Eye*, the correlation between gender roles and reproduction is reflected in Pecola's aforementioned confusion as to why " 'boys have belly buttons,' " when " 'only girls have babies,' " and in the question she poses after her first menstruation: " 'Is it true that I can have a baby now?' " ²⁰ Brooding over Pecola's question, Claudia consults the images of men and women circulated by society:

It would involve, I supposed, "my man," who, before leaving me, would love me. But there weren't any babies in the songs my mother sang. Maybe that's why the women were sad: the men left before they could make a baby.²¹

17. Chodorow, *Sexualities*, pp. 34–5.

18. Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender, Second Edition* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/ London: University of California Press, 1999), p. 173.

19. Jean Wyatt, *Reconstructing Desire: The Role of the Unconscious in Women's Reading and Writing* (Chapel Hill/London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1990), p. 215.

20. Morrison, *Bluest Eye*, pp. 54, 23.

21. Morrison, *Bluest Eye*, p. 23.

Although the issues of gender roles and reproduction which confound Claudia become most salient during and after puberty, they are, Chodorow insists, implicated in the subject's development from earliest infancy, and have a determining influence on gender development.²² It is telling, then, that the "big, blue-eyed Baby Doll" that Claudia receives at Christmas not only represents for her pervasive white ideals of the body and of beauty, but also introduces her to the notion of "babies [and] the concept of motherhood."²³ Similarly, the songs that Claudia's mother sings form a significant, if subtle, part of the patriarchal ideology of gender. Claudia's interpretation of her mother's songs as the laments of would-be mothers and the fact that adults give her dolls in the belief that motherhood is her fondest wish are both symptoms of her development in a society in which "children of both genders [grow] up in families where women, who have a greater sense of sameness with daughters than sons, perform primary parenting functions."²⁴

Although by no means homogenous, the pattern of parenting and development described by Chodorow is found throughout Morrison's novels, where women are primarily and often exclusively responsible for rearing children. The divergences between masculine and feminine gender formation and the centrality of the mother's role in shaping these gender identities are evident in the portrayals of the Wright family in *Sula* and of the Dead family in *Song of Solomon*. Both families are headed (nominally, at least) by a predominantly absent father, while childrearing is carried out exclusively by a mother. After giving birth to a daughter, Nel, Helene Wright "[rises] grandly to the occasion of motherhood," and discovers that her daughter is "more comfort and purpose than she [has] ever hoped to find in this life."²⁵ Helene's husband, Wiley Wright, works as a ship's cook on one of the Great Lake lines, and is "in port only three days out of every sixteen," thus leaving Helene alone to enjoy "manipulating her daughter," whose appearance and behaviour she seeks to alter to her satisfaction.²⁶ Chodorow, reviewing clinical studies by Fliess and others, finds that maternal manipulation and interference typifies most mother-daughter relationships, and is attributable to the fact that mothers "are the same gender as their daughters and have been girls." As a consequence, mothers "tend not to experience these infant daughters as separate from them in the same way as do mothers of infant sons."²⁷

22. Chodorow, *Reproduction*, pp. 38–9.

23. Morrison, *Bluest Eye*, p. 13.

24. Chodorow, *Reproduction*, p. 110.

25. Toni Morrison, *Sula* (London: Vintage, 1973), p. 18.

26. Morrison, *Sula*, pp. 17–8.

27. Chodorow, *Reproduction*, p. 109.

The experience of "prolonged symbiosis and overidentification" with the mother causes the girl to develop anxiety as to her separateness and boundaries, a concern which remains with her into adulthood.²⁸ This disquiet is experienced by Nel, whose friendship with Sula initially offers respite from her mother, but becomes a threat to her sense of self when "they themselves have difficulty distinguishing one's thought from the other's."²⁹ For Morrison's male characters, on the other hand, the determining factor in gender development is typically not a continued identification with the mother, but rather the emergence of Oedipal issues in the mother-son relationship. Because of his gender, or, more accurately, his male physiology, the boy is treated by the mother as "a definite other – an opposite gendered and sexed other," and as a substitute for the often absent father.³⁰ Such substitution can be discerned in the intimacy that initially marks Milkman and Ruth's relationship in *Song of Solomon*. "Long deprived of sex, long dependent on self-manipulation," Ruth finds "physical pleasure" in nursing her son, whom she views as "a beautiful toy, a respite, [and] a distraction."³¹ Physical pleasure is implicated not only in Ruth's imagined unity with her son (her sense that he is "pulling from her a thread of light"), but also in her linking of her son to the "last occasion she had been made love to" by her husband.³²

As well as determining the distinct Oedipal issues that Morrison's male and female subjects must negotiate, the pattern of maternal omnipresence (and omnipotence) and paternal absence in her novels also affects the manner in which these characters assume a gender role through identification with the appropriate parent. While the mother's pervasive presence and over-identification may cause a daughter such as Nel to develop anxiety regarding separateness and boundaries, this negative effect is somewhat counterbalanced by the fact that the mother provides a model on which the daughter can base her own feminine identity. "Insofar as a woman's identity remains primarily as wife/mother," Chodorow claims, "there is greater generational continuity in role and life activity from mother to daughter than there can be from father to son."³³ This generational continuity from mother to daughter reveals itself in the Wright household, where Helene treads a path that largely overlaps that laid down by her grandmother. Raised under the "dolesome eyes of a multicoloured Virgin Mary" (a cogent symbol of maternity and obedience), and counselled to be

28. Chodorow, *Reproduction*, p. 137.

29. Morrison, *Sula*, p. 83.

30. Chodorow, *Reproduction*, pp. 104–5.

31. Morrison, *Song*, pp. 132–4.

32. Morrison, *Song*, pp. 13, 134.

33. Chodorow, *Reproduction*, p. 175.

“constantly on guard for any sign of her mother’s wild blood,” Helene eventually enjoys the privilege of “manipulating” her own daughter.³⁴ Any childish enthusiasms that Nel displays “[are] calmed by the mother until she [drives] her daughter’s imagination underground.”³⁵ Morrison conveys the extent to which Helene is subsumed by the maternal role not only by describing her domineering behaviour, but also by designating her as “the mother,” and not as “her mother” or “Helene.”

Despite her desire for independence from her mother, and her goal of leaving her hometown for “faraway places,” Nel, like Helene, eventually finds herself in the role of wife and mother. As well as adopting her mother’s roles, Nel also displays many of Helene’s traits, such as her concern for the upkeep of her household and the disciplining of her “grimy intractable children.”³⁶ However, the greatest evidence of the generational continuity between Nel and her mother emerges after the departure of her husband, Jude. Left alone, Nel replicates Helene’s omnipresence and over-investment, twisting her love for her children “into something so thick and monstrous she [is] afraid to show it lest it break lose and smother them with its heavy paw.”³⁷ While Nel’s two sons love the fact that, because of her need for intimacy, she “[cannot] stop getting in the bed with her children,” her daughter, significantly, does not enjoy her presence.³⁸ This suggests that the cycle of mother-daughter identification and gender role repetition that Nel and Helene have each negotiated has begun yet again.

If the daughters of Morrison’s fiction regularly assume a gender role that is characterised by continuity with the mother and her values, the sons in her novels generally assume an appropriate masculine role despite the father’s predominant or even permanent absence. In contrast to the personal identification that marks Nel’s relationship with her mother, the relationships between boys and their fathers in Morrison’s novels is commonly characterised by what Chodorow terms “positional identification.” Lacking the emotional and empathic closeness of daughter-mother identification, positional identification consists in “identification with specific aspects of another’s role,” and not necessarily with their ideals or personality.³⁹ In assuming the traits and role of a male, boys in Morrison’s novels may “appropriate those specific forms of the masculinity of their father they fear will otherwise be used against them.”⁴⁰

34. Morrison, *Sula*, pp. 17–8.

35. Morrison, *Sula*, pp. 17–8.

36. Morrison, *Sula*, pp. 96–7.

37. Morrison, *Sula*, p. 138.

38. Morrison, *Sula*, p. 109.

39. Chodorow, *Reproduction*, pp. 175–6.

40. Chodorow, *Reproduction*, p. 176.

In *Song of Solomon*, the contrast between the respective forms of female and male gender role identification is apparent in the experience of the children in the Dead family. Accepting their mother's valuation of their lighter skin colour and distinguished ancestry (their grandfather being both a doctor and a man of means), the Dead girls, Magdalena and Corinthians, assume that their future fulfilment and financial security is to be found through marriage to "a professional man of color."⁴¹ As Corinthians reflects, it is assumed that she and Magdalena (called Lena) will "marry well," and hopes for Corinthians are "especially high since [she has] gone to college." Despite Corinthians' aspirations, however, her college credentials do not equip her for the wider world of work, but rather revolve around the roles associated with her gender in a patriarchal society:

Her education had taught her to be an enlightened mother and wife, able to contribute to the civilization – or in her case the civilizing of her community. And if marriage was not achieved, there were alternative roles: teacher, librarian, or . . . well, something intelligent and high-spirited.⁴²

Corinthians' examination of the employment options open to her as an educated woman echoes Chodorow's argument that "[w]omen's work in the labor force tends to extend their housewife, wife, or mother roles and their concern with personal affective ties."⁴³ While Magdalena seems resigned to a life of domesticity and spinsterhood, Corinthians suffers a "severe depression" upon discovering that she is "a forty-two-year-old maker of rose petals" and is unlikely to acquire either the husband or the career she has hoped for.⁴⁴ Desperate to "get out of the house" and away from the hobby that she associates with her mother, Corinthians seeks employment and, being "[u]nfit for any work other than the making of red velvet roses," accepts a job as a maid.⁴⁵ Magdalena and Corinthians' ensnarement by a patriarchal system which is predicated upon the division of labour along gender lines is reflected in the fact that their brother is unable "to really distinguish them (or their roles) from his mother."⁴⁶

Although Milkman's inability to differentiate between his mother and his sisters reflects the generational continuity that typifies many mother-daughter relationships, his relationship with his father follows the pattern of positional identification

41. Morrison, *Song*, p. 188.

42. Morrison, *Song*, p. 188.

43. Chodorow, *Reproduction*, p. 180.

44. Morrison, *Song*, p. 189.

45. Morrison, *Song*, pp. 187–9.

46. Morrison, *Song*, p. 68.

that is characteristic of masculine identity formation.⁴⁷ As his father's employee, Milkman tries "to do the work the way Macon want[s] it done," and fears and respects the man who apparently has "no imperfection" and who seems to strengthen with age.⁴⁸ Notwithstanding this deep-rooted respect, Milkman feels that he can "never emulate" his seemingly flawless father since his own body is marked by an (imaginary) imperfection – one of his legs is, he believes, shorter than the other.

While Milkman views Macon's body as a model of physical perfection, he refuses to mimic his father's appearance or to adopt his interests:

Macon was clean-shaven; Milkman was desperate for a moustache. Macon wore bow ties; Milkman wore four-in-hands. Macon didn't part his hair; Milkman had a part shaved in his. Macon hated tobacco; Milkman tried to put a cigarette in his mouth every fifteen minutes. Macon hoarded his money; Milkman gave his away. But he couldn't help sharing with Macon his love of good shoes and fine thin socks.⁴⁹

Even when he usurps the paternal power that has previously been wielded against him by defending his mother and "deck[ing] his father,"⁵⁰ Milkman's identification with Macon is devoid of empathy and does not extend beyond physical supremacy. Despite listening to Macon's motives for striking his wife, Milkman feels "curiously disassociated from all that he [has] heard":

As though a stranger that he'd sat down next to on a park bench had turned to him and begun to relate some intimacy. He was entirely sympathetic to the stranger's problems – understood perfectly his view of what had happened to him – but part of his sympathy came from the fact that he himself was not involved or in any way threatened by the stranger's story.⁵¹

Milkman's view of Macon as a stranger, an "alien," and "another man," suggests that, like most males, he identifies with his father's power and position rather than his personality. Macon, for his part, transforms the pride and love he experiences as a boy working "right alongside his father," an ex-slave who has bought and built up a farm of "a hundred and fifty acres," into a belief that there is only one important thing that Milkman will ever need to know: "Own things. And let the things you own own other

47. Chodorow, *Reproduction*, pp. 175–6.

48. Morrison, *Song*, p. 63.

49. Morrison, *Song*, p. 63.

50. Morrison, *Song*, p. 69.

51. Morrison, *Song*, p. 74.

things. Then you'll own yourself and other people too.'"⁵² Macon's single-minded determination to own both property and people suggests that he wishes to assume the authority and agency that his father has previously enjoyed as a landowner, rather than adopt or emulate his father's affectionateness and other personality traits. Such impersonal identification indicates that Macon and Milkman come to view the father less as a begetter nor someone to whom they are tied by biological, imaginary, or affective bonds, and more as an embodiment of patriarchal power, or in Lacanian terms, the Law of the Father.

"Maleness, for its Own Sake"

Where do you get the *right* to decide our lives? . . . I'll tell you where. From that hog's gut that hangs between your legs. Well, let me tell you something baby brother: you will need more than that. I don't know where you will get it or who will give it to you, but mark my words, you will need more than that.⁵³

The phallus is the privileged signifier of that mark where the share of the logos is wedded to the advent of desire.

One might say that this signifier is chosen because it is the most tangible element in the real of sexual copulation, and also the most symbolic in the literal (typographical) sense of the term. . .⁵⁴

As is evident from the difficulties that Morrison's protagonists face in assuming and maintaining sexuality, the respective social standing and characteristics of males and females are not natural. Rather, the meanings of masculinity and femininity derive from a socially perpetuated pattern of gender identities and, more precisely, from myths (embodied in forms as diverse as dolls and songs) circulated in support of this pattern. Since the assumption of any sexual identity is tenuous and involves the interplay of psychological and sociological factors, any privileging of masculinity over femininity in Morrison's novels, although normative, is neither innate nor inevitable. Morrison's characters both adhere to and violate this psychoanalytic model, admitting, if not always submitting, to the idea that men are privileged in a system of heterosexual hierarchy and hegemony.

52. Morrison, *Song*, pp. 51, 54.

53. Morrison, *Song*, p. 215.

54. Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*. Alan Sheridan, translator (London: Routledge, 1977), p. 318.

In *Sula*, patriarchal privilege is implicated in Nel and Sula's decision, upon discovery of the fact that they are "neither white nor male, and that all freedom and triumph [are] forbidden to them," to "set about creating something else to be."⁵⁵ Susan Neal Mayberry sees in this passage evidence that the "traditional African American community is not ready to accept a woman who assumes a man's freedom," an intolerance eventually voiced by Nel, who, in admonishing the dying Sula, rejects "the masculine part of herself."⁵⁶ A similar view of masculinity as normative and honoured seems to be implied in Morrison's account of the acrimony between Macon Dead and his wife in *Song of Solomon*: "Each one befuddled by the values of the other. Each one convinced of his own purity and outraged by the idiocy he saw in the other."⁵⁷ As this description pertains to a man and a woman, the designation of each party as "he" suggests that, in language, the privileged subject position is that of the male. Morrison's use of the pronoun "he" cannot be construed as countenancing patriarchal privilege or as supporting a system that assumes mankind is male, but is, rather, indicative of the manner in which the symptoms and supports of patriarchy insinuate themselves in language.

Fraught as it is with evidence of the assumed ascendancy of males in patriarchal society, language also lends itself to those who wish to challenge such superiority and expose its essential hollowness. The aforementioned assertion in *Paradise* that "one" is "a woman" and "the other" is "a man" encapsulates the interrogation and subversion of male dominance that runs throughout Morrison's work. As Magdalena's emasculating remarks to her brother demonstrate, men in Morrison's novels require more than an appeal to physiology to justify their "right" to rule over women and society.⁵⁸ While Milkman's "hog's gut" marks him as male, and thus as a member of the gender group wielding power in a patriarchal society, it is not in itself the source of that power. Commenting on the power that patriarchal society erroneously attributes to its male members, Lacan claims that it is by merit of its visibility that the penis becomes associated with the phallus, the privileged signifier of the Symbolic order.⁵⁹ The significance with which the phallus is endowed derives from its role in liberating the subject from its imaginary dependence on its mother and projecting it into its lifelong project of

55. Morrison, *Sula*, p. 52.

56. Susan Neal Mayberry, "Something Other Than a Family Quarrel: The Beautiful Boys in Morrison's *Sula*," *African American Review* 37.4 (Winter 2003) 517–33, p.519.

57. Morrison, *Song*, p. 132.

58. Morrison, *Song*, p. 215.

59. Lacan, *Écrits*, p. 318.

self-development in the symbolic and social orders.⁶⁰ Ellie Ragland-Sullivan asserts that although "the Phallus does not refer to the real father, . . . Lacan used this term to underline the idea that the biological father, the penian part-object, and the phallic differential function are confused in language."⁶¹ Macon plays the part of the father in *Song of Solomon*, separating Milkman from his mother first by forbidding him to sit on her lap, and later by removing him from the domestic (and traditionally feminine) sphere and introducing him to the (supposedly masculine) world of work and capitalism.⁶² Macon's fulfilment of the phallic function of differentiation, however, does not prove that male physiology and the phallus are superior or superposable; in fact, Macon's body in and of itself bears no more phallic power than the "male doll with a small chicken bone stuck between its legs" which Pilate places in his office to deter him from abusing his pregnant wife.⁶³

In *Sula*, men and male physiology are the subject of Nel and Sula's interest as they venture past the pool hall towards the ice cream parlour; it is not ice cream that the girls want, but rather the sight of the "inchworm smiles" and the "squatting haunches" of the men who haunt the pool house:

The cream-colored trousers marking with a mere seam the place where the mystery curled. The smooth vanilla crotches invited them; those lemon-yellow gabardines beckoned to them. . . . Somewhere beneath all of that daintiness, chambered in all that neatness, lay the thing that clotted their dreams.⁶⁴

Nel and Sula's attraction to the men at the pool hall and to "the thing" that each of them possess is attributable not only to the girl's adolescence and sexuality, but also to their desire to distance themselves from their mothers and their families.⁶⁵ Although she acknowledges the father's part in the infant's development, Chodorow questions any privileging of males or their organs that rests on either a logical or biological basis.⁶⁶ In the development of gender identity, the import of the male member is always secondary, an offshoot of the infant's experience of being parented by the mother:

60. Lacan, *Écrits*, pp. 320–1.

61. Ellie Ragland-Sullivan, *Jacques Lacan and the Philosophy of Psychoanalysis* (Urbana/Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1986), p. 283.

62. Morrison, *Song*, pp. 32, 55.

63. Morrison, *Song*, p. 132.

64. Morrison, *Sula*, pp. 50–1.

65. Chodorow, *Reproduction*, p. 138.

66. Chodorow, *Reproduction*, pp. 145–7.

The penis, or phallus, is a symbol of power or omnipotence, whether you have one as a sexual organ (as a male), or as a sexual object (as her mother “possesses” her father’s). A girl wants it for the powers it symbolizes and the freedom it promises from her previous state of dependence, and not because it is inherently and obviously better to be masculine.⁶⁷

Nel, subject to her mother’s manipulation in her father’s absence, pictures herself “waiting for some fiery prince.”⁶⁸ Sula, similarly, lives with her mother, Hannah, and grandmother, Eva, in a house from which men are absent. In light of the generational continuity and often inhibitory intimacy that mark the mother-daughter relationships in their family, it is possible that the Peace women’s “manlove” is, as the novel suggests, a love of “maleness for its own sake,”⁶⁹ that is, a love for those gender and body traits that characterise men and mark their difference from women.

In Morrison’s novels, maternal omnipotence not only endows male members of patriarchal society with importance and an association with the phallic function of differentiation, it also results in the devaluation of females and their bodies by male subjects. While a girl’s assumption of a feminine gender identity is largely in line with her identification with her mother, a boy’s acquirement of a heterosexual masculine identity means that he “represses those qualities he takes to be feminine inside himself, and rejects and devalues women and whatever he considers to be feminine in the social world.”⁷⁰ Milkman’s misogyny can be explained from this perspective, as he, more than most males, has experienced prolonged dependency on – or, at least, submission to – his mother, who nurses him past infancy in an attempt to fulfil her “fantasy” and satisfy her desire to be loved.⁷¹

In *The Bluest Eye*, Cholly comes to devalue women as a result of the dependency and powerlessness he associates with them. Abandoned by his mother when he is four days old, Cholly is rescued and raised by his Great Aunt Jimmy, who takes delight in reminding him of that fact.⁷² Although grateful to his aunt, Cholly occasionally appraises his experience of being forced to “sleep with her for warmth in winter and [seeing] her old, wrinkled breasts sagging in her nightgown,” and wonders

67. Chodorow, *Reproduction*, p. 123.

68. Morrison, *Sula*, p. 51.

69. Morrison, *Sula*, p. 41.

70. Chodorow, *Reproduction*, p. 181.

71. Morrison, *Song*, pp. 13–4.

72. Morrison, *Bluest Eye*, p. 103.

"whether it would have been just as well to have died."⁷³ While Cholly's subjection to an old woman's demands makes him question the value of living, his devaluation of all women can be traced to the impotence he experiences during his first sexual encounter with a young girl, Darlene. Interrupted by two white hunters during this liaison, Cholly is forced to repeat, or, rather, "to simulate what [has] gone on before": he is too terrified to do "more than make believe."⁷⁴ Humiliated and emasculated, Cholly does not consider "directing his hatred towards the hunters," who are "big, white, armed men," but cultivates instead "his hatred of Darlene," since she is the one "who [has] created the situation, the one who [has borne] witness to his failure, his impotence."⁷⁵

While Cholly, like many other African American men, chooses to blame a woman for his failure, Morrison insists in an interview with Robert Stepto that "everybody knows, deep down, that black men were emasculated by white men, period. And that black woman didn't take any part in that."⁷⁶ Cholly's sexual failure illustrates Jean Walton's assertion that "though the penis can be attributed to all men (as opposed to women) . . . the phallus cannot."⁷⁷ If Milkman's economic standing places him in proximity to the phallic power of capitalistic society, then Cholly occupies a much more marginal position, that of a poor African American boy standing prone before two white gun-wielding men. Like many African American men who possess a penis but lack the means to assert themselves as men, Cholly is "a figure whose relation to the phallus, as signifier of white male privilege in a racialized, patriarchal society" is extremely tenuous.⁷⁸

Women's mothering is not only implicated in men's subjection and devaluation of women, but is also entailed in the positioning of women as other by men in Morrison's novels. Lacan ascribes the myths and fears that the male subject associates with "Woman" to the fact that females, unlike males, do not have an affiliation with the phallus, and have therefore no "signifier" for their sexuality.⁷⁹ Chodorow, in contrast, follows Karen Horney in attributing the myths and misogyny that characterize patriar-

73. Morrison, *Bluest Eye*, p. 103.

74. Morrison, *Bluest Eye*, p. 116.

75. Morrison, *Bluest Eye*, p. 118.

76. Robert B. Stepto, "'Intimate Things in Place': A Conversation with Toni Morrison," in *Toni Morrison: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*, eds. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and K.A. Appiah (New York: Amistad, 1993) 378–95, p. 384.

77. Jean Walton, "Re-placing Race in (White) Psychoanalytic Discourse: Founding Narratives of Feminism," *Critical Inquiry* 21.4 (Summer, 1995) 775–804, p. 784.

78. Walton, p. 784.

79. Ragland-Sullivan, pp. 286–7.

chy as manifestations of men's deeper dread of women and of "a masculine fear and terror of omnipotence that arises as one major consequence of their early caretaking and socialization by women."⁸⁰ However, as a result of the Oedipal issues involved in the boy's individuation this terror is always ambivalent, as the boy fears the mother and yet also finds her "seductive and attractive." In an attempt to cope with their simultaneous fear of and attraction towards women, men develop certain "psychological and cultural/ideological mechanisms," such as polarising women as witches and angels.⁸¹

In *Song of Solomon*, these opposing attributes of the woman as other are detectable in Milkman's encounter with Circe, the almost mythic midwife who harbours Macon and Pilate after their father is killed by the very people she works for.⁸² Onomastic critics would undoubtedly draw attention to the fact that Circe is a sorceress from Greek mythology, who, in Homer's *Odyssey*, detains Odysseus on her island and transforms all of his companions into pigs. The Circe of *Song of Solomon* shares with her Homeric counterpart an association with witchcraft, the supernatural, and, most importantly, with the power to emasculate the males she encounters:

He had had dreams as a child, dreams every child had, of the witch who chased him down dark alleys, between lawn trees, and finally into rooms from which he could not escape. . . . So when he saw the woman at the top of the stairs there was no way for him to resist climbing up toward her outstretched hands, her fingers spread wide for him, her mouth gaping open for him, her fingers devouring him. . . . [H]e knew that always, always at the very instant of the pounce or the gummy embrace he would wake with a scream and an erection. Now he had only the erection.⁸³

This seemingly surreal passage can be interpreted in light of the dread of and attraction to women that mothering ingrains in certain of Morrison's male subjects. In the case of Milkman, the amativeness and terror that he associates with the dream of the witch may be connected with the oedipal overtones of the nursing he has been subjected to by his mother. Part of the pleasure Ruth receives from her "secret indulgences" comes from the room in which it occurs, a little room inhabited by a "dark greenness" which is "made by the evergreen that press[es] against the window and filter[s] the light."⁸⁴ As a child Milkman comes to this little room

80. Chodorow, *Reproduction*, p. 183.

81. Chodorow, *Reproduction*, p. 183.

82. Morrison, *Song*, p. 238.

83. Morrison, *Song*, p. 239.

84. Morrison, *Song*, p. 13.

"reluctantly, as to a chore," and suspects these meetings with his mother are "strange and wrong."⁸⁵ It is perhaps telling, then, that the witch who haunts Milkman's dreams chases him "between lawn trees, [and] into rooms from which he cannot escape."⁸⁶

"A Lover Was Not a Comrade"

[The men] had merged into one large personality: the same language of love, the same entertainments of love, the same cooling of love. Whenever she introduced her private thoughts into their rubbings or goings, they hooded their eyes. They taught her nothing but love tricks, shared nothing but worry, gave nothing but money. She had been looking all along for a friend, and it took her a while to discover that a lover was not a comrade and could never be – for a woman.⁸⁷

Freud originally ("a man's love and a woman's are a phase apart psychologically"), and psychoanalytic thinkers after him all point to a way in which women and men, though "meant for each other," and usually looking for intimacy with each other, are, because of the social organization of parenting, not meant for each other, and do not fulfil each other's needs.⁸⁸

Given that the subject's assumption of a gender identity is fraught with difficulties and is neither natural nor innate, it is unsurprising that relationships between those subjects who identify themselves as masculine and those subjects who identify themselves as feminine are often marked by misunderstanding and conflict. Such is certainly the case in Morrison's novels, with conflict between Cholly and Pauline Breedlove in *The Bluest Eye*, marital breakdown between Eva and BoyBoy and between Nel and Jude in *Sula*, and acrimony between Macon and Ruth Dead in *Song of Solomon*. So marked is this gender conflict in Morrison's fiction that it prompts Louis Menard to gloss Morrison's proposed title for *Paradise* – "War" – in referring to "The War between Men and Women" in that novel.⁸⁹

85. Morrison, *Song*, pp. 13–4.

86. Morrison, *Song*, p. 239.

87. Morrison, *Sula*, pp. 120–1.

88. Chodorow, *Feminism*, p. 77.

89. Menard, Louis, "The War between Men and Women," *The New Yorker* 73.42 (1998) 78–84.

If, however, it is misguided to believe that sexuality is biologically based or that men and women are meant for each other, it is equally erroneous to attribute disparities in male-female relationships in Morrison's works to natural differences. Chodorow asserts that the disparities between masculine and feminine gender identity are attributable to the differential treatment of girls and boys by mothers and to the distinct preoedipal and Oedipal issues experienced by each gender.⁹⁰ Whatever its importance for the subject's sexual orientation, the greatest significance and effects of the Oedipal complex, Chodorow insists, are found in "the constitution of different forms of 'relational potential' in people of different genders."⁹¹ Since the development of feminine identity is characterised by a prolonged preoedipal relationship with the mother, women generally develop a sense of self in relationships, and acquire strong emotional and relational needs and capacities.⁹² Men, in contrast, "are more likely to have been pushed out of the preoedipal relationship, and to have had to curtail their sense of empathic tie with their mother" in order to attain a sense of separateness and masculinity.⁹³

As a result of the asymmetry in the experiences of males and females in their relationships with their mothers, girls develop "a basis for empathy built into their primary definition of self in a way that boys do not." Because they have a need for intimacy and empathy that men, because of their Oedipal separation and gender role training, are generally incapable of supplying, most women, although erotically heterosexual, tend to establish a less exclusive and secondary emotional attachment to men.⁹⁴ This is reflected in the disillusionment that Sula experiences in her relationships with men who are unable to share anything but worry or give anything but money, and who "[hood] their eyes" whenever she attempts to convey her "private thoughts" to them.⁹⁵ Since masculinity entails the repression of relational capacities, it is inevitable that for a (heterosexual) woman, "a lover [is] not a comrade and [can] never be."⁹⁶

Elsewhere in *Sula*, the marriage of Nel and Jude encapsulates the chasm between men and women, and between the desires each gender seeks to satisfy in a relationship with the other. Jude seeks to be married since he needs "some of his

90. Chodorow, *Reproduction*, pp. 169–70.

91. Chodorow, *Reproduction*, p. 166.

92. Chodorow, *Reproduction*, pp. 199–200.

93. Chodorow, *Reproduction*, p. 166.

94. Chodorow, *Reproduction*, p. 167.

95. Morrison, *Sula*, p. 121.

96. Morrison, *Sula*, p. 121.

appetites filled, some posture of adulthood recognized," but "mostly he wants someone to care about his hurt, care very deeply," and "if he [is] to be a man, that someone can no longer be his mother."⁹⁷ Jude fears leading an emasculated life as "a waiter hanging around a kitchen like a woman," and views marriage as an arena in which he can prove his masculinity as "the head of a household pinned to an unsatisfactory job out of necessity."⁹⁸ Jude also wishes to gratify his desire for an exclusive, dual relationship, and takes Nel as his wife with the certainty that the "two of them together [will] make one Jude."⁹⁹ Testifying to the projections that reveal themselves in the subject's imaginary relations with the other, Jude's actions and the motives behind them also reflect Chodorow's observation that, as a result of their treatment by the mother in infancy, "men look to relationships with women for narcissistic-phallic reassurance rather than for mutual affirmation and love."¹⁰⁰

Ironically, Nel is attracted to Jude because he provides her with a "new feeling of being needed by someone who saw her singly."¹⁰¹ This reassertion of her sense of individuality is important, since her infant relationship with her overbearing mother, like the mother-daughter relationships studied by Deutsch, has left her with a fear of merging, and her relationship with Sula is "so close, they themselves [have] difficulty distinguishing one's thoughts from the other's."¹⁰² Chodorow, however, supports Deutsch in stating that relationships with other women are essential for a woman:

Some women . . . always need a best friend with whom they share all confidences about their heterosexual relationships. These relationships are one way of resolving and recreating the mother-daughter bond and are an expression of women's general relational capacities and definition of self in relationship.¹⁰³

While allaying Nel's unease regarding her boundaries, therefore, Sula's departure also deprives Nel of the empathy and emotional attachment she needs. Fortunately for Nel, however, Sula returns after a ten-year absence, and their reunion is "like getting the use of an eye back, having a cataract removed."¹⁰⁴

97. Morrison, *Sula*, p. 82.

98. Morrison, *Sula*, p. 83.

99. Morrison, *Sula*, p. 83.

100. Chodorow, *Reproduction*, p. 196.

101. Morrison, *Sula*, p. 84.

102. Morrison, *Sula*, p. 83.

103. Chodorow, *Reproduction*, p. 200.

104. Morrison, *Sula*, p. 95.

Jude's belief that marriage will cast him in the role of breadwinner for his family and will thus offset the emasculating effects of a job that requires him to "[hang] around a kitchen like a woman"¹⁰⁵ draws attention to an area of conflict between men and women in Morrison's fiction which revolves, not around relational capacities, but around the world of work. Chodorow suggests that an intrinsic element in the perpetuation of gender identities is the sexual division of labour. While generational continuity and gender role identification generally ensure that the girl will adopt her mother's domestic roles, the boy, who has identified away from his mother and achieved a sense of separateness, is enabled and expected to enter into the capitalist work environment.¹⁰⁶

The belief that men are – or should be – independent and mobile is one of the motivating factors behind Eva's killing of her son, Plum. Returning from war service to the home where he has "floated in a constant swaddle of love and affection as a child," Plum is killed by his mother not only because she fears that he wishes to return to her womb, but also since he is unable to "leave [her] and go on and live and be a man."¹⁰⁷ As Patricia Hill Collins notes, however, the inculcation of such gender roles creates conflicts between African-American men and women, since they are based on a white "normative family household [that] ideally consists of a working father who earns enough to allow his spouse and dependent children to withdraw from the paid labor force."¹⁰⁸ While this ideal, as seen previously, is an important element of Jude's desire to marry, it is often unattainable for African-American men, since racial prejudice creates "reversed roles for men and women."¹⁰⁹ This role reversal arises when African-American women are employed while African-American men "have difficulty finding steady work," and results in the charge that "Black women emasculate Black men by failing to be submissive, dependent, "feminine" women."¹¹⁰ In *The Bluest Eye*, this transposition of the position of men and women in the division of labour leads to conflict between Cholly and Pauline Breedlove. Although Cholly feels free "to take a woman's insults . . . to be gentle when she [is] sick, or mop her floor, for she [knows] what and where his maleness [is],"¹¹¹ his sense of masculin-

105. Morrison, *Sula*, p. 83.

106. Chodorow, *Reproduction*, pp. 178–90.

107. Morrison, *Sula*, pp. 45, 72.

108. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 46–7.

109. Collins, p. 75.

110. Collins, p. 75.

111. Morrison, *Bluest Eye*, pp. 125–6.

ity rests upon his supposed superiority over her. Cholly and Pauline's marriage deteriorates, therefore, when Pauline finds a permanent housekeeping job in the home of a white family. As Pauline reflects, it is at this point that Cholly starts to become "meaner and meaner" and wants to fight her "all of the time."¹¹²

In contrast to the hostilities and misunderstandings that beset many male-female relationships in Morrison's novels, female friendships, several critics suggest, are marked by their nurturing qualities; some, such as Barbara Smith, have interpreted the harmony of these relationships as evidence of a "lesbian 'disloyal' subtext."¹¹³ Such a proposal echoes Chodorow's argument that lesbian relationships are positive for women in that they "tend to recreate mother-daughter emotions and connections."¹¹⁴ Notwithstanding the desirability of homosexual relations for women, however, "heterosexual preference and taboos against homosexuality, in addition to objective economic dependence on men, make the option of primary sexual bonds unlikely."¹¹⁵ While Chodorow's view of women's economic dependence on men can only be applied to an African American context after it has been qualified, her argument that heterosexual taboos deter women from entering into homosexual relations is echoed by commentators on African American culture. Collins suggests that for Black lesbians "homophobia represents a form of oppression that affects their lives with the same intensity as does race, class, and gender oppression."¹¹⁶

The extent of the opposition and oppression which lesbians experience can be gauged from the previously cited passage from *Paradise* in which a "committee of concerned Methodists" seek to fulfil their "antiperversion" duties by destroying a rock formation which, in their minds, resembles "two women making love in the dirt."¹¹⁷ This sentiment is shared by the town fathers of Ruby, who construe the fact that the Convent women "don't need men" as a sign that they are "[k]issing on themselves," and as an omen of the "ruination that [is] upon them – how Ruby [is] changing in intolerable ways."¹¹⁸ Ruby's patriarchs cannot tolerate lesbianism since it both subverts the sexual and social structure that affords them their privileged position and undermines the system of mothering that guarantees the continuance of their

112. Morrison, *Bluest Eye*, p. 92.

113. Barbara Smith, *Toward a Black Feminist Criticism* (New York: Out & Out Books, 1977), pp. 8–13.

114. Chodorow, *Reproduction*, p. 200.

115. Chodorow, *Reproduction*, p. 200.

116. Collins, p. 193.

117. Morrison, *Paradise*, p. 63.

118. Morrison, *Paradise*, pp. 275–6.

names and bloodlines. In deciding to kill the women “who [choose] themselves for company, which is to say not a convent but a coven,”¹¹⁹ the town fathers manifest both the typical masculine demonisation of women as witches, outlined above, and the severity with which patriarchal societies enforce the systems that produce heterosexual gendered subjects.

While the threat posed by female homosexuality to patriarchal and heterosexual society is often felt most keenly by men in Morrison’s novels, it is curbed not only by masculine forces, but also (and occasionally more so) by maternal forces. If men in Morrison’s texts seek to eradicate the threat of lesbianism through physical force or militant means, mothers are equally active and aggressive in ensuring that their daughters adopt a normative (and purportedly normal) sexual identity. This is evident in *The Bluest Eye*, where Claudia and Frieda’s mother discovers their efforts to assist Pecola, who has just had her first period, and mistakenly assumes that her daughters’ actions are “nasty”:

“What you all doing? Oh. Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Playing nasty, huh?” She reached into the bushes and pulled off a switch. “I’d rather raise some pigs than some nasty girls. Least I can slaughter *them!*”¹²⁰

Mrs. MacTeer’s horror at her daughters’ apparently perverted play, and the implication that, given the choice, she would “slaughter” rather than raise “nasty girls,” reveal her role in reproducing of a system of heterosexual subjects. Her anger lessens, however, when she learns that her daughters are aiding Pecola with the practical and emotional adjustments that are necessitated by menstruation. Foremost among the psychological adaptations that Pecola must make is an acceptance of her new-found capacity to bear children and, consequently, of her apparently predetermined role in a patriarchal and cyclical system of reproduction. As seen above, Pecola and her friends are aware of the fact that “‘only girls have babies,’” even if they are bewildered by the complexities and signs of sexual difference.¹²¹ Pecola’s and Claudia’s preoccupation with maternity may be attributed to gender role identification, which, as outlined above, shapes the selfhood of girls who are raised “in families where women, who have a greater sense of sameness with daughters than sons, perform primary parenting functions.”¹²² In addition to their acquired sense of identicalness

119. Morrison, *Paradise*, p. 276.

120. Morrison, *Bluest Eye*, p. 22.

121. Morrison, *Bluest Eye*, p. 54.

122. Chodorow, *Reproduction*, p. 110.

with their mothers, the girls of Morrison's fiction are introduced to the concept of maternity by more active ideological agents and apparatuses. Claudia's parents attempt to satisfy what they believe is her "fondest wish" by gifting her with baby dolls, and also presume that her playful parenting of these dolls will both fulfil and sustain her supposed "enthusiasm at the prospect of being a mother."¹²³ Although Claudia associates her toy with motherhood, "old age, and other remote possibilities," it is probable that she, like so many of Morrison's female characters, will assume the roles of wife and mother, thus continuing the cyclical system of mothering and gender formation.

Operating both overtly and covertly through various agents, the patriarchal systems depicted in Morrison's novels seek to ensure that each of Morrison's subjects adopts one of two offered gender identities – "one . . . a woman, the other a man."¹²⁴ As has been demonstrated above, however, the task of assuming and sustaining a sexualised sense of self proves to be a tortuous and bewildering one for Morrison's protagonists, for whom gender identity is neither innate nor naturally determined by anatomy. Indeed, the so-called sexual perversions that appear in Morrison's novels disprove the belief that the subject's gender identity is prefigured in its biologically-sexed body. Furthermore, the meanings that Morrison's subjects attribute to body parts and to the signs of sexual difference vary according to the familial and cultural influences to which they are exposed in infancy. The differential valuation of male and female bodies by the patriarchal societies of Morrison's novels leads to both an unjustified privileging of men and male gender traits and an equally erroneous degrading of mothers and women in general. Not only are "man" and "woman" just two of the sexual positions that Morrison's subjects can – and indeed must – assume, the very structures of self-identity and the patriarchal system of reproduction in which women mother mean that one can't have "one" without the "other."

123. Morrison, *Bluest Eye*, p. 13.

124. Morrison, *Paradise*, p. 63.