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RESURRECTING THE AFRICAN AMERICAN FAMILY:
A STUDY OF TONI MORRISON'S SONG OF SOLOMON,
BELOVED, AND JAZZ

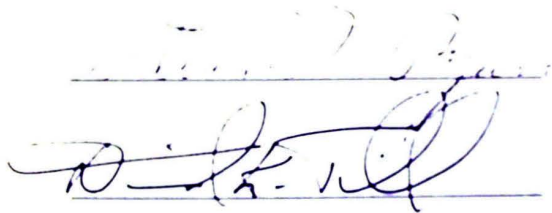
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Resurrecting the African American Family: A Study of Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*,
Beloved, and *Jazz*

A Thesis

Presented for the

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ABSTRACT

Resurrecting the African American Family : A study of Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, *Beloved*, and *Jazz*

Through a close reading of the texts, I propose to show how in *Song of Solomon* (1978), *Beloved* (1987), and *Jazz* (1992) Toni Morrison explores the way the black man and woman must and can change so that they can help to rebuild both the African American family and, at the same time, their own identity. I propose to show how for Morrison, black women and black men can (and finally must) develop together, but I shall focus on her female characters because she portrays their passivity as the trait whose change would have the greatest effect not only on women, but finally on men. In the course of these three novels, Morrison's African American couples move from passivity and alienation to activity and cooperation, and thus from the fragmentation of the family to its unification. As they move toward unification, they move toward a constructive acknowledgment of the past that has divided them but that, if acknowledged and shared, could reunite them. In these novels Morrison portrays three families in which men and women live as though they do not need one another. In each successive novel, the male and female characters more closely approach the active cooperation that Morrison implies produces viable family-life and a stable and positive identity. The characters approach active cooperation through understanding and acknowledging their pasts. Thus they recognize their separate experiences of similarly divisive pasts as a shared past. As they

share an understanding of the past, they share an understanding in and of the present. Each novel offers the hope that the African American family can survive if men and women learn to acknowledge and share their histories. In the novel, *Jazz*, men and women most nearly realize this hope. This thesis will explore the way female characters in the three novels progress from a passive to an active role as they search the past and present for the basis of community and hence identity. To show how the female characters progress in the course of the novels, I shall examine the novels in the order in which they were written and published.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

This study will focus upon how Toni Morrison reveals in the novels *Song of Solomon* (1978), *Beloved* (1987), and *Jazz* (1992) the necessity for black women and black men to develop together in the family. Through this process of development, the couples move from an inactive status to an active status. These novels show how one's inability to deal properly with the past can adversely affect the family. Thus, the family unit dissolves. Toni Morrison explores three families whose females and males exist as separate entities and do not realize wholly the importance of unification. The primary male and female characters in each novel either find their own identity as participants in the family, or fail to find an identity because they fail to participate in the family. And to participate in the family, each of its members must come to terms with the past. The past offers the possibility of unifying the family, since all of the family members share that past. But the past also threatens to divide the family, since the family's common experience is of being divided. In each novel, if the female and male can learn to integrate their histories the African American family can survive. In Morrison's implicitly conventional vision of the family, it consists of a female adult, a male adult, and their children. These novels center around three families: the Dead family, Sethe and her family, and the Trace family. Although, other characters in the novels have households and in a sense are families, they are not the central focus of the novels. They work as examples to reinforce the notion

that for the African American family to thrive there must be a male, female, and child who are willingly to integrate their pasts to secure their futures.

Other critics who have studied Morrison also focus upon the past and its connections to the African American family. This thesis goes one step further to reveal the connection between the three novels as they relate to both the past and the family. Although other critics discuss Morrison's extensive use of the past, they do not perceive the importance of the past as a means of unifying the African American family and thus establishing the identity of its members.

Critics have discussed the treatment of the past in each of the novels I shall discuss, and they have placed each novel in a more narrow thematic category. This preoccupation with history transcends the boundaries of each novel in that the same conclusions have been reached about each of the novels. The more narrow categories include a focus on the community, the African American family, and love. One critic, Dana Heller, writes about the concept of slavery (the past) and its relationship to the African American family:

As a study of the connection between the historical and the familial, *Beloved* is concerned with the healing of the black American family and the "reconstruction" of kinship structures. These structures had been violated by the cruel fact of family life under the slavery system: as enslaved Africans, women and men had no right to themselves, to one another, or to their children. (108)

Perhaps the most definitive work written on Morrison and her usage of the past in her work written on Morrison and her usage of the past in her novels comes from Doreatha Mbalia:

The idea that African American people are one people, bound by history, culture, and current oppression, pervades all of Morrison's work. In *Sula*, *Song of Solomon*, *Tar Baby*, and *Beloved*, the individual who selfishly violates the collective in some way either reaps disaster or learns from his/her mistakes. (625)

Critics have also considered the novel *Song of Solomon* from the historical point of view. Linda Krumholtz in her article "Dead Teachers: Rituals of Manhood and Rituals of Reading in *Song of Solomon*" says of Milkman:

Milkman Dead is a disengaged, self-centered young man, who has presumably been educated in a school system that offered him no point of connection or inspiration as a black man. . . . On his quest, Milkman learns the "discredited knowledge" of African-American history and spirituality, and for the first time he sees some connection between obtaining knowledge, interpreting signs in the world, and constructing a sense of himself. (553)

The usage of history as an approach ranges from her early work to her last novel, *Jazz*. Philip Page says of this novel, "The problems of the displaced characters in *Jazz* arise from their lack of satisfactory connection to the past because of the absence or

disappearance of their parents and children. To survive, these characters emphasize binary oppositions such as sense of self against others, or vice versa” (58).

Many critics, then, recognize that the relationship between the individual and history is central to Morrison’s novels. Some critics also recognize that the characters’ relationship to the past can destroy as well as unify their families. For example, Terry Otten in the article “Horrific Love in Toni Morrison’s Fiction” explores violence in Morrison’s work as a perverted love that reflects a perverted past:

The many aspects of Toni Morrison’s delineation of the degree to which oppression and racism have perverted love in the African American manifestation of exceptional love. Even her most gentle and pitiful characters are capable of moments of unexpected brutality during which innocent individuals are injured. Many of these acts arise out of a desire to protect or mitigate the suffering of a loved one. (651)

Adam McKible also views love and violence as a significant theme in Morrison’s work. He says, “When Sethe attempts to kill all of her children rather than allowing them to be returned to slavery, she does so because she finds the intersection of love and resistance impossible to navigate” (229).

Another aspect of Morrison’s work which permeates the criticism is that dealing with community. Various critics have examined Morrison’s work in terms of how the characters deal with their relationship to one another and their environment. Deborah Guth finds in *Sula* connections among history, identity, and community. “The ostensible

relation of present to past in this novel is one of rejections as Sula attempt to define herself a new identity in contradiction to the value of the community” (576). Phillip Page also explores this theme of community in his article. “Her characters have trouble developing fulfilled selves because they lack adequate relationships with one or more others, such as parents, spouse, family, neighborhood, community, and/or society” (55-56).

Critics focus not only upon the effects of the external world on the black family, but also upon how the impact the internal world or family itself has. Dana Heller says of *Beloved*, “Sethe undergoes separation from her family and attempts to mediate this separation by projecting her need for a family on an ambiguous character named Beloved” (105). In his article “Milkman’s Flying: The Scapegoat Transcended in Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*” Philip Royster examines *Song of Solomon* in terms of how Milkman asserts himself and thus creates a place in society. “Song of Solomon is a Bildungsroman in which Milkman Dead, placed at the beginning in the role of a scapegoat and victim, grows to take charge of his own life and defines his role in society” (419).

The purpose of this thesis is to demonstrate further the importance of the historical past to the survival of the African American family. This link to the past is the necessary component of the black female and male’s progression from the inactive to the active. The genders must come to a consensus that the survival of the family is based upon their ability to integrate the past into their lives and work together in the task of integration.

Even though all of Morrison's novels explore the concept of history and provide interesting female characters to consider, novels such as *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, and *Tar Baby* do not explore the way the black male and female might progress together to an active state in order to save and revitalize the African American family and hence themselves. The characters in the texts spend their lives searching for their identities. Yet, in these novels, the characters' identities are connected to not only the past, but also the future condition of the family. Thus, the family emerges as a central element in these novels.

Even though critics have recognized the usage of the historical past within Toni Morrison's work, they have failed to make the connection among the past, the relationship between the black female and male, and the present condition of the black family. This study takes the research already in place about the ramifications of slavery and the African American and fuses this information with the progression the female and male characters must make in order to preserve the family. For example, the first novel to be discussed, *Song of Solomon*, examines the identity crisis of the Dead family. Even though the novel seems to focus on Milkman's journey, the fact that his mother and two sisters do not embark on a similar quest becomes extremely significant. Critics who have written on this novel have overlooked the role of Ruth and her daughters in the novel. This depiction of Milkman as a character who takes action is juxtaposed with the inactive female characters in his family. They too have felt the emptiness and insecurities Milkman feels; however, they choose to remain locked inside themselves and their home.

The novel, *Jazz*, shows the women as being flexible and in active roles. The primary characters, Violet and Joe, find themselves in a failing marriage in which the past has suspended them in inactivity and reactivity. Joe has killed his young lover, and Violet has in effect attempted to kill her again at the funeral. This act of violence on Violet's part reveals a distinct progression in the roles of women from *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*. Violet does not merely sit aside and accept Joe's infidelity. She seeks out the funeral home, fights through a crowd, and then cuts the corpse in the coffin. The past haunts Joe and Violet as it haunts Sethe, Milkman, and Ruth.

This thesis will explore the progression from an inactive to a more active role as female characters search for identity within the novels *Song of Solomon*, *Beloved*, and *Jazz*. The themes explored in the first novel are further developed in the second and then matured in the third. The female characters in the first novel appear weak and static, the second novel shows their growing strength, and finally the third novel reveals their ideal state. Morrison achieves this progression by portraying women in each novel who appear to be in similar situations but who react differently. For example, Lena in *Song of Solomon* and Denver in *Beloved* both grow up in homes where mothers refuse to pass their histories down. This lack of information causes the female to be stifled. However, Denver utilizes this lack of information to her advantage and emerges as an active female at the close of the novel. Toni Morrison uses her texts as a historical analysis for the roles African American women have taken. They have moved from the inactive to an

active state. Ruth in *Song of Solomon* represents the lowest point because she never takes any action. She simply submerges into the lives of her children and hangs on to the memory of her father. Sethe in *Beloved* occupies the middle ground because she does take the action of killing her daughter; however, she does not let go of the guilt, and thus she allows *Beloved* to manifest herself as a ghost and later as a woman. Sethe isolates herself and her daughter Denver from their community and attempts to deal with her problem internally. Violet in *Jazz* illustrates the furthest progression because she not only takes action on her own behalf, but at the same time works to resurrect her family. The women in Morrison's work move from stage to stage in an attempt to identify with themselves and their pasts.

On the other hand, the men within the novels do not cling to their immediate families, nor do they look internally for answers. Milkman in *Song of Solomon* sets out on a journey to discover himself. Paul D in *Beloved* spends his life in the woods and traveling the country in search of himself. Joe in *Jazz* finds a lover who reminds him of his mother and then kills her. These men immediate action to seek their identity whereas the women tend to move through stages in order to reach a decision. However, even in their search for identity, these men are still doomed to failure. This failure results from the lack of cooperation between the sexes. Morrison shows us that the black male and black female can only find a sense of self if they work together to preserve the African American family.

To show how the characters in the three novels progress toward an understanding of

the centrality of the family, I shall examine each novel separately. Therefore, the first novel will be *Song of Solomon* because the weakest form of the black female can be seen as well as the ill state the family is in. As the family name indicates, the Dead family represents the worst condition of the family. Macon and Ruth do not communicate or allow their pasts to integrate, nor do they pass down their histories. The second novel to be explored, *Beloved*, introduces a strong central female character, Sethe, who cannot relinquish her past or pass the history down to her daughter. Paul D in this novel introduces the need for the black male and female to work together when he returns to Sethe at the close of the novel. The last novel, *Jazz*, fully develops the connections among history, identity, and active cooperation within the African American family. So, it becomes necessary to look at each novel individually in order to show a progression toward a relationship with the past that will unify male and female in an active cooperation to build a family that will confer a sense of self upon its members.

CHAPTER 2

Escape: The Dead Family

The novel *Song of Solomon* by Toni Morrison contains various female characters who not only represent the inactive black woman, but also the reactive black woman. These two types of females can be regarded as highly negative because they do not contribute constructively to the black family. Instead, they help to bring about the disintegration of the family. For the black woman to help herself and those around her, she must actively participate in her life and the life of her family. This active role begins with dealing with the past. To construct effective strategies to handle the past and present, the black woman must understand how history has affected her. Dana Heller supports this view; however, the extent to which she makes the connection between the past and the condition of the black family begins and ends with the novel *Beloved*. "As a study of the connection between the historical and the familial, *Beloved* is concerned with the healing of the black American family and the "reconstruction" of kinship structures" (108). Heller does not identify this connection in *Song of Solomon*. Once the female has come to an understanding of history, she must incorporate the lessons learned in the past into her modern life. Characters such as Ruth in *Song of Solomon* have allowed the haunting memories of the past to rise up and disrupt their everyday lives.

Even though Morrison provides Pilot as an indicator of a strong black female, Pilot is an example of the woman who fails to deal effectively with the past. She and her

daughter, Reba, are not part of the African American family that can result only from dealing with the past. A symbol of Pilot's inability to construct a living relationship with the past and hence a life for herself is the earring she always wears--a coffin-like black box. This box contains the slip of paper on which her father wrote her name, "as confused and melancholy over his wife's death in childbirth," he "had thumbed through the bible, and since he could not read a word, chose a group of letters that seemed strong and handsome; saw in them a large figure. . . . How he had copied the group of letters out on a piece of brown paper; copied, as illiterate people do, every curlicue, arch, and bend in the letters, and presented it to the midwife" (18). Through wearing her earring containing the paper on which her father wrote her name, Pilot clings to the only palpable memory she has of her father--a dead word, the mere shape that is her name. This gesture in a sense stagnates her as does Ruth's preoccupation with her own father. Pilot also does not utilize her past experiences to be a true mother, to aid Reba and Hagar's journey into womanhood. Morrison says of Pilot and her relationship with Hagar,

Neither Pilate nor Reba knew that Hagar was not like them. Not strong enough, like Pilate, nor simple enough like Reba, to make up her life as they had. She needed what most colored girls needed: a chorus of mamas, grandmamas, aunts, cousins, sisters, neighbors, Sunday school teachers, best girlfriends, and what all to give her the strength life demanded of her--and the humor with which to live it. (307)

Therefore, misdirecting children as to the significance of their past, which incorporates

the individuals listed above, proves to be detrimental to the family. Pilot appears to be a strong female individually, but for the people around her she is destructive. Like Ruth, she is compelled to live in her own world without using her past as a means to support her family.

This novel not only reveals various female characters who are inactive but also provides a male character by which we can judge the female characters. Milkman represents this character because he identifies the breakdown in his family and observes the disintegration, but he also takes action to determine the remedy. By embarking on a quest to search for gold which ultimately leads him on a journey towards discovering his family's history, Milkman takes the responsibility every black family member must take. He searches for and discovers his identity and then incorporates this information into his life. When Milkman returns home and discovers Hagar's death, he knows that he is at fault. Through learning about the myth of Solomon and how Ryna loses her mind, Milkman realizes the impact he has had on Hagar. He finally accepts responsibility for his actions: "He had hurt her, left her, and now she was dead--he was certain of it. He had left her. While he dreamt of flying, Hagar was dying. Sweet's silvery voice came back to him: "'Who'd he leave behind?'" He left Ryna behind and twenty children" (323). Therefore, *Song of Solomon* provides the reader with viable examples of inactive and reactive females through posing them against active male characters.

At the beginning of the novel, Morrison provides insight into the marriage of Ruth and Macon. This relationship appears to be quite unhealthy. Not only does Macon

consistently criticize Ruth, but he also does not spend a substantial amount of time with his family. This type of abandonment causes the reader to speculate as to the basis for his inattentiveness and lack of affection for his family. The answer lies in his inability to relinquish the past. Macon Dead II wants to own property as well as have plenty of money. This need comes from the haunting memories he has of his father. Since his father was murdered by individuals who wanted his property, Macon Dead II does not want to fall prey to this society. He neglects his wife and family in an attempt to reach unrealistic goals. Hence he perpetuates the distrust and greed slaveholders and their successors used to divide the African American family. Macon II does not trust Ruth's father because he refuses to lend him money for investment purposes. This refusal on the part of the father creates the chasm between Macon II and Ruth. Macon and Ruth cannot let go of the memory of Ruth's father. Whether the memory entails Macon's recollection of her father's refusal to lend money, a bedroom scene, or Ruth's image of her father as her only companion, Ruth's father remains a divisive part of their lives.

Instead of Ruth confronting Macon about the marriage, she submerges herself into the lives of her children. Her daughters, Lena and Corinthians, spend their childhood dressed in dainty dresses and gloves, "sitting like big baby dolls before a table heaped with scraps of red velvet" (10). Ruth's behavior proves to be inadequate and a reflection of the past. Ruth has made her daughters clones of herself when she was a child. Ruth found herself separated from her community and peers due to her father's efforts to repudiate the past. Her father did not want to be associated with the common black because this affiliation

meant inferiority. Therefore, when Ruth becomes a mother, she disguises her daughters in the costume she wore as a child.

Even though Ruth infected her daughters with her inability to release the past, or in art integrate the past into her life effectively, her son perhaps has experienced the most extreme example of her behavior. Early in the text we are given an instance in which Ruth attempts to escape the inadequacies of her life through her son. Quite often during the day, when all others have fled the wrath of the Dead home, Ruth and her son go off into a room and relive the closeness and serenity infancy and motherhood bring. However, the only participant who enjoys these episodes seems to be Ruth:

In the late afternoon, before her husband closed his office and came home, she called her son to her. When he came into the little room she unbuttoned her blouse and smiled. He was too young to be dazzled by her nipples, but he was old enough to be bored by the flat taste of mother's milk, so he came reluctantly, as to a chore and lay as he had at least once each day of his life in his mother's arms and tried to pull the thin, faintly sweet milk from her flesh without hurting her too much with his teeth. . . . So she felt him. His restraint, his courtesy, his indifference, all of which pushed her into fantasy.

(Morrison 13)

This quotation reveals the unnatural relationship between Ruth and her son. Not only does the breast feeding provide Ruth with an escape from her life, but the act also constitutes an awareness of motherhood and maternity.

Too often when women within Morrison's novels *Song of Solomon*, *Beloved*, and *Jazz* are faced with adverse situations, they revert back to maternal instincts and actions. On the surface this action can be positive; however, when the act becomes a tool to escape reality then the negativity seeps in. For Ruth, the breast-feeding allows her to escape her environment and be in a place where she matters and feels needed. This world, of course, is motherhood. As a mother Ruth can cuddle Milkman and most, importantly, have a reason to be. Morrison says of this feeling,

Something else is needed to get you from sunup to sundown: a balm, a gentle touch or nuzzle of some sort. So Ruth rose up and out of her guileless inefficiency to claim her bit of balm right after the preparation of dinner and just before the return of her husband from his office. It was one of her two secret indulgences--the one that involved her son. (13)

No matter how hard Ruth tries to use her son as a means of escape, her efforts will be fruitless. She herself must leave the Dead home, the Dead children, and most importantly her dead father. Ruth enables her husband to mistreat her through her own inability to exercise her action and talents.

Before one can condemn Ruth for her inactivity, one must first try to understand why this inactiveness thrives and consumes her life. Being the only child of a prominent doctor, Ruth had to contend with a highly sheltered life and scornful treatment by her neighbors. Both the occupation of her father, and the color of his skin create a chasm in her community. For many people during this era, pale skin signified a superior nature,

and many blacks realized that pale skin at least afforded certain opportunities. One of these was the opportunity to belittle other blacks who possessed a darker complexion. Therefore, Ruth's father kept his family isolated from the black community and thus caused a breach between Ruth and her past, present, and future.

Although isolating Ruth deprived her of the sense of community traditional among black families, perhaps the death of her mother had even more detrimental effects on her personality. Following her mother's death, Ruth turned all her attention to her father which made him feel quite uneasy:

Fond as he was of his only child, useful as she was in his house since his wife had died, lately he had begun to chafe under her devotion. Her steady beam of love was unsettling, and she had never dropped those expressions of affection that had been so lovable in her childhood. The good-night kiss was itself a masterpiece of slow-wittedness on her part and discomfort on his.

(Morrison 23)

This display of affection towards her father supports the idea that Ruth has a terrible time dealing with loss, change, and death. Not only does she revere her father while he lives but she also reveres him immensely in his death. This inability on her part to let go of her father's life and move on with her own contributes greatly to the problems within her marriage. Macon feels inadequate because he knows he cannot contend for Ruth's affection due to her devotion to her father.

Her exaggerated displays of affection for her father can also be seen as a need for

Ruth to feel needed and wanted, just as with her children. Since she cannot elicit these emotions from her husband, she must hold on to the memory of her father. This fixation on her father has opened a chasm between Ruth and her husband. Macon despises Ruth due to her unnatural relationship with her father. The incident which prompts the separation between Ruth and Macon occurs immediately following her father's death. Macon tells Milkman of this ordeal following a physical confrontation between the two of them. Instead of apologizing for the act, Macon attempts to provide some reasoning behind the ill feelings he has for his wife. These feelings stem from her past, their past. Macon says, "In the bed. That's where she was when I opened the door. Laying next to him naked as a yard dog kissing him. Him dead and white and puffy and skinny, and she had his fingers in her mouth" (73). Macon's recollection sheds some light into Ruth's personality. Apparently she cannot let go of the past and move on with her life. From the breast-feeding of a little boy to this display of affection to her dead father, one can see Ruth as an inactive and reactive black woman.

Even though Ruth's actions happen to be self-destructive, one must give some consideration to her explanation for the behavior. For several years following the death of her father, Ruth would journey to his grave. Ruth tells Milkman the reasoning behind her secret rendezvous with her father. She says, "The fact is that I am a small woman. I don't mean little; I mean small, and I'm small because I was pressed small. I lived in a great big house that pressed me into a small package. I had no friends, only schoolmates who wanted to touch my dresses and my silk stockings. But I didn't need a friend

because I had him" (124). This explication of Ruth's feelings reveals a new dimension to the problem of inactive women. This dimension includes the criteria by which the woman judges her actions. In Ruth's case she feels that her environment has made her "small," insignificant by her environment. Not only has her past created a woman who fears loneliness, but also one who cannot continue her life. Her father made a void in Ruth which now by dying he has made permanent. Ruth says of her father,

But he cared whether and he cared how I lived, and there was, and is, no one else in the world who ever did. And for that I would do anything. It was important for me to be in his presence among his things, the things he used, had touched. Later it was just important for me to know that he was in the world. When he left it, I kept on reigniting that cared-for feeling that I got from him. (124)

This passage along with the previous one supports the contention that Ruth does indeed use her family as a means of escape. She attempts to escape the harsh realities of her life. Instead of seeking constructive materials to fill the void in her life, she consumes the lives of her children. From nursing Milkman to visiting her father's grave, Ruth has chosen an inactive life.

The last stage in this view into the world of inactive women takes place between the male and female characters in this novel. Milkman, for instance, does not share his sisters' responsibilities within the familial structure. In fact, he does not have any obligations short of wandering the streets, socializing with Guitar, and becoming

intoxicated. In contrast to this seemingly carefree life is that shared by Lena and Corinthians. The females share the responsibility of cooking, cleaning, and washing clothes. They handle the domestic affairs. Unlike Milkman, they do not have the freedom to venture off in search of gold, identities, or even relief from their lives.

Lena feels as though Milkman has exercised his power over them just as his father has, therefore preventing any means of escape. She says to Milkman,

What do you know about somebody not being good enough for somebody else? And since when did you care whether Corinthians stood up or fell down? You've been laughing at us all your life. Corinthians. Mama. Me.

Using us, ordering us, and judging us: how we cook your food; how we keep your house.... Our girlhood was spent like a found nickel on you.... You have yet to wash your own tub, or move a fleck of your dirt from one place to another. (215)

This passage reveals the division among the males and females within the Dead family. The women do not have outlets besides the family. Even when Corinthians tries to escape the mundaneness of her family, Milkman and Macon squelch the idea. This unequal treatment along with the inactivity of the black females disintegrates the black family.

Macon has passed his imperious attitude about women down to his son. Therefore, when Milkman embarks on his journey towards self-realization, he discovers what has brought about the destruction of his family. The myth Milkman discovers about

Solomon, an ancestor and slave in his lineage, illustrates the primary reason behind the breakdown of the black family. When Solomon discovers he can no longer tolerate the brutality of slavery, he decides he must flee. The myth states that he grows wings and flies away. This gesture appears on the surface to be positive and heroic, but in his flight he leaves his family. Solomon abandons his wife, Ryna, and many children. Just as Solomon leaves his family, Milkman and Macon leave theirs as well. Macon leaves by means of his business and total disregard for his wife and daughters. Milkman physically leaves his family in search of gold.

Before Milkman leaves town, he had already deserted his family. From the time Milkman was a small boy he longed to fly away. Morrison writes, "When the little boy discovered, at four, the same thing Mr. Smith had learned earlier--that only birds and airplanes could fly--he lost all interest in himself" (9). Perhaps this longing in Milkman at a very early age signifies the need for people who find themselves in an unbearable situation to determine a means of escape.

Contrary to Milkman's longing is that of his sisters. Instead of wanting wings to fly away, Lena discovers flower-making which provides a silent means of escape. This outlet proves ineffective because she and her sister remain in the Dead home.

The novel *Song of Solomon* chronicles the lives of the Dead family. Within this household the women have become paralyzed under the restraint of the men and the disconnection with the past. Instead of seeking a means of escape, they simply become inactive. This lack of motivation destroys the black family. Ruth must realize her role as

a mother, teacher, and mentor to her children. She simply closes herself off from the world. Even though her father sheltered her out of his own arrogance and ignorance, Ruth should have taken that history and utilized the lessons to her own advantage. She as black woman cannot allow the past to rise up and destroy the future. The most effective means of combating such a past is action. Lena and Corinthians could have learned empowerment from Ruth. Instead they learn to bury themselves into their psyches and move silently in the world.

CHAPTER 3

Sethe and Denver: Reactive, Inactive, and Proactive Women

During the course of the opening chapter the theme of women and their either active or inactive status was introduced. The novel *Beloved* appears to be in the center of the spectrum of novels since the female characters in the novel range from those who do not take an active role in searching for their identities to those characters who take a very active role in seeking their identities. The incorporation of multiple female characters allows the reader to observe the negative results of living a stagnated life, filled with the haunting memories of the past. But most importantly, the novel examines the lives of black females and their relationships to the past. As Morrison portrays them, black females cannot live the present and future without constructively dealing with the past. Pamela Barnett agrees with this assertion in, "Figurations of Rape and the Supernatural in *Beloved*." "Sethe is haunted by the ghost of a child she has killed; *Beloved*'s return to life corresponds to the return of many of Sethe's painful repressed memories of her enslaved past" (419). Although Barnett reveals the connection between Sethe's past and her inability to live the present, she does not discuss the link between the past and the black family. The characters Denver and Sethe illustrate this point. Both women use the past as a catalyst for action. However, when the past becomes the primary emphasis, the action becomes negative. *Beloved* shows how the past helps to create black women who are not only inactive but also reactive. These terms describe the negative, distorted side

of action.

The novel itself contains various female characters who embody the primary characteristics necessary to be either an inactive, reactive or active female. The primary character Sethe represents the active female who towards the end of the novel degenerates back into an inactive person. In addition to Sethe, Morrison gives us Denver, who evolves into an active female by the close of the novel but only through learning about the rich, hard past her mother bore. Sethe in the end reverts to a languid state of mind, because she does not allow herself to relinquish the past but allows it to rise up and engulf her. Therefore, the novel *Beloved* possesses the full range of female character types. Not only do we have the active female, but we also have Sethe the self-absorbed stagnated and dramatic reactive female.

The progression Denver makes from being an inactive woman to an active woman parallels her movement from ignorance to knowledge of her past and its vile effects on her lineage. This historical data must come from her mother, Sethe. Since Denver at the opening of the text hides herself away in the woods and never leaves her yard, she, of course, represents the stagnated female. Denver does not have a complete understanding of the past. The scanty sketches she receives from Sethe do not satisfy her curiosity, nor do they satisfy the growing need she has within her personality. Instead of seeking out the knowledge she obviously needs, she isolates herself and feeds off of her own psyche. Following the death of Beloved and the return of Sethe from jail, Denver finds herself a tiny room in the woods where she can escape the menacing ghost and exercise the full

range of her imagination:

Back beyond 124 was a narrow field that stopped itself at a wood. On the yonder side of these woods, a stream, hidden by post oaks, five boxwood bushes, planted in a ring, had started stretching toward each other four feet off the ground to form a round, empty room seven feet high, its walls fifty inches of murmuring leaves... Denver could crawl into this room, and once there she could stand all the way up in emerald light. (35)

This example reveals the emptiness Denver feels as she must run from the past and hide from the future. The room not only becomes a safe haven for her but also a place where she can sink into herself without the distractions from the outside world. The room can be seen as a safe haven because Denver goes there whenever she feels as though Sethe has neglected her. After Baby Suggs's death, Denver spends much of her day in the green house. This behavior does not cease until Beloved returns. Denver's ultimate disuse of the house after the reunion with her sister shows she is using the house to escape her loneliness. The behavior seems to be peculiar and negative, but, since Denver does use the room as a way to think about Sethe and their history, her progression to an active state begins there.

Once Denver concludes Sethe will not tell her about her history, she finds an alternative outlet by venturing outward. This gesture of seeking others becomes the second step in her journey towards an identity and reckoning with the past. On several occasions Denver goes to town and seeks out a home where perhaps she can get some

answers: "Once upon a time she had known more and wanted to. Had walked the path leading to a real other house. Had stood outside the window listening. Four times she did it on her own--crept away from 124 early in the afternoon when her mother and grandmother had their guard down..." (124). Often Denver longs to escape the hold 124 has on her and run wild into the community. This behavior signifies Denver's longing to become an active female. Instead of living a secluded life, Denver wishes to experience the richness of an active life.

Morrison reveals through Denver the ill effects inactivity has on females in general. This concept is illustrated through Denver's evolution. At the opening of the text Denver does not venture off by herself. Because she is inactive, people think she is mentally slow. On the contrary, her mind is not retarded although her emotional development remains so. This "real other house," the one in which Denver learns to spell and write as well as connect with other members of her community, aids in her development. This achievement thrills her, but most importantly this gesture exposes her will and need to become active. Morrison says the event was significant to her, "Especially so because she had done it on her own and was pleased and surprised by the pleasure it created in her mother and brothers" (125). This episode of activity that promises more activity is brief. For once again the past lashes out and whisks Denver away. "It was Nelson Lord--the boy as smart as she was--who put a stop to it; who asked her the question about her mother that put chalk, the little I and all the rest out of reach forever..." (125). But Nelson Lord's question only evokes the past which will not allow Denver to move on

with her life. The longer Denver avoids confronting her past the heavier the burden becomes and the further she moves from her community. Nelson Lord represents the mind-set of Denver's neighbors. They become engrossed in the unspeakable crime Sethe committed without taking notice of the effects of their actions on Sethe's children. Not only Sethe, but her family as a whole is condemned. Yet once again, Denver does not take any action to counter her emotions. She merely returns home and helps to call forth the ghost.

Once Beloved is resurrected as a woman and returns to 124, Denver's relationship with Sethe and her past comes to fruition. No longer does Denver have the baby ghost to attend to, but rather a human manifestation of the ghost. No longer does Denver have to rely upon small pieces of history to discover who she must be and where she must go. Beloved forces Sethe to speak about the past. Therefore, Denver finally has access to her history. Determined to show Sethe the evil in her deed, the vile nature of the act, but most poignantly the reactive nature of the deed, a grown woman has risen to tell Denver of Denver's own history. Up until this point in the book Sethe seems convinced that her actions were justified. The thought of having her babies reared in the mire of slavery was enough. The thought of having her babies suck the iron bit was enough. The thoughts of herself returning to a place where she had four legs instead of two was enough. According to Beloved these reasons were not enough. Beloved like the repressed memories returns.

The solution to the dissolving family is action. Once Beloved returns and sucks the

life out of Sethe, Denver must either take action or starve. "Somebody had to be saved, but unless Denver got work, there would be no one to save, no one to come home to, and no Denver either. It was a new thought, having a self to look out for and preserve" (310). Through this mobilization on Denver's part, her true worth, intelligence, and spirit can be noted. She discovers a clever way to receive food from her neighbors, a job, but most importantly she closes the breach within the community. Since the death of Beloved, the townspeople have ostracized the people living at 124. But when Denver accepts the task of revitalizing her mother and sister, she herself becomes rejuvenated. This empowerment symbolizes the element which comes under examination in Morrison's work: the need for women to be active participants in their lives through not only self-examination but also action that will reveal their identities. Denver at the close of the novel has found her true self.

At the opening of the novel, Sethe signifies the reactive woman. With the fear of having her children raised within slavery's claws, Sethe steps into the role of supreme protector and murders her baby daughter. Her family and neighbors feel as though this act suggests not only insanity but also, in the words of Ella, a person who is "Prideful, misdirected" and disconnected with the present (315). Sethe feels she has taken the proper mode of action. Instead of looking towards the future after the incident, Sethe reverts to the past she carries within. She becomes immobile, inactive. The memory of her daughter and the harness of slavery haunt Sethe until she can no longer separate the past from the present. She longs for Beloved's return in order to reconcile her actions

and mesh past deeds with present actions:

Sethe was trying to make up for the handsaw; Beloved was making her pay for it. Sethe's greatest fear was the same one Denver had in the beginning--that Beloved might leave. That before Sethe could make her understand what it meant--what it took to drag the teeth of that saw under the little chin; to feel the baby blood pump like oil in her hands; to hold her face so her head would stay on (308).

This reluctance to reconcile with the past illustrates how black women allow the past to dictate the present and future. Sethe does not take the lessons learned in her past as a guide to help herself and family through the future. By withholding information she isolates Denver and by harboring a ghost she runs Buglar and Howard away.

As Morrison portrays her, can Sethe be held accountable for her actions? As a black woman and central figure in the familial structure, she must learn to make the correct choices concerning her family. She must choose not to be reactive but rather active in handling the issues in her past as they are connected to her family and identity. She must take the memories of rape, confinement, whippings, and degradation and place them in perspective. She must not be like Paul D and the other male characters who essentially flee from the family. Paul D must "Move. Run. Hide. Steal and move on" in order to deal with his past (82). He along with Sethe's husband, Halle, cannot constructively evaluate the hardship of their pasts. For instance, when Sethe discovers that Halle watched the Schoolteacher's sons rape and steal her milk, she immediately becomes

angry: "He saw them boys do that to me and let them keep on breathing air? He saw? He saw?" (85). This response by Sethe shows the difference between the male and female characters within the novel. The male characters when faced with atrocious acts leave. They leave their women; they leave their children; they even try to leave themselves. Through either self-denial or self-inflicted pain, they leave themselves. The females, on the other hand, stay with their men, stay with their children, and stay with themselves.

One basic mistake both the males and females make is not to pass down their histories. When Sethe refuses to share her past with Denver and when Paul D wanders across the country, they are exhibiting the negative results of thinking singularly, instead of as a family unit. They do not think at first to come together as a single familial unit; instead, they move in opposite directions. Slave-masters such as Schoolteacher did not allow their slaves to interact as families. He treated the females as animals and breeders and the males as machines. This history for Sethe and Paul D should have been used as a foundation to rebuild the family. Yet, the history works as a divider between man and woman making reconciliation virtually impossible. Denver at the opening of the book best illustrates this behavior. She secludes herself and partakes in self-reflection rather than marching off in the world to find the answers she desperately needs. Sethe, once she has killed Beloved and buried her, gives birth to her ghost and closes herself up in 124.

These women discover that their history is the key to healing their family. Denver learns that she must go forth in order to become someone and find her identity. This journey does not take place until she first confronts the past and places the events in

perspective. Sethe, on the other hand, allows the past to linger into the future thus causing a distortion of reality. When she takes the ice pick and tries to slay Mr. Bodwin, she has Schoolteacher on her mind. She has not let go of the memory; therefore, her actions become misdirected. She does not differentiate between the white man, Mr. Bodwin, who has helped Denver and herself, and the white man, schoolteacher, who destroyed her family and her identity. Denver at the close of the novel aspires to be the true black woman, a woman who utilizes the horrid facts of the past in order to meet and challenge the forces of the future. Instead of reacting against the past, Denver takes action to remedy the past.

Paul D at the end of the novel returns to Sethe. He finally realizes that he must cease running and mesh his history with Sethe's. This reunion results in the family having a chance to rebuild itself. When Paul D initially returns to 124, he and Sethe reminisce about the past and help to resurrect Beloved. When Beloved seduces Paul D and causes him to flee from Sethe, she once again is representing the past, their slave past. She like Schoolteacher does not want the African American family to thrive.

CHAPTER 4

Violet and Joe: A Search for Empowerment

In her more recent novel, *Jazz*, Toni Morrison takes the theme of inactive and active black women to the highest level. Through having both a female and male character undergo the evolution from passive to active simultaneously, Morrison identifies the need for black families to utilize one another as well as their pasts in order to resurrect the black family. Violet and Joe Trace, the primary characters in the novel, find themselves suspended in a failing marriage. Both individuals refuse to incorporate their pasts in order to preserve their future. The future entails the African American family as one unit, with both the male and female working together. This inability for Violet and Joe to mesh their pasts with the present leads to bouts of inactivity, reactivity, and finally a state of being active. The other female characters in the book work as examples of the various stages black females find themselves locked in.

Jazz is a combination of the themes presented in the two previous novels already examined in this thesis. *Jazz* takes characters such as Ruth and provides ways in which wives can indeed save their marriages. Of course, this rescue cannot take place without the help of the black male. In this aspect *Beloved* seems to become the bridge between the novels in that Paul D at the close realizes he must return to Sethe and lay his story down beside hers. Not only does Dorcas rebel against the sheltered life in which her aunt has placed her, but this rebellion signifies the reactive black woman. Since Dorcas

reacts to her situation rather than becoming an active person, she has not progressed like Violet. Instead, Dorcas is a symbol for both Joe and Violet, one that involves their pasts as well as their futures. As one can visualize, *Jazz* exemplifies the final stage in the evolution of black women through its use of characters as well as the connecting of themes from *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*.

Violet evolves from an inactive to reactive to finally an active woman. Violet's character acts quite uniquely because she moves from reactivity to inactivity several times. At the opening of the novel, Violet moves from reacting to Joe's affair to not reacting at all to his affair. When the novel begins, Violet has just come from Dorcas's funeral where she attempted to cut the girl's face, and then returned home and set her birds free. All of this behavior, of course, is a pointless reaction to Joe's affair with Dorcas. The narrator says when Violet "went to the funeral to see the dead girl and to cut her dead face they threw her to the floor and out of the church. She ran, then, through all that snow, and when she got back to her apartment she took the birds from their cages and set them out the windows to freeze or fly, including the parrot that said, 'I love you'" (3). Violet's behavior is quite negative and irrational. She does not confront Joe about the affair or even attempt to use a more constructive means of getting his attention. The next solution Violet tries involves seeing another man. "Violet is mean enough and good looking enough to think that even without hips or youth she could punish Joe by getting herself a boyfriend and letting him visit in her own house" (4). Violet cannot use gross reactions to solve a dilemma. She must remember to use her past as a springboard and

guide to solving her problems. The next plan Violet conjures up involves inactiveness. She decides to “fall back in love” with Joe. This can be seen as negative because she does not try communicating verbally with him. Instead, she resorts to domestic duties as a means of explaining herself. These duties include preparing elaborate dinners and cleaning the house.

All of these solutions fail because Violet does not allow herself to think fully about the reasons behind Joe’s need to have an affair. Since Violet made up her mind early in the marriage to not have children due to the memory of her mother, when the maternal instincts rise up inside her, she can do nothing to calm them:

By an by longing became heavier than sex: a panting, unmanageable craving. She was limp in its thrall or rigid in an effort to dismiss it.

That was when she bought herself a present; hid it under the bed to take out in secret when it couldn’t be helped... Violet was drowning in it, deep-dreaming. Just when her breasts were finally flat enough not to need the binders the young women wore to sport the chest of a soft boy, just when her nipples had lost their point, mother-hunger had hit her like a hammer. (108)

Mbalia says of Violet’s decision, “What happens to Violet as a result of the breakdown of the family is a breaking down of her concept of womanhood. First, Violet convinces herself never to have children. Violet neither wants to create another in her image, nor wants to connect herself with someone in her image” (629). Once one takes into account

Violet's unstable behavior and Joe's longing for a mother he never knew, then the affair and the reactions seem plausible. For Violet, Dorcas was not Joe's missing mother, but the child she will never have. The past miscarriages have ascended into Violet's everyday life and consumed her. She cannot do anything about the craving so she begins to sleep with a doll and imagine life as a mother. Violet's behavior reminds one of Ruth in *Song of Solomon* when she continues to breast-feed Milkman out of a misplaced maternity and a craving for self-worth. Violet speculates what the identity of Dorcas might be:

Who posed there awake in the photograph? The scheming bitch who had not considered Violet's feelings one tiniest bit, who came into a life, took what she wanted and damn the consequences? Or mama's dumpling daughter? Was she the woman who took the man, or the daughter who fled her womb? (108)

Dorcas is not Joe's mother nor Violet's lost daughter, but she does seem to be a manifestation of their pasts. Much in the same way *Beloved* becomes Sethe's past, Dorcas has become Joe and Violet's past.

In order to make sense out of her feelings, Violet meets with Alice Manfred. This relationship, or rather union, signifies the need for women to reach out into their communities in search for answers. Violet seeks Alice for support much in the same manner Denver utilizes her community for food. "The idea that African people are one people, bound by history, culture, and current oppression, pervades all of Morrison's work" (Mbalia 625). Violet realizes her bouts with inactiveness and reactiveness are not

helping to curb the pain inside of herself. The only remedy is an acceptance of her past. Once Violet leaves Alice and sits in the drug store, she can finally start to mesh the past and the present. This voluntary reflection on the past signifies Violet's evolution as a black woman. She no longer has to resort to negative modes of action because she has been empowered. On the surface, this contemplation in the drug store may not appear to represent activeness; however the result of the action justifies the manner in which Violet seeks her answer.

The primary male character, Joe, evolves by the end of the novel into a strong male, the kind of male every black family needs, a male who will not desert his family when the conditions harden. However, before Joe arrives at this ideal plateau he undergoes many stages. The stages involve the necessity for Joe to acknowledge and deal with his past, most importantly his mother. Joe tells the reader he changed several times in his life; these changes signify his need to alter his life as conditions in his life change. In order for a black person to integrate properly his past into his life he must be willing to change. He says, "I talked about being new seven times before I met you, back then, back there, if you was or claimed to be colored, you had to be new and stay the same every day the sun rose and every night it dropped" (135). This need for Joe to change constantly helps in his evolution because he has become flexible. All too often, characters such as Macon in *Song of Solomon* and Paul D from *Beloved* do not realize they have to allow change to enter their lives.

The characters have to come to an understanding that to become progressive

individuals, they must be aware of their past and alter their present and future to accommodate that past. Joe finds himself suspended in time in that he cannot let go of the memory of his mother. Through this refusal to relinquish the past, Joe gets involved with Dorcas. This affair directly relates to his mother in that he sees Dorcas as a manifestation of his mother. For example, when he sets out to find Dorcas he knows "She'll be alone. Hardheaded. Wild, even but alone" (182). Since Joe's mother has the name Wild and she lives alone in the woods, the connection is all too clear. Joe does not have a choice as to who his mother would be, but he does have a choice with Dorcas. Instead of acknowledging his anger towards his mother, he seeks out a young girl who shares the same personality traits of his mother. He tries on several occasions to find his mother and does not succeed. The moment he sets out to look for Dorcas, he sets out to find his mother again. When Morrison describes Joe and his search for Dorcas in the city using hunting terminology, she is blending the third time Joe tries to find his mother with the hunt for Dorcas. "I tracked my mother in Virginia and it led me right to her, I tracked Dorcas from borough to borough" (130). This fusion allows the reader to see clearly that the search for Dorcas is in fact a search for his mother. Not only does the fusion create this idea but the hunting imagery used to describe the concrete city provides another indication of the searching for Wild.

Joe's evolution parallels Violet's evolution in that they move through stages much in the same manner. However, the most striking connection between the evolutions is the role the past plays. Both Violet and Joe try to escape memories of their parents. For Joe

this means having to come to terms with accepting Wild as his mother and forgiving her for her lifestyle and his abandonment. Violet's mother commits suicide by plunging into a well. This well, as with the forest, haunts Joe and Violet until they are able to release the memories and integrate them into their lives. For example, the narrator feels as though Joe's affair with Dorcas stemmed from his lack of understanding of his mother: "All the while he was running through the streets in bad weather I thought he was looking for her, not Wild's chamber of gold. That chamber in the rock; that place sunlight got into most of the day. Nothing to be proud of, to show anybody or want to be in" (221). This quotation explains Joe's need for Dorcas and the void he has from his mother. Joe cannot make Dorcas fill the chasm inside himself. He must go and seek the answers. Any time an individual tries to use someone else to fill a need without acknowledging the basis for that need, he can be doomed to failure. Since Joe would not openly admit his shame, fear, and bewilderment about his mother, the tension built up inside him and spilled over. He would not find a constructive outlet for the emotions, nor would he identify the function of the past within the emotions. Violet much in the same manner deals with the memories of her mother. She cannot allow herself to ponder the reasoning behind her mother jumping into the well. For her, as with Joe, hatred has consumed her judgment. Until Violet and Joe realize the significance of their pasts and the importance of integration, they cannot build a family or be content.

Once Joe and Violet realize they must work together in order to preserve their family, they also must realize they must work together to preserve their histories. Since Joe and

Violet's pasts intersect, they have an obligation to each other to expose those pasts and move on with the present. Since the man who helped Joe's mother following an accident which could have resulted in her death was the same man who Violet's grandmother helped to raise, Joe and Violet have more in common than just their marriage. This common history allows the reader to see the necessity of the black female and male to work together. Through taking walks and listening to each other under the covers, Joe and Violet have put to rest the loneliness they once felt:

Since Joe had to be at work at midnight, they cherished after-supper time.

If they did play bid whist with Gistan and Stuck, and Stuck's new wife,

Faye, or promise to keep an eye out for somebody's children, or let

Malvonne in to gossip. They played poker just the two of them until it

was time to go to bed. (224)

The well symbolizes Violet's mother because that is the method she used to escape her grim life: "And then Rose Dear jumped in the well and missed all the fun" (99). Yet, Violet and Joe by the close of the novel have in a sense put their stories together. grim life, "And then Rose Dear jumped in the well and missed all the fun" (99). Violet now involves Joe in this memory. "Meanwhile Violet rests her hand on his chest as though it were the sunlit rim of a well and down there somebody is gathering gifts (lead pencils, bull Durham, Jap Rose Soap) to distribute them to all" (225). In addition, Joe has resolved in himself the dilemma with his mother. He finally realizes Wild had her reasons for living unconventionally, reasons that did not involve him. "She was

powerless, invisible, wastefully daft. Everywhere and nowhere” (179). He comes to the point that all black males and females must come to: history does not dictate the future. In other words a person cannot rewrite what has already happened; he must instead learn from the past and go forward. Violet and Joe have taken the memories of their broken childhoods and integrated them into present-day living. The task becomes possible to complete due to their willingness to change, seek answers, and confront the past. Even though they move into stages of inactivity and reactivity, they make the necessary alterations to resurrect their family.

The novel *Jazz* explores the lives of Joe and Violet Trace in order to promote a possible solution to the dissipation of the black family. The male and female must work together. They must also realize the strong connection their pasts may have. Although all couples may not have a direct link like the Trace’s, they still must not neglect the past but must integrate the past. The need for communication and alteration are the elements the couple must possess.

One of the primary reasons Violet enables herself to move from one stage to the next involves her ability to change. She learns from Alice that she does not know her husband and has not taken the time to communicate with him. Violet says, “I had to sit down somewhere. I thought I could do it here. That you would let me and you did. I know I didn’t give Joe much reason to stay out of the street. But I wanted to see what kind of girl he’d rather me be” (82). When Alice responds with, “You don’t know anything about your own husband, I can’t be expected to help you” this reaction to Violet indicates

her need to focus upon Joe instead of negative and reactive displays of frustration towards Dorcas (82). It is after this meeting with Alice that Violet reviews her life and then moves forward. Joe follows this same plan of action. Throughout his life he has been moving from one character trait to another. This ability to integrate life experience into one's living habits enables him to evolve into a progressive black male. This novel also brings into account themes explored in *Beloved* and *Song of Solomon*. The themes include inactive black women and reactive black women. Violet in a sense is made up of these other characters. From Ruth to Denver to Sethe, Ruth incorporates and accommodates the actions of these females. The only factor that separates and elevates Ruth is ability to blend her past, present, and future.

CHAPTER 5

A Culmination of Themes

The novels *Beloved*, *Song of Solomon*, and *Jazz* by Toni Morrison illustrate the fundamental need for black families to resurrect themselves. This regeneration cannot occur until the black female moves from being an inactive or reactive individual to an active female. This progression takes place when the female wholly realizes her placement within her historical past, and then takes that knowledge and integrates the information into her present life. The female and male must come to a consensus that the black family is worth saving. The female and male together resurrect and complete the family. Ruth in *Song of Solomon* and Sethe in *Beloved* must become active, just as Violet does in *Jazz*.

However, the connection between the two sexes does not become apparent until the novel *Jazz*. The depiction of character in the previous novels focuses upon the black female and her inability to act positively in adverse situations. For example, Ruth in *Song of Solomon* does not make any effort to escape her failing marriage or provide guidance to her daughters. Sethe in *Beloved* allows the past to resurge and engulf her life; therefore, she reacts against her past rather than acts in accordance with her past. The last female character of significance, Violet, resolves to remain with her husband, lay aside her mother's death, and move on with her life.

This progression exemplifies the ideal state for the African American woman. She

must realize the grimness of her past without negating the present and future. Along with this task, she must also be committed to her family. She, along with the African American male, must come to the consensus that the black family is indeed worth saving. Cooperation suggests the only means to achieving this goal. Morrison writes three novels which involve not only the relationships between black women and their children, but also the relationship between black males and black females. Therefore, the novels *Song of Solomon*, *Beloved*, and *Jazz* create both a progression from the inactive black female to the active black female and also a simultaneous progression in relationships between the black male and female.

The first novel in the progression, *Song of Solomon*, presents Ruth, Lena, and Corinthians as black females so thoroughly oppressed by their conditions that they have become static. Their primary dilemma lies in the fact that Ruth, the mother, will not let go of her past. Since her father was important in her life, Ruth following his death, will not allow him to rest in peace after his death. Instead, she visits his grave regularly and dwells on his memory. This preoccupation with her past causes Ruth to ignore her responsibilities to her daughters, Lena and Corinthians. Ruth dresses her girls in fancy attire while they are young and then surrounds them with gloom and worry after they have grown older. They become two adult females incapable of escaping the Dead home due to their lack of self-esteem caused by their father's ill-treatment. Ruth's husband, Macon Dead, is dissatisfied with his daughters because he has not forgotten Ruth's relationship with her father. Although Lena and Corinthians can blame Ruth and Macon

for this static behavior, they would not be justified. Since Denver in the novel *Beloved* enables herself to break free from her tightly knit world, Lena and Corinthians could possibly as well. This ability on Denver's part reveals the genius behind these novels. Morrison in every situation provides a foil character in order to judge the strong characters.

Ruth's son Milkman emerges to become the only member of the Dead family who accepts the task of discovering who he is and where he has come from. However, on his journey, the most important error he commits is that, he leaves his family behind. This abandonment by Milkman signifies the black man realizing his need to seek an identity and leaving his family behind in the process. The legendary Solomon in the myth commits this same act. He leaves behind Ryna and a host of children in order to flee slavery. Instead of Milkman incorporating his family into his journey, he, like Solomon, merely leaves them and ventures off.

Macon Dead abandons his family, but in a different manner than Milkman does. Macon emotionally abandons his family. He does not leave town or even the Dead's home. He psychologically creates a chasm between himself and his daughters and his wife. He stops sleeping with Ruth in an effort to punish her for not letting go of her father. Macon ignores his daughters, only taking the time to dissolve any connection they may have with the outside world. An illustration of this act occurs when he forces Corinthians to leave her boyfriend, thus ending any hope of her leaving. This behavior of Corinthians, of course, can be seen as doomed from the start. Corinthians has not

discovered and does not discover that she must flee her awful state; she cannot use someone else to escape to.

The novel *Beloved* becomes the central turning point in the evolution of the relationships. This fact becomes apparent with the integration of a strong male character. Morrison uses Paul D as a means to introduce the underlying theme common in the three novels. This theme also lends itself to the evolution of the female characters. Black males and females must work together in order to save the black family. This idea was subtly introduced with *Song of Solomon* through the myth. Solomon should not have flown away without his family. In *Beloved* Paul D comes to Sethe's aid and rids her house of the baby ghost. This gesture seems positive and beneficial on the surface; however, Sethe does not uphold her end. Through not releasing the memory of the ghost she allows for the ghost to emerge. Not only does Beloved return, but she returns as a grown woman ready to make Sethe pay for her crime. However, Denver works as a female who realizes the need for action. Positive action in Denver's mind means seeking help for her mother and her sister even if the attempt means coming to terms with her past. The novel *Beloved* takes the role of the sheltered daughter from *Song of Solomon* and reveals how, in spite of a crushing, overwhelmingly sheltered childhood, a black female can find a positive outlet. She can look inside herself, set aside her fears, and move on. Denver does just that; she moves on-on with her life and a new job, on with her life and new friends, on with her life and a new identity.

The relationship between Sethe and Paul D signifies the alliance of the black male and

female. Since Morrison does not solidify this union until the final chapter of *Beloved*, the need for *Jazz* becomes imperative. *Jazz* takes the relationship and develops the final component of the evolution. Sethe moves through the entire novel discounting her need for Paul D because of upon her feelings for Beloved and Denver. She thinks as long as she has her daughters, she does not need Paul D. The book on numerous occasions refers to Sethe's former slave master, Schoolteacher, and his various tactics of control and oppression. Through these episodes in the novel the connection between the past and the present can be seen. For example, when Sethe learns that she has animal parts and human parts from overhearing a conversation between Schoolteacher and his sons, she discovers the debasement of the system of slavery, the denial of humanity. In light of her discovery she realizes she cannot allow her own daughters to grow up under such conditions. At this point Sethe attempts to murder her children, thus freeing them from slavery's claws. Of course, her efforts turn out to be fruitless because only one child falls lifeless, not all four. Even though Sethe feels that the memory of slavery and what slavery did to her mother, her grandmother, and finally herself was justification, this behavior cannot be viewed as positive action. Sethe reacts to slavery, to the torture, to the memory rather than using the history to live in the present. One must integrate the memory in a positive manner; the memory should not simply be a backlash against reality. To move forward, one must make the past a stepping stone.

The character Beloved illustrates the past, Sethe's past. When she refuses to allow the dead child to rest, Sethe provides the conditions necessary for the child's return. When

Sethe recalls the brutality of plantation life, Beloved moves into the forefront. After Sethe's return home, the baby ghost becomes a constant reminder of Sethe's past. This ghost feeds on Sethe's refusal to tell Denver her entire past. This ghost feeds on Sethe's refusal to tell Howard and Buglar about their past. Thus Beloved remains an integral part of Sethe's life. When Paul D arrives and expels the ghost, Denver reaches out to the ghost. When Paul D tries to become a permanent fixture in Sethe's life, Sethe reaches out to Beloved. Beloved finally appears and demonstrates the powerful hold she has on Sethe by systematically destroying her. Morrison allows the ghost to do so in order to reveal the negativity of not letting go of the past. If Sethe had allowed herself to accept what her past imposed on her and carried the story down to her children, then Beloved would not have had the nurturing which led to her resurrection.

In *Jazz* Morrison fully develops the themes explored in the first two novels and develops them fully. For example, Violet has the ability to move from an inactive state to an active state by the close of the novel. Her husband, Joe, follows the same progression, and in the end they arrive at the same point. This point represents the healing of the black family. At first, Violet refuses to allow the memory of her mother's suicide to leave her thoughts. She constantly dreams of the well. Consequently, Violet lives her life inside of a well; she closes herself off from her community and her husband. She does not see the refusal to allow her husband to become a part of her world as contributing to this cycle of inactivity.

Nonetheless, Violet commences to move to the next stage of development. In this

stage, she must venture outside of her home and consult with Alice Manfred. Through visiting Alice, she accomplishes two major tasks. First, Violet has involved herself with her community. Before this seeking out of Alice, Violet found herself ostracized by her community due to the affair of her husband and the reaction she has at Dorcas's funeral.

This situation parallels Denver's dilemma in *Beloved*. After Sethe's heinous act of violence, the community would not involve itself with any person living at 124. Of course, when Denver realizes the depth of her situation, she goes to them for assistance.

Violet must clear the same hurdle that Alice must clear. After having spoken with Mrs. Manfred, she realizes she must try to rescue her failing marriage. This results in the second stage of development. This stage forces the individual to come to terms with her own activities. Sitting in the drugstore, Violet recounts the instances when she proved to be inactive or reactive. This contemplation coincides with Paul D's decision to return to Sethe. He realizes the need to let go of the past in order to preserve their relationship. When Violet returns home from the drugstore, she has likewise resolved to redeem her relationship with Joe.

The final stage in the developmental process involves cooperation between the sexes. Violet and Joe together make the decision to continue their relationship. They begin to spend time together in an effort to seek the element which initially brought them together. They bring their histories together and allow them to mesh. Sethe and Paul D begin this process at the close of *Beloved*. Paul D realizes he must lay his story down besides Sethe's story in order to bring Sethe back. "Her tenderness about his neck jewelry--its

three wands, like attentive baby rattlers, curving two feet into the air. How she never mentioned or looked at it, so he did not have to feel the shame of being collared like a beast. Only this woman Sethe could have left him his manhood like that. He wants to put his story next to hers" (335).

Following the stages of progression in Violet's life, one can clearly see the parallels among the novels. Morrison has composed a three-stage process which black women and men must pass through in order to bring to life themselves and their families. Each stage strings together the novels so, when each of the three stages becomes apparent, a line of development connects each novel. Morrison has achieved the feat of writing three novels which piece together the history of African Americans, an elaborate puzzle which provides tools with which we can heal ourselves. Black women, of course, emerge as the primary target group. This thought becomes apparent as one moves from novel to novel.

Morrison illustrates the first stage of development in *Song of Solomon* with the Dead family. The Dead family emerges as being unique because they do not acknowledge any connection to their past. Instead, as Ruth does, they connect only to the generation which proceeds them, their parents. Until Milkman embarks on his quest, the Dead family is just that, dead. They do not have any hope for the future. This is especially true for the females because they do not attempt to begin the first stage of acknowledgment. They move silently within the Dead home and will leave without a trace.

The second novel, *Beloved*, focuses upon the situation that in certain circumstances a female may take some action to combat her oppression; however, the action may be

negative. Sethe illustrates this reactivity. Through killing Beloved and keeping her memory alive, Sethe reveals for black women the need for proactive approach instead of a reactive one. The second novel also introduces the second stage of development, that of introspection. When the ghost, Beloved, arrives at 124, she forces Sethe to think back to the day of the killing and beyond. She forces Sethe to try to explain satisfactorily to her how she could react so violently. This novel also introduces the third stage which incorporates the black male and launches the reader into the third part of the triptych, *Jazz*.

In this last novel one character moves through all three stages. Violet plays this role in that she exemplifies aspects of Ruth, Sethe, Denver, and then finally the proactive black woman. The final stage also comes to fruition in this last novel by connecting histories, activities, and families. Violet and Joe not only connect in the present and future, they also have a past which connects or rather intersects. Therefore, in order for the black family to resurge and become whole, the female and male must deal constructively with their pasts. Toni Morrison in her novels, *Song of Solomon*, *Beloved*, and *Jazz* reveals how the female and male must integrate their pasts and work together to preserve their futures and the African American family.

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VITA

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