

The Essential Female Tragedy
*A Study of Motherhood in African American Female
Literature*

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Abstract

This thesis studies how African American motherhood is presented in literature. The chosen texts are Maya Angelou's *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings* (1969), and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987). Both texts explore loss between mother and daughter, making up what Adrienne Rich calls "the essential female tragedy" (237). *Caged Bird* is told through the eyes of the daughter, whereas *Beloved* is told through the eyes of the mother. In *Caged Bird*, Angelou tells her story of how she was abandoned by her mother when she was three years old. She was sent to live with her grandmother in Stamps, Arkansas, along with her brother Bailey. Maya longs for her mother and wonders what was so wrong with her that it made her mother send her across the country to live with her grandmother. In *Beloved*, which is set in the slave era, the story is told from the mother, Sethe's point of view. She and her four children escape slavery, and they go to live with Sethe's mother-in-law, Baby Suggs. When their owner comes to take them back, Sethe decides to kill her own daughter in order to save her from a life in slavery. In *Beloved*, Morrison raises the question of whether it is acceptable for a mother to murder her own child, to save it from a horrible life. This thesis explores motherhood and its complexities in two different texts written by African American authors. Adrienne Rich's separation of motherhood into motherhood as experience and motherhood as institution, is used as a basis for analyzing motherhood in the chosen texts. This thesis argues that the patriarchal and oppressive ideal of institutionalized motherhood destroys the relationship between mothers and daughters, resulting in the essential female tragedy.

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1. Introduction

The topic of motherhood has not always been considered worthy of literary pursuit. Through history there has not been much focus on the mother, especially not the black mother. In the Victorian novel the white mother was often portrayed as frivolous and silly, and it was not until the beginning of the 19th century she was taken seriously. However, the 1970s saw a new wave of publications of African American female authors like Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Audre Lorde and Toni Cade Bambara among others. Dana A. Williams writes that “post 1970s African American women writers explore the black feminine self, a self heretofore unexamined” (72). Motherhood is central in this exploring of black womanhood. According to Marianne Hirsch, African American female writers of the 1960s, 70s and 80s “feature the mother prominently and in complex and multiple ways” (176). This thesis explores the theme of motherhood in two texts written by African American female authors, namely Maya Angelou’s first autobiography *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings* (1969), and *Beloved* (1987) by Toni Morrison. Loss and separation between mother and daughter are the main themes in both texts. A loss between mother and daughter is what Adrienne Rich calls “the essential female tragedy” (237). The two texts offer two very different approaches to motherhood both in time and place. As this thesis will show, black women have historically faced different problems than white women in general, and on issues concerning motherhood specifically. *Beloved* is set to the slave era, and portrays a mother who is willing to do anything to keep her children safe, whereas *Caged Bird* is mainly set in 1930s and 40s rural South, and portrays a daughter who is rejected by her mother.

This thesis explores ‘the essential female tragedy’ from the perspective of both mother, in *Beloved*, and daughter, in *Caged Bird*. Further, it explores how the institution of motherhood has destroyed the sacred bond between mothers and children through its permanent goal to keep women under male control. In *Beloved* Morrison uses the infanticide to critique the institution of slavery in general, and the institution of motherhood specifically. In *Caged Bird*, Angelou’s mother Vivian does not fit the description institutionalized motherhood places on mothers, and therefore she sends her children to live with their grandmother. Angelou critiques her mother for not being present in her childhood, and in doing so she is endorsing institutionalized motherhood. However, Angelou is ambivalent in her approach to the institution of motherhood, because she at some points in the text also critiques it. This thesis argues that the institution of motherhood has destroyed the relationship

between mother and daughter in the two chosen texts. The institution of motherhood expects all mothers to be perfect, and when mothers do not meet the expectations of the institution they are deemed 'unfit' to be mothers. As the two texts shows, motherhood is not one single thing. Women are mothers in different ways, and the standard institutionalized motherhood places on women are impossible to reach. *Beloved* and *Caged Bird* portray motherhood in a raw way, which highlight how the burden of the institution crushes women and their relationships to their daughters.

Chapter one establishes the theoretical framework of the thesis. The thesis focuses on three main theoretical approaches. The first one is Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born*, and her extensive research on motherhood. Rich's book works as a framework for analyzing motherhood in this thesis. The oppressive, patriarchal institution of motherhood, which aims to keep all females under male control, works as an extremity for analyzing motherhood in literature. This thesis uses the institution of motherhood to understand how motherhood is presented in *Beloved* and *Caged Bird*. The institution of motherhood is critiqued in both texts in order understand the mother character, and why the mother acts like she does in the chosen texts. The second one is literary critic Marianne Hirsch and her research on mother-daughter relationships in literature. She highlights how mothers are not given much attention in Western literature up until the beginning of the 1900s, and she blames this 'maternal silence' on the myth of Oedipus. Rich claims that the mother-daughter plot is "the great unwritten story" (225) blaming it on the patriarchal institution of motherhood. Hirsch proposes that literature needs more female voices, based on its lacking focus on mother-daughter relationships. She proposes the myth of Demeter and Persephone as a replacement for the Oedipus myth, focusing more on mother-daughter relationships. Thirdly the thesis focuses on writings of African American feminists such as Angela Davis, bell hooks and Patricia Hill Collins in order to understand African American motherhood, and how the history and culture of African Americans influence these mothers. The thesis will also highlight how African American women have often felt left out in the women's movement because most white, feminist texts only reflect how white women felt.

Chapter two focuses on motherhood in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou. *Caged Bird* is Angelou's first autobiography, and it portrays her childhood up until she is 16 years old. Maya and her brother Bailey were sent to live with their paternal grandmother, in Stamps, Arkansas, at age three and four, because their parents could not take care of them. The text depicts Maya's feelings of parental rejection and her longing for her mother's love. Maya does not understand why her mother does not want her, and as a result

she thinks something is wrong with her. Angelou critiques her mother for not being present in her childhood, and the traumas it brought her. For instance when Maya is raped by her mother's boyfriend. When Maya becomes a mother herself at 16, Vivian finally acts like a real mother towards her. This thesis argues that Angelou shows support for the institution of motherhood in terms of critiquing her mother's absence. However, Angelou is ambiguous in her approach to the institution, because she in some cases critiques it, and sometimes she supports it. Angelou supports the institution of motherhood in terms of critiquing her mother's absence, and her lacking ability to take care of her children, however, she also critiques it in terms of its strict rules concerning how a mother should act. Angelou critiques the institution for taking her mother away from her, and when Angelou becomes a mother herself she critiques the institution for not allowing mothers to realize their own dreams outside the home because of her own guilt of leaving her son.

The third chapter explores how motherhood is portrayed in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. *Beloved* is inspired by the historical events surrounding Margaret Garner, a runaway slave who in 1856 killed her daughter in order to save her from slavery. Morrison found the idea for the novel when she read about Garner while working as a publisher at Random House. Morrison writes in the foreword of *Beloved* that "The historical Margaret Garner is fascinating, but to a novelist, confining" (XI). In *Beloved*, Morrison explores the mother-child relationship between slave women and their children, which was heavily influenced by the slave women's oppression from both slavery itself and the institution of motherhood, that allowed slave owners to be in total control of slave women's bodies. Morrison explores how these two institutions influence motherhood, and she uses the infanticide to critique both the institution of motherhood and the institution of slavery. Marianne Hirsch argues that slavery "heightens and intensifies the experience of motherhood – of connection and separation" (6). The slave women in the novel suffered a double burden of being victims of both slavery and the institution of motherhood, which aims to control all women. Slavery allowed the owners to sell and buy children, separating mothers from their children, the patriarchy however, allowed them to control slave women's bodies making their lives extremely difficult. Morrison uses the infanticide to attack both institutions. The relationship between mother and daughter in the text resembles the myth of Demeter and Persephone, because it is a story of a mother who loses her daughter who comes back to her 18 years after her death. Hirsch writes of *Beloved* that: "Morrison's novel is about the murdered child, a daughter, returning from the other side to question the mother, and like the story of Demeter and Persephone, it is about the contemporary, perhaps a cyclical, reunion between mother and daughter" (6). Sethe could

be interpreted like a Demeter-figure, because she is willing to do anything in her power to save her daughter. This chapter argues that Morrison uses the infanticide to critique the institution of motherhood and slavery, and in doing so justifies Sethe's actions.

Motherhood is an important theme to explore because women are faced with impossible standards from institutionalized motherhood. In addition, many black women feel a double burden of being both women and African American. They face different challenges than white women in many aspects of life. *Beloved* and *Caged Bird* highlight the complexities of black motherhood in an honest way. Women are not perfect, and they will not always be great mothers. Rich asks the question of why "We know more about the air we breathe, the seas we travel, than about the nurture and meaning of motherhood" (11). Why is it that motherhood, which is the start of all life, has been silenced and suppressed throughout so much of history? As the two texts highlight, it is often institutionalized motherhood itself that hurts the relationship between mothers and daughters. Because mothers are not allowed to be mothers in their own way, they feel defeated when they do not manage to reach the high standards of the institution. Mothers cannot be expected to be good role models for their own daughters if they constantly feel like they are not good enough. As Rich highlights: "As daughters we need mothers who want their own freedom and ours" (247). This freedom is especially relevant to African American women since they historically have been struggling to win their freedom both in terms of slavery and as women.

2. Theory

Introduction

In its analysis of motherhood in literature, this thesis explores the writings of Adrienne Rich and her book *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1976), Marianne Hirsch's book *The Mother/Daughter Plot* (1989), as well as African American feminist writers such as Angela Davis, bell hooks and Patricia Hill Collins. The combination of these theories forms a good base for analyzing motherhood in literature because they together offer a complex insight into motherhood in general and African American motherhood specifically. Rich, a pioneer in the field of writings on motherhood, presents two different outlooks on motherhood in general, namely motherhood as experience and motherhood as institution. Motherhood as institution is the oppressive form of motherhood imposed on women by the patriarchy, whereas motherhood as experience is the opposite, the potential all women have to

be mothers. Rich writes about how women have been suppressed throughout history, and how they have not been in control of their own bodies. As a result, women have been forced into motherhood without any rights. Based on the lack of mother-daughter portrayals in literature, Rich calls the relationship between mother and daughter “the great unwritten story” (225). This sparked Hirsch’s inspiration for writing about the missing representation of female relationships in Western literature. Hirsch describes that she thought *Of Woman Born* was a “model for feminist writing” as well as a “statement of a lacuna that would serve as inspiration for this project” (17). Marianne Hirsch tries to answer Rich’s question of why motherhood has been neglected throughout history, and she searches for the great unwritten story. She studies Western literature and how the mother-daughter relationship is missing in most of these texts, much of which she blames on the Greek myth of Oedipus. Hirsch suggests that the myth of Demeter and Persephone, which portrays a classic narrative about mother and daughter, should have been given more attention in the literary tradition. Hirsch and Rich work well together because Hirsch applies Rich’s question of women’s roles to literature and the “essential female tragedy” (237), which is what Rich calls the loss of a mother to a daughter, or the loss of a daughter to the mother. This thesis will explore the loss of a mother in the one text, and the loss of a daughter in the other text. In addition there are several African American feminist writers such as Angela Y. Davis, bell hooks and Patricia Hill Collins who offer valuable insight into how African American women feel about motherhood and their role in traditional feminist writings. Since this thesis explores motherhood in literature written of, and about African American women, these texts offer valuable insight for analyzing the chosen texts.

Adrienne Rich – Of Woman Born

Rich’s book has received cult status in the field of motherhood, and Hirsch calls it a “ground-breaking analysis of motherhood” (129). Andrea O’Reilly calls *Of Woman Born* “the first and arguably still the best feminist book on mothering and motherhood” (*Motherhood to Mothering* 1). Rich’s main idea is to interpret motherhood in two different ways, namely motherhood as institution, which is motherhood imposed on women by the patriarchy, and motherhood as experience which is the potential all women have of caring for and bearing a child. Rich sees motherhood as a patriarchal idea (institution), whereas mothering is the potentially empowering motherhood as experience. O’Reilly explains the two terms like this: ““motherhood” refers to the patriarchal institution of motherhood that is male-defined and controlled and is deeply oppressive to women, while the word “mothering” refers to women’s

experiences of that are female defined and centered and potentially empowering to women” (*Motherhood to Mothering* 2). Because of the comprehensiveness of Rich’s study on motherhood, it is well suited for being the backbone of a literary analysis of motherhood. Rich’s text will be used as a starting point for the analysis of the two texts presented in this thesis, and how to understand motherhood in literature.

In *Of Woman Born*, Rich writes about her own experience as a mother combined with the history, psychology and sociology of motherhood. As she writes in the introduction of the ten year anniversary edition of her book: “I wanted to examine motherhood – my own included – in a social context, as embedded in a political institution: in feminist terms” (IX). Rich writes about how motherhood has been viewed throughout history, and how the treatment of women and motherhood itself has changed. As the title suggests, Rich’s main argument is how motherhood can be divided into two main interpretations, which is what she calls motherhood as institution, and motherhood as experience. Motherhood as institution is according to Rich motherhood imposed on women by the patriarchy. Women are supposed to love being mothers, and see this as their sole purpose in life. Rich defines the two terms like this:

Throughout this book I try to distinguish between two meanings of motherhood, one superimposed on the other: the *potential relationship* of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children; and the *institution*, which aims at ensuring that that potential – and all women – shall remain under male control. This institution has been a keystone of the most diverse social and political systems. It has withheld over one-half of the human species from the decisions affecting their lives; it exonerates men from fatherhood in any authentic sense; it creates the dangerous schism between “private” and “public” life; it calcifies human choices and potentialities (13).

As Rich highlights, motherhood as institution has throughout most of history degraded women’s potential and taken away their opportunity to make decisions concerning their own lives. She goes on to say that “for most of what we know as the “mainstream” of recorded history, motherhood as institution has ghettoized and degraded female potentialities” (13). There are examples of this treatment of women in literature, for example in the dystopian novel *A Handmaid’s Tale* by Margaret Atwood, where women are used as breeders in a patriarchal society. Rich’s view on motherhood can help us understand motherhood presented in literature because it represents how women throughout history has been forced into the role of mother and wife. As Rich writes about her thoughts concerning her first pregnancy: “*This is what women have always done*” (25). Rich felt that she had to become a mother “to be like other women” (25). Rich’s own experience of motherhood as something that wasn’t quite

right for her, and her frustrations connected to motherhood represent how many women have felt about the role they have been forced to take. By using her own experiences Rich's analysis becomes more authentic and realistic.

Patriarchal motherhood is harmful to women because it tells women how to be mothers, and if women do not follow these rules, they are deemed as failures. O'Reilly points out "two features of modern patriarchal motherhood that are particularly harmful to mothers" (*Motherhood to Mothering* 5). The first one is "the assumption that mothering is natural to women and that child rearing is the sole responsibility of the biological mother" (5). The second thing O'Reilly highlights is the "practice that assigns mothers sole responsibility for motherwork, but gives them no power to determine the conditions under which they mother" (*Motherhood to Mothering* 5). Under the institution of motherhood, women are given all the responsibility, but they are not allowed to decide *how* to perform the task. In addition, when they fail, they are given all the blame. Rich, however, was critiquing the institution, not the mothers, making her a player on the women's team. Rich honestly portrayed her own daily life as a mother, and how she felt like she did not master the job. Susan J. Douglas and Meredith W. Michaels highlight that "Rich launched a scathing critique, not of mothers or motherhood itself, but of the institution that it had become" (51). Many homemakers may have been offended by Rich's book, like Douglas and Michaels highlight "everyone we knew read the book, and some of us gave it to our mothers, a gesture not always greeted with the same delight that flowers or bath oil evoked" (50). For many women, being a housewife was all they knew, and they were enraged and scared when they felt like they were being critiqued.

By analyzing motherhood in literature as motherhood imposed on women by the patriarchy, the contrast between women's own feelings and thoughts concerning motherhood becomes clearer. By comparing motherhood in literature to the patriarchal and freedom-robbing motherhood as institution, one can better understand different female characters in literature. In literature, a character's feelings and thoughts are often presented to the reader, either through dialogue, actions or thoughts and feelings. Western literature is full of repressed and trapped mothers who want more than being a mother. By using Rich's rhetoric concerning motherhood, which can be seen as one extremity, different versions of motherhood will become visible when compared to this extremity. Motherhood is not *one* thing. There is not only one way to be a mother. There are as many different versions of motherhood as there are mothers. Rich writes that "female possibility has been literally massacred on the site of motherhood. Most women in history have become mothers without

choice, and an even greater number have lost their life bringing life into the world” (13). To some, Rich’s description of motherhood as institution might be extreme, however, it serves as a good starting point when analyzing motherhood in literature because it explores so many aspects of motherhood both positive and negative. Rich herself highlights that “This book is not an attack on the family or on mothering, *except as defined by and restricted under patriarchy*” (14). Rich critiques motherhood presented by the patriarchy, not motherhood defined by women. She also writes that “To destroy the institution is not to abolish motherhood. It is to release the creation and sustenance of life into the same realm of decision, struggle, surprise, imagination, and conscious intelligence, as any other difficult, but freely chosen work” (280). It is important to remember that Rich does not set out to destroy the nuclear family nor abolish motherhood. Instead, she points out that women should have more power when it comes to decisions concerning their own lives and bodies.

Rich’s other version of motherhood, motherhood as experience, is much more free and moldable to each mother. This concerns the biological possibility women have to become mothers, in contrast to the institution where this potential to have children must remain under male control (Rich 13). Rich does not write much about motherhood as experience, however she writes about how she enjoys motherhood as experience while she is vacationing with her sons during the summer, she feels free, and she adores this version of motherhood:

I remember thinking: This is what living with children could be – without school hours, fixed routines, naps, the conflict of being both mother and wife with no room for being, simply, myself. [...] I felt wide awake, elated; we had broken together all the rules of bedtime, the night rules, rules I myself thought I had to observe in the city or become a “bad mother”. We were conspirators, outlaws from the institution of motherhood; I felt enormously in charge of my life. Of course the institution closed down on us again, and my own mistrust of myself as a “good mother” returned, along with my resentment of the archetype (194-195).

Rich finally feels like she enjoys motherhood when she is allowed to live more spontaneously, not being chained to a schedule of naps, school hours and routines. Rich writes that she feels like an outlaw, someone criminal for not following the rules of the institution. This description illustrates how trapped Rich herself felt within the institution. Women are freer under motherhood as experience than they are under motherhood as institution. Rich, who doesn’t like being a mother under institutionalized motherhood, enjoys having time with her sons that is not timed after a strict schedule. She loves their carefree, rule-free days where she can do whatever she wants without being judged as a bad mother. Motherhood as experience is the opposite of motherhood as institution, because Rich is in

charge herself, instead of following a set of rules imposed on her and her children. However, as she writes this does not last for long before the institution closes down on them again.

By looking to Rich, readers of literature might understand characters that rebel towards the institution. Rich highlights that a woman's sole purpose is not motherhood, and she critiques the institution of motherhood for not allowing women to complain and be frustrated with their children. "The patriarchal institution of motherhood is not the "human condition" any more than rape, prostitution and slavery are. (Those who speak largely of the human condition are usually those most exempt from its oppressions – whether of sex, race, or servitude)" (33). As Rich points out, being a mother is not always the most natural thing for women. The patriarchy tells women that they are not allowed to question their role as mother and wife, and since no one questions it, no one knew that a lot of women felt the same way. Betty Friedan identified this problem as "the problem that has no name" in her 1963 best seller *The Feminine Mystique*. Friedan writes about American housewives that: "Suddenly they realized that they all shared the same problem, the problem that has no name. They began, hesitantly, to talk about it" (17). What Friedan refers to as the problem that has no name, is the frustration white housewives felt over their own missing self-fulfillment. Being a mother is not enough; motherhood is not a woman's sole purpose in life. Douglas and Michaels write of Friedan that she by identifying "the problem that has no name", she "opened the floodgates to what would soon become a tsunami of increasingly focused resentment and anger, namely, the women's movement that began in earnest in the late 1960s" (35). Friedan became a hugely influential person in the women's movement and her contribution to the field of feminism is highly regarded to this day. She highlights the restrain motherhood put on women: "Parenthood, and especially motherhood, under the Freudian spotlight, had to become a full-time job and career if not a religious cult. One false step could mean disaster. Without careers, [...], mothers could devote every moment to their children" (173). Women were not allowed to question their role as mothers, it was meant to be enough for them, and they were supposed to know all the answers concerning motherhood and taking care of children. They were not allowed to want something more than a ring on their finger, a pretty house and children, but as Friedan unveiled not all women are natural Stepford wives, whose only wish is to please her husband and children.

Marianne Hirsch – Mothers and Daughters in Literature

The other main theoretical text is written by Marianne Hirsch. She focuses on the portrayal of the mother, and the maternal voice in literature up until the post-modern era. She questions

why the mother in much of Western literature is given no attention and she argues that mother blaming can be one of the reasons. Hirsch argues that mother blaming does not go hand in hand with feminism, and that there has been a trend for female writers to blame their mothers for everything that has gone wrong in their lives. Hirsch states that “I believe that feminists need to clarify their positions on motherhood” (13), insinuating that feminists cannot call themselves feminists when blaming their mothers for everything. Paula Caplan has written much about mother blaming and she states that blaming our mothers is too easy because society tells us that it is ok: “we need to realize that our culture encourages us to focus only on our mothers’ faults and to let their good points slip our minds. Blaming our mothers is so easy that we rarely stop to consider whether anyone else might be to blame, or even whether no one is to blame” (37-38). As Caplan points out, blaming our mothers comes natural to us, and because of it mothers receive much undeserved blame. Rich writes of the topic that “The institution of motherhood finds all mothers more or less guilty of having failed their children” (223). Mothers are blamed not matter what they do, and it seems like they cannot do anything right.

Hirsch argues that the relationship between mothers and daughters has not been given enough space in literature, and she tries to find out why. She asks “not only where the stories of women are in men’s plots, but where the stories of mothers are in the plots of sons and daughters” (4). This lack of attention on mothers and daughters is what Rich calls “the great unwritten story” (237). Hirsch argues that the relationship between father and son has been paid much more attention than the relationship between women. Hirsch blames much of the focus on male relationships on the myth of Oedipus where the mother Jocasta is not given any attention even though she marries and has children with her own son. The focus on fraternal relationships and the Oedipus myth was enforced by Sigmund Freud’s theories concerning the psychoanalysis. “Freud might be said to have predetermined his theory by highlighting Oedipus” (Hirsch 29). Maybe things would have been different if Freud had chosen to focus more on mothers and daughters, and Rich calls him “terribly limited both by his culture and his gender” (196). Why did he choose the Oedipus myth over other myths that highlight a mother’s love for her children like the myth of Demeter and Persephone? Rich proposes a possible answer: “Like intense relationships between women in general, the relationship between mother and daughter has been profoundly threatening to men” (226).

However, Hirsch presents another Greek myth based on a mother’s strong love for her daughter, namely the myth on Demeter and Persephone, which she suggests as a replacement of the Oedipus myth. Hirsch questions why this myth hasn’t been more influential. The myth

of Demeter and Persephone can help us understand the complexities of motherhood, and how it is presented in literature because it illustrates a mother's unconditional love for her daughter and her willingness to sacrifice anything to keep her safe. In the myth, the goddess Demeter is robbed of her daughter, and the myth portrays how the mother is furious and willing to destroy the earth to get her daughter back. The myth illustrates that mothers can find unimaginable strength in order to keep their children safe. The myth illustrates the unconditional love a mother has for her daughter, and it will serve as an extremity of a mother's love, which will be useful in a literary analysis on motherhood. In contrast to Jocasta, the mother Demeter is given a voice. Hirsch also mentions Electra and Antigone as strong female characters in the Greek myths as women's stories that could have replaced the strong emphasis on the myth of Oedipus. Hirsch highlights the myth of Demeter and Persephone and suggests that it can be seen as a backbone text for modern literature on mother-daughter relationships. "The emblematic example of the Demeter myth can serve to illustrate the complicated intersections of gender and plot exemplified in modernist fiction" (Hirsch 34-35). In the myth of Demeter and Persephone the mother's perspective is shown in contrast to what it is in the myth of Oedipus. Demeter loves her daughter Persephone unconditionally, and she is heartbroken when Hades abducts her to the underworld and takes her as his wife. Demeter is a desperate mother who wants her daughter back, and she threatens to destroy everything if she is not given back Persephone. She is the goddess of the harvest and agriculture, and she controls the seasons. As a result of her daughter's abduction she makes the crops stop growing as well as the flowers and trees, which, again lead to famine and starvation for the people inhabiting the earth. Zeus wanted to end the famine, and made Hades return Persephone. There are many versions of this myth, but a common story is that Persephone had to return to the underworld for some time each year, leaving Demeter heartbroken. According to O'Reilly this explains "the cycle of death and regeneration in nature, when Demeter the harvest goddess mourns her daughter's return to the underworld each winter" ("Demeter, Goddess"). When Persephone is in the underworld Demeter mourns, and it is nothing that grows because it is winter. When she left for the underworld it left Demeter crushed. She is a desperate mother, willing to do everything to get her daughter back. The Myth of Demeter and Persephone can help us understand motherhood in literature because it shows a mother's unconditional love for her daughter. Human mothers do not have the power to destroy the earth to save their children, but this is a good metaphor for how it feels for a mother when her children are in danger. The Demeter and Persephone myth illustrates motherhood in a powerful way. Most mothers are willing to do anything to protect

their children and keep them safe. This myth can also be used as a contrast when reading literature, for example in texts where the mother does not love her children unconditionally. The story “grants voice and legitimacy not only to the daughter’s but also to the mother’s story” (Hirsch 36). The story of Demeter and Persephone in contrast to the Oedipus story gives the mother’s perspective of losing her child. It also shows a mother’s love for her daughter, and the strong bond between them, as well as it tells the story of female loss from the female perspective. Rich calls this ‘the essential female tragedy’:

The loss of the daughter to the mother, the mother to the daughter, is the essential female tragedy. We acknowledge Lear (father-daughter split), Hamlet (son and mother), and Oedipus (son and mother) as great embodiments of the human tragedy; but there is no presently enduring recognition of mother-daughter passion and rapture (237).

In the myth of Demeter and Persephone, the mother loses her daughter and it leaves her heartbroken. What is special about the myth is that it portrays female loss from the female’s perspective. This portrayal of loss can function as a good basis for analyzing motherhood in literature and especially female loss. It helps the reader understand how a mother is willing to do anything to save her daughter. It is also a good contrast for works of literature where mothers do not love their children, or leaves them.

Women, Race and Class

This thesis explores motherhood in African American literature, and therefore it is valuable to include theory on African American views on motherhood and feminism. Black women have often felt left out when it comes to the fight over equal rights and feminist theory. As Patricia Hill Collins puts it “All African American women share the common experience of being Black women in a society that denigrates women of African descent” (22). Black women undoubtedly face different problems than white women in the American society. Historically the black slave woman was lowest on the social ladder. The feminist critic bell hooks writes of feminism in the U.S. that it “has never emerged from the women who are most victimized by sexist oppression; women who are daily beaten down, mentally, physically, and spiritually – women who are powerless to change their condition in life” (1). Insinuating that the women who were able to fight for their rights were in a better position than black women in the first place. In her critique of Betty Friedan and *The Feminine Mystique*, bell hooks argues that Friedan only wrote about white, middle class American women living in suburbia and forgot about American women that did not fit this description. Hooks questions whether “college-educated white housewives” were “an adequate reference point by which to gauge

the impact of sexism or sexist oppression on the lives of women in American society” (2-3), clearly believing the opposite. Hooks argues that Friedan “ignored the existence of all non-white women and poor white women. She did not tell readers whether it was more fulfilling to be a maid, a babysitter, a factory worker, a clerk, or a prostitute than to be a leisure-class housewife” (2). Being a maid or babysitter was a profession often occupied by black women, in large degree earning them the role of the stereotypical “Mammy”. Hooks also asks who were going to take care of the children and maintain the houses of white housewives if they were given access to other professions (1-2). Black women, in many cases, were the ones who had to take over the jobs of the white women in the home. What did the white feminists think of this division of labor? Is it right for white middle class women to enter the workforce, if the work they found unfulfilling is given to less fortunate women? Aren’t they simply handing their problems over to less fortunate women by doing this? Many black women were already working outside the home, and as hooks points out, they were working jobs that “neither liberated them from dependence on men nor made them economically self-sufficient” (96), often keeping them from their children and their own role as mother. When white women wanted less time with their children, black women wanted more time with them. Because black women have always worked they have often helped each other and watched each other’s children. In the slave era there was often one woman, usually a woman that was too old to work, who were given the responsibility of taking care of all the children while the mothers worked. Women who take care of other women’s children are often called “othermothers”. It could be “Grandmothers, sisters, aunts, or cousins [who] act as othermothers by taking on child-care responsibilities for one another’s children” (Hill Collins 119-120). Othermothers “serve a critical function in African-American communities” (Hill Collins 120). Black women have also from as long back as the slave era worked as nannies for white families, basically taking on the role as mothers for both their white employer’s children, in addition to being mothers to their own children.

Work was already a big part of black women’s lives, and this did not make them feel liberated. Angela Y. Davis points out that “the enormous space that work occupies in Black women’s live today follows a pattern established during the very earliest days of slavery. As slaves, compulsory labor overshadowed every other aspect of women’s existence” (2). In other words, they did not have as much time to dedicated to motherhood as white women had. Female slaves were treated no differently than male. They were expected to work just as hard as the men, however they had the double burden of doing the housework after a whole day’s work in the plantations (Davis 207-208). The slave women also had to take care of their

children in addition to working for their slave owners. Davis writes that “housework has never been the central focus of black women’s lives. They have largely escaped the psychological damage industrial capitalism inflicted on white middle-class housewives, whose alleged virtues were feminine weakness and wifely submissiveness” (208). However, these women have always done their housework, but they had “carried the double burden of wage labor and housework” (Davis 208). *The Feminine Mystique* was published during the Civil Rights Movement, a time in American history where African Americans were harassed and victims of racism. Also, the flux of white housewives into the labor force would “mean fewer hirings of qualified black people” (hooks 99). As a result, being told that work outside the home is fulfilling did not resonate with black women. Therefore, hooks calls this outlook “one-dimensional perspective on women’s reality” (3). Hooks’ point is that black women were not in the same privileged position as these white housewives. Hooks goes on to argue that most feminist writers are white, and that black women are left out: “White women who dominate feminist discourse, who for the most part make and articulate feminist theory, have little or no understanding of white supremacy as racial politic, of the psychological impact of class, of their political status within a racist, sexist, capitalist state” (4). She goes on to state that well-of feminists seldom are able to speak with, to and for diverse groups of women (15), making women who are not white and privileged feel left out.

What happens to motherhood during these conditions? Is the mother-daughter relationship influenced by the harsh conditions African Americans have experienced? Hill Collins points out that “Black mothers of daughters face a troubling dilemma. On one hand, to ensure their daughters’ physical survival, mothers must teach them to fit into systems of oppression” (123). (Most) mothers would do anything to keep their daughters (and sons) safe. The myth of Demeter and Perspehone, where Demeter is willing to destroy the earth is a symbol for how far a mother is willing to go to save her daughter. Unfortunately women today are not goddesses, and do not have the power to protect their daughters from every danger and threaten to destroy the earth if their daughters are unsafe. “On the other hand, Black daughters with strong self-definitions and self-valuations who offer serious challenges to oppressive situations may not physically survive” (Hill Collins 123-124). Strong, black women like the protagonist in Octavia Butler’s novel *Kindred*, Dana, who are sent back to Antebellum South, refuses to succumb to the slavery in the beginning, and she is violently punished for it. Defying the slave masters almost cost her life. Knowing about the problems that face African American women can help us understand and analyze literature concerning black mothers. It might help us understand the choices they make and their actions. Black

women face an even greater challenge than white women, in addition to fighting the institution of motherhood, they have to fight racism and unfair treatment as well. They are a 'weak' group within another 'weak group', which makes it even harder for them to be mothers, and especially raise daughters, because they cannot always protect them. However, as this thesis will illustrate, literature is full of strong, black, female characters that fight this assumption that black women are victims.

Conclusion

This thesis combines three main theories; Rich's theory of motherhood as institution and experience, Hirsch's theory on motherhood in literature and the Demeter Persephone myth, as well as African American feminist writings on women, race and class written by Davis, hooks and Hill Collins. Rich's *Of Woman Born*, an iconic book in the field of motherhood, has inspired many feminist writers. Because of the book's broad investigation of motherhood it works as a good reference point when analyzing motherhood in literature. The two versions of motherhood that Rich presents, namely motherhood as experience and motherhood as institution are two very different things. The contrast between the two works well for analyzing mothers in literature, because it can be used to analyze a huge diversity of mothers. Rich highlights how women through history have been excluded from making decisions concerning themselves, also in literature. On that note, Rich points out: "A glance at ancient texts would suggest that daughters barely existed" (226). Rich calls the relationship between mother and daughter "the great unwritten story" (225), which worked as an inspiration for Hirsch when she decided to write about female relationships (or the lack of them) in Western literature. These two theorists work well together because Hirsch continues to build on what Rich highlighted in *Of Woman Born*. Rich has written a book on motherhood, which deals with motherhood, its history, as well as sociology, psychology and own experiences. Rich highlights mothers' suppressed visibility and roles throughout history, and Hirsch writes about the same theme in literature. Hirsch applies Rich's point of how mothers have been suppressed to their missing visibility in literature. In addition, the African American feminist writers bell hooks, Angela Davis and Patricia Hill Collins offer aspects on African American life and motherhood that is necessary when analyzing motherhood in African American literature, such as problems connected to race and gender.

Additionally, the contrast between what Rich describes as motherhood as institution, and the myth of Demeter and Persephone that Hirsch highlights, is useful when analyzing literature. Motherhood as institution under patriarchy is a very different kind of outlook on

motherhood, compared to the unconditional love illustrated in the myth of Demeter and Persephone. The myth of Demeter and Persephone is working well when analyzing African American literature on motherhood, because it often discusses, or at least draw lines back to the theme of slavery because of the huge impact this institution has had on African American culture. The slave era was a horrible time to be a mother. The slave mothers were not able to protect their children like Demeter is able to protect Persephone. Even though most mothers would do anything in their power to save their children, many women are denied this protection of their children based on their own situation. For African American mothers factors such as race, gender and class might hinder them from being able to keep their children safe. Black mothers have always worked, and they are often forced to spend much time away from their children because they have to work. Work did not make them feel liberated, like Betty Friedan told them it would. The myth of Demeter and Persephone, might function as a metaphor for how black women often have *wanted* to act in order to protect their children, but not had the opportunity to because of the conditions they have lived under. It is also a good contrast to use when analyzing mothers in literature that *do not* love their children unconditionally. The myth of Demeter and Persephone works as one extremity, and another extremity is what Rich calls motherhood as institution. Together, they offer a wide-ranging specter of background for analyzing motherhood in literature because they portray two opposites. When comparing something to an extremity, the differences are often made clear. When measuring characters in a text to one extremity, one can easily see the character's traits, and therefore easier understand them and the choices they make.

3. The Neglecting Mother

Introduction

Maya Angelou has written seven volumes of autobiography. The first and most celebrated volume is *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969). *Caged Bird*, which portrays Angelou's strict Southern upbringing in the 1930s touches heavily on themes of racial and gender oppression, and parental rejection. Angelou follows in the tradition of her fellow African American writers, and chooses the autobiography as her genre. The autobiography has been the traditional and most influential genre for African Americans, Selwyn Cudjoe argues that: "The Afro-American autobiographical statement is the most Afro-American of all Afro-American literary pursuits" (6), he goes on to say that up until the contemporary era the autobiography "remains the quintessential literary genre for capturing the cadences of Afro-

American being, revealing its deepest aspirations and tracing the evolution of the Afro-American psyche under the impact of slavery and modern U.S. imperialism” (6). Mary Jane Lupton states that Angelou “transcends the autobiographical tradition, enriching it with contemporary experience and female sensibility” (*Iconic Self* 15). What is special about Angelou’s works, are that they span over seven volumes, and offer the reader an insight into her whole life.

Angelou dedicates much space in her works to the theme of motherhood. Lupton states that motherhood is probably the “most consistent thematic issue found in Angelou’s autobiographies” (*Iconic Self* 179). Both Angelou’s relationship to her own mother Vivian, and eventually her relationship to her son is the backbone of the texts, but also her relationship to her grandmother Momma Henderson plays a significant role. This chapter will explore how motherhood is represented in *Caged Bird*. Even though Angelou critiques her mother, none of the black women portrayed in her texts are weak. As Sondra O’Neale puts it: “No black women in the world of Angelou are losers. She is the third generation of brilliantly resourceful females, who confronted oppression’s stereotypical maladies without conforming to its expectations of behaviour” (26). Eva Lennox Birch highlights that the black women portrayed by Angelou all denies the “literary and media stereotyping” of black women (130). Even though Angelou highlights strong and independent women, this portrayed independence comes at a price. Her mother, who sent Maya to live with her grandmother at the age of three, does not fill the role of the warm and safe mother that Maya longs for. Angelou’s childhood and adolescence years are heavily influenced by her feelings of neglect after being abandoned by her mother.

This chapter will explore how Vivian’s abandonment and rejection impact her daughter, and whether or not Angelou, by critiquing her mother in *Caged Bird* is supporting the institution of motherhood. Angelou’s relationship to the patriarchal institution of motherhood is ambivalent, because she both supports and critiques it. She shows support for the institution by agreeing with it in terms of mothers not being allowed to abandon their children. At the same time Angelou critiques the institution of motherhood for only being accepting of one type of mothers, and only accepting one view on motherhood, which is that motherhood is supposed to be a woman’s sole purpose. Angelou critiques the institution in terms of how it took her mother away from her, because it does not accept a mother who is not following the strict rules of the institution. However, as a child Angelou longs for the security and warmth the institution demands mothers to offer their children. Based on this ambivalence, this chapter argues that Angelou in many parts of *Caged Bird* shows support for

the institution of motherhood because she implies that her childhood would have been much better if her mother had been present. However, when it comes to Angelou's own experience of motherhood, she critiques the institution because it does not allow her to pursue her need for self-realization. This chapter will argue that Angelou in *Caged Bird* shows both support and critique for institutionalized motherhood imposed on women by the patriarchy. Still, her main support is found for the institution because of her severe critique of her mother Vivian, who were gone almost her entire childhood.

The Absent Mother

In *Caged Bird* Angelou portrays the relationship between mother and daughter from the child's point of view. She does this with brutal honesty, blaming her mother for much of her childhood traumas. As Sidonie Smith points out, Angelou does not only focus on her success in *Caged Bird*: "Unlike a large number of black autobiographers who have achieved a sense of freedom in the achievement of fame, Maya Angelou chooses not to focus on the traditional success story of her life but rather on the adolescence that shaped her and prepared her for those achievements" (135). Angelou is brutally honest in *Caged Bird*. She is not reluctant to write about traumas and vulnerable episodes in relation to her mother. Angelou highlights the fact that her mother made many mistakes, and she does not aim to hide how this motherly rejection shaped her life. Angelou's representation of the absent mother, and her own feelings of being a rejected child makes up much of the text's basis. Vivian is not as warm and nurturing as Momma: "To describe my mother would be to write about a hurricane in its perfect power. Or the climbing, falling colors of a rainbow" (64-65). Angelou describes her mother like a hurricane, who destroys everything that comes in its way. Maya and Bailey are obstacles for the hurricane that is Vivian Baxter. Birch argues that "the most challenging of Angelou's anti-stereotypical female portraits is that of her mother, the dazzling Viv Baxter. Like the grandmothers, she is shown as strong, but at times the reader feels that she is strong at the expense of maternal nurturing" (130). This chapter will explore how Vivian's desire for being an independent woman makes her reject her maternal responsibilities. Maybe Vivian should not have been a mother, Rich writes that "Most women in history have become mothers without choice" (13), not because they wanted to. Birch goes on to argue that "It is difficult to be convinced that Angelou never harboured feelings of resentment against a mother whose determination to pursue her own life overrode the needs of the children she had borne" (130). This determination to pursue her own life forms the basis of Angelou's critique of Vivian, and it is one of the main points where Angelou shows her support for the institution

of motherhood.

Further, Angelou describes Vivian as someone who views motherhood as a demanding task. She only wants to be a mother when it is convenient for her, she is not interested in being a mother when things are tough. By sending her children back and forth, she shows a lacking ability to commit to being a full-time mother. She is an unconventional mother, who seemingly likes the role of mother when it is not typical i.e. when it is not motherhood as institution. Hill Collins argues that some black women “view motherhood as a truly burdensome condition that stifles their creativity, exploits their labour, and make them partners in their own oppression” (118). She goes on to say that others view motherhood as something that provides a base for self-actualization, status and a reason for activism (118). Angelou writes in *Mom & Me & Mom*: “You were a terrible mother of small children, but there has never been anyone greater than you as a mother of a young adult” (195). The quote is powerful in its critique of Vivian in Angelou’s childhood years, still it honors Vivian’s support for her as an adult. As Angelou writes in *Caged Bird*: “Mother was competent in providing for us. Even if that meant getting someone else to furnish the provisions” (76). According to institutionalized motherhood, a mother is supposed to do anything to provide for her children, Vivian however outsources this task. Angelou describes Vivian as “a pretty kite that floated just above my head” (70), insinuation that Vivian was just out of reach. If Maya needed her she had to pull the string attached to the kite, Vivian would never anticipate Maya’s needs or wishes she had to make them known. The kite is a metaphor for something that is out of reach. The people who really care for her and love her are Momma, Bailey and Uncle Willie, which is much of the reason why Stamps represents safety for Maya. Angelou supports and critiques the institution of motherhood in *Caged Bird*. She supports it because she blames her mother for being a ‘bad mother’ to small children, as well as she praises her mother’s mothering of her as a young adult. In praising her mother she critiques the institution of motherhood of only allowing Vivian to be a good mother for her in her adult years, based on the strict rules the institution demands.

Nothing about Vivian is conventional neither when it comes to her approach to motherhood or life in general. In her critique of Betty Friedan, bell hooks notes that Friedan only wrote about white women who wanted more time away from home and family, whereas black women had the opposite problem. Black women have always worked, and they wanted more time in the home with their families (134). This did not seem to be the goal for Vivian who seemingly wants to spend as much time as possible *away* from her children, nurturing her own needs instead of theirs. Vivian craves the life outside the home. Hooks argues that,

had black women been asked their view on motherhood “it would not have been named a serious obstacle to our freedom as women” (133). She goes on to say that “Racism, lack of jobs, lack of skills or education, and a number of other issues would have been on top of the list – but not motherhood” (133). This statement does not fit Angelou’s description of Vivian, because to her, motherhood seems like a key issue. Dolly A. McPherson describes Vivian as: “bold, self-reliant, and unconventional” (38), she is not the typical American housewife of the 1930s and 40s. McPherson points out that Vivian depends on “liaisons with a variety of live-in “boyfriends” who furnish the necessities and through the extra money she earns cutting poker games in gambling parlors” (38). Vivian does not have a traditional outlook on relationships, and she is not afraid of getting rid of her boyfriends if they do not please her: “Men are permitted to remain with Vivian Baxter only as long as they follow the her strict code of conduct; one has been cut and another shot for failing to show proper respect for her prerogatives” (McPherson 38). Vivian does not follow the institution’s strong emphasis on the nuclear family, where a woman is supposed to support her husband and children. Angelou writes of her mother in *Caged Bird* that “Vivian Baxter had no mercy” (221), and she is also “a firm believer in self-sufficiency” (283). When reading the descriptions of Vivian one understands that she can be merciless and cold, unlike the ideal mother the institution wants women to be. Even though she is a trained nurse “She wouldn’t bust suds for anybody nor be anyone’s kitchen bitch” (220). Vivian is not the warm, caring mother the institution expects women to be, and she believed that “Sympathy is next to shit in the dictionary” (221). Angelou critiques Vivian for not putting her own need for freedom aside in order to be present in her daughter’s life. In this critique of Vivian, Angelou shows support for institutionalized motherhood whose ideal mother is someone who always sacrifices her own needs to tend to her family. Angelou shows support for the institution of motherhood in terms of how her childhood would have been much better had Vivian succumbed to it, but at the same time she also critiques the institution for not being accepting of different kind of mothers. However, support for institutionalized motherhood is the main point in this section.

Further, Angelou writes about several times when Vivian’s missing ability to look after her results in serious consequences. This chapter mainly focuses on two main situations: the rape, and when Maya gets pregnant at 16 years old, however there are many other occasions that could have been discussed. Angelou blames Vivian for how much she leaves her alone with Mr. Freeman, when she lives with her mother in California for a brief period when she is 7-8 years old. Vivian is gone much of the time, and her boyfriend Mr. Freeman spends much of his time waiting for her: “Mr. Freeman moved gracefully, like a big brown

bear, and seldom spoke to us. He simply waited for Mother, and put his whole self into the waiting. He never read the paper or patted his foot to radio. He waited. That was all” (77). The effect of describing Mr. Freeman like a big brown bear is that he seems like an innocent and nice man, and this is how Maya perceives him. He sounds like a teddy bear, a person who would not harm anyone. Maya even feels sorry for him because he is always waiting for Vivian to come home. Liliane K. Arensberg argues that Vivian is “Ruthless in her quest for material comfort”, and that she is “not above taking full advantage of Freeman’s obvious adoration” (120), even if it comes at the cost of Maya being raped. Angelou supports the institution of motherhood here, because she basically blames her mother for the rape, which would not have happened if Vivian was more involved and paid more attention to Maya. Institutionalized motherhood demands that mothers spend all their time with their children, something Vivian clearly does not do. Vivian fails to protect Maya, because she spends most of her time fulfilling her own needs, instead of her daughter’s, clearly rejecting the institution’s strong emphasis on motherhood being a women’s number one priority.

Because Vivian is gone much of the time Mr. Freeman starts to sexually abuse Maya, and he eventually rapes her. Maya believes that these assaults are acts of love: “From the way he was holding me I knew he’d never let me go or let anything bad ever happen to me. This was probably my real father and we had found each other at last” (79). Maya believes the assault is an act of love, she thinks that Mr. Freeman will protect her from bad things, when he is the one who imposes the bad things on her. Maya, who has little memory of physical contact in her life starts to long for Mr. Freeman and his strong arms. She also believes that he is her real father because of the way he treats her. Because Vivian has not taught Maya the difference between parental love and sexual assault, she does not understand that what Mr. Freeman does to her is wrong. Maya actually likes it because she thinks it is an expression of his love for her. Birch comments on Maya’s experience: “Her need to be loved, warmed and be held by a loving parent accounts for her bewildered reaction to her sexual molestation by Mr. Freeman. His initial embraces had given her pleasure as expressions of affection from a trusted adult” (129). Maya is relentlessly exploited in her quest for acceptance and parental care, as a result of her mother’s rejection and absence. Lupton blames Vivian for Maya’s rape: “Ironically, this mother “too beautiful to have children”, is to a large degree responsible for her own child's brutal rape” (“Singing the Black Mother” 136). Because Vivian leaves Maya and Mr. Freeman unattended, it could be argued that she facilitates the sexual molestation and eventually rape of the child. The institution of motherhood demands that women see motherhood as their sole purpose and job, something Vivian clearly does not do.

Another example of Vivian's recklessness, and lacking ability to look after her daughter, is when Maya becomes pregnant after casually asking a boy in her neighborhood if he wants to have sexual intercourse with her. Vivian has not taught Maya anything about sex, or prepared her for it. Three weeks later Maya discovers that she is pregnant. "The world had ended, and I was the only person who knew it" (304). She tries to hide the pregnancy, which was not difficult since Vivian was too concerned with her own life to notice:

Fortunately, Mother was tied up tighter than Dick's hatband in the weave of her own life. She noticed me, as usual, out of the corner of her existence. As long as I was healthy, clothed and smiling she felt no need to focus her attention on me. As always, her major concern was to live the life given to her, and her children were expected to do the same (305).

The way Angelou describes her mother, and how she only notices her out of the corner of her eye, shows support for institutionalized motherhood. Angelou blames her mother for not being involved in her life, and being "tied up tighter than Dick's hatband" which according to Urban Dictionary is an old Southern idiom ("Tighter Than Dick's Hatband"). "Under my loose scrutiny I grew more buxom, and my brown skin smoothed and tight-pored, like pancakes fried on an unoiled skillet. And still she didn't suspect" (305). Angelou's use of metaphors illustrates her growing stomach and her skin being stretched because of the baby. Even though her body went through huge changes, Vivian did not suspect anything because she did not pay attention to Maya. Angelou is supporting the institution of motherhood in the same way as with the rape. Vivian should pay enough attention to her teenage daughter to know that she is pregnant. Especially since Maya was raped as a child, Vivian should take extra good care of her, protect her and make sure she is safe, so something like it could never happen again. As a result of her mother's absence during her childhood, Maya has learned to take care of herself. McPherson notes that "Like the "aloneness" that she has experienced most of her life, Maya is literally "alone" during most of her pregnancy" (54). Vivian, concerned with her own life goes away for several months when Maya is six months pregnant and leaves Maya in the care of her husband: "Daddy Clidell was to look after me but I was more or less left on my own recognizance" (307), as usual, Angelou is left to take care of herself. Maya's resistance to tell her mother about her life illustrates how she does not consider her mother someone she can confide in. Hill Collins writes that "African-American mothers place a strong emphasis on protection, either by tracing to shield their daughters as long as possible from the penalties attached to their race, class, and gender status" (126). However, this emphasis to protect Maya does not seem to apply to Vivian. She is more

concerned with living her own life than looking out for her daughter. Even though Maya, as a black girl, is exposed to gender and racial oppression Vivian leaves her on her own. As a result she is victim of rape and teenage pregnancy. Angelou supports the institution of motherhood in her critique of Vivian's reckless treatment of her daughter. Angelou insinuates that the rape and the pregnancy could have been prevented if Vivian took her responsibilities as mother more seriously, and in doing this she shows support for the institution of motherhood.

Despite Angelou's critique of Vivian's abandonment, Angelou does the same thing when she becomes a mother herself. Angelou writes about this experience in her third autobiography. Maya becomes the absent mother herself when she leaves her son with Vivian, because she is touring in Europe with the musical *Porgy & Bess*. It could be argued that Maya makes the same mistakes as Vivian, and Vivian becomes the stable, safe grandmother, like Momma was to Maya. When Maya herself is given the opportunity to travel to Europe with *Porgy and Bess* she immediately thinks of her son, and how her being away will affect him, like her own mother's absence had affected her, still she decides to go:

The past revisited. My mother had left me with my grandmother for years and I knew the pain of parting. My mother, like me, had her motivations, her needs. I did not relish visiting the same anguish on my son, and she, years later, had told me how painful our separation was to her (Singin' and Swingin' 165).

Even though she knows how painful it was to be separated from her own mother, she still chooses to go to Europe. Maya convinces herself that going to Europe to work is the best thing for her own motivation and needs (165). She uses words like pain and anguish to underline how difficult the situation was for her, and how she is afraid to impose the same feelings on her son. It could be argued that mother blaming is the reason for why Maya can justify her own absence, but not Vivian's. Caplan notes that: "Blaming our mothers gives us temporary relief from self-examination and self-doubt" (63). Maya convinces herself that she has a better reason than Vivian to leave, and is still upset with her own mother leaving even though she does the same thing herself. Furthermore Maya blames her mother for not being the mother she needed, however when she leaves her own son, she finds excuses for herself. She supports the institution of motherhood when it comes to her mother, but she does not seem to apply the same demands on herself. McPherson states that the reader sympathizes with Angelou "in her maternal angst – ambivalently wrestling with guilt for leaving her son to sing and swing with *Porgy and Bess*, yet needing the freedom and the space such a tour gave her to expand both intellectually and psychologically" (89). The reader is more sympathetic to

Maya's choice to leave, than to Vivian's. Angelou critiques Vivian for not succumbing to the institution of motherhood, while she does not do it herself. Angelou is both critiquing and supporting the institution here. She struggles with feelings on guilt over leaving her son, and she critiques the institution for making her feel like this. At the same time, she supports the institution of motherhood in her critique of how Vivian left Maya when she was a child. She is torn and unhappy about leaving her son, still she needs to do it in order to complete her own self-realization. However, she critiques the patriarchy for not allowing women to do this. At the same time, she wished that her own mother would not have the same need for self-realization, and in this she supports the institution. She supports the institution of motherhood when it comes to Vivian, but she critiques it when it comes to her own experience of motherhood.

The “Unwanted” Daughter

Race and gender are influential themes in the text, which leads Maya to feel displaced. Vivian looks like a white woman, since she has very light skin and straight hair. Maya has dark skin and curly hair, and does not look like her mother. Vivian's beauty is one of the main areas where Maya feels disconnected from her mother. Maya does not fit the beauty norm in America at the time, which only saw white girls as beautiful. Vivian's beauty becomes a source of double rejection for Maya, both in terms of parental rejection, but also in terms of racial prejudice in seeing white girls as more beautiful than black girls. Angelou critiques her mother for enforcing these feelings of not being beautiful enough, by giving her a white, blue-eyed doll for Christmas. A key passage for understanding this displacement is when Maya and Bailey receive Christmas presents from their parents. “Until that Christmas when we received the gifts I had been confident that they were both dead. I could cry anytime I wanted by picturing my mother (I didn't quite know what she looked like) lying in her coffin” (56). Angelou goes on to say that the dead mother makes tears fall down her “cheeks like warm milk” (56). The warm milk can be linked to a mother's breast milk, which connects mother and child. By describing her tears as warm milk Angelou clearly demonstrates the longing for a mother's love and care. McPherson notes how Maya's feelings of rejection are reinforced by the Christmas presents: “The young Maya may, in time, be able to forgive her mother, but for the moment she must face the unimaginable reality of being both unwanted and abandoned” (28). Maya is told that her mother lives in “a heaven called California, where we were told they could have all the oranges they could eat” (56). Maya wonders how Vivian could “laugh and eat oranges in the sunshine without her children” (56). By sending her

children away, Vivian rejects the institution of motherhood. She does not succumb to the traditional role of mother in 1930s America, imposed on women by the patriarchy. The presents, which represent Vivian's guilt, remind Maya that she is an unwanted child, which again shows how Angelou critiques Vivian's refusal of institutionalized motherhood. Angelou shows her support for the institution by implying that her childhood would have been much better had Vivian been present.

Moreover, the Christmas presents turn into a traumatic experience for Maya, because she is forced to think about the fact that her parents are living their lives somewhere else, without her:

The gifts opened the door to questions that neither of us wanted to ask. Why did they send us away? and What did we do so wrong? So Wrong? Why, at three and four, did we have tags put on our arms to be sent by train alone from Long Beach, California, to Stamps, Arkansas, with only the porter to look after us? (57)

When Maya and Bailey receive the Christmas gifts they are forced to face the reality that they are unwanted children. Angelou describes this experience as "that terrible Christmas with its awful presents" (56). Lupton argues that the title of Angelou's third autobiography *Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas* might be "intended to signal the reader back to the very unmerry Christmas of *Caged Bird*" ("Singing the Black Mother", 140). This argument substantiates the significance of the Christmas scene in *Caged Bird*. The scene portrays the children's longing for their parents' attention and love. By writing in so much detail about that Christmas, Angelou highlights her mother's absence. She blames her mother for not being present in her life, and sending her gifts to relieve her own guilt, which implies Angelou's support for the institution of motherhood. By informing the reader of this resentment of Vivian's choices, Angelou shows support for the institution.

In addition to the white doll, Maya receives a tea set from Vivian both of which make her feel inferior in terms of race. McPherson calls these gifts symbols of a white world foreign to 5-year old Maya (28). The doll and the tea set represent elegance and class, something foreign from Maya's world in Momma's store. Maya's world consists of rural life in Stamps, with cotton pickers and poverty, which is far away from tea parties and white gloves. The day after they receive the gifts, Maya and Bailey tear the doll apart. Since the children secretly hope that the gifts are a sign that Vivian "had just been angry at something we had done, but was forgiving us and would send for us soon" (58), Bailey warns Maya that she must keep the tea set in good condition "because any day or night she might come riding up" (58). The Christmas presents represent the possibility that their parents still care about

them. The presents stir up ambivalent feelings in the children towards their parents. Lupton argues that “The preserved tea set, the torn doll – what better signifiers could there be for the split feelings of the abandoned child, who destroys one gift to show anger but saves the other in anticipation of the mother’s return?” (“Singing the Black Mother” 140). Even though Maya is angry with her mother, she also wishes for her to come back, she is ambiguous in her feelings towards her. She shifts between feelings of anger and longing. Caplan writes: “As many mothers and daughters admit, one minute they can overflow with love and admiration, thinking of each other as positively perfect, and the next minute they can be overwhelmed with rage and contempt” (2). Maya blames her mother for leaving, but her childhood dreams of the warm mother allows her to forget about her resentment for a little while, until reality comes crashing down again. Arensberg adds more insight into this: “Abandoned by a dead mother is forgivable, but abandoned by a living one evokes rage so threatening that it must undergo massive repression” (118). It is the fact that Vivian is somewhere else, alive and well, that infuriates Maya. The gifts remind her of this rejection. She has chosen to be somewhere else than with her children, which is something institutionalized motherhood does not approve of. By describing how the gifts made her feel, Angelou critiques her mother for giving her these particular gifts. Angelou even refers back to the doll later in *Caged Bird* right after the rape: “I was as gutless as the doll I had ripped to pieces years ago” (93), by referring back to the doll, Angelou highlights its importance. Her ripping the doll to pieces symbolizes how Angelou feels about Vivian. Had Vivian followed the rules of the institution of motherhood, she would have known that these gifts that are foreign from Maya’s world, would make her feel inferior and stir up feelings of displacement. In her description of these gifts, Angelou shows her support for the patriarchal ideals of institutionalized motherhood.

Further, Angelou critiques her mother for giving her a doll that celebrates the beauty norm at the time, a norm that excluded black women. Michele Wallace points out that “The black woman had not failed to be aware of America’s standard of beauty nor the fact that she was not included in it; television and motion pictures had made this information very available to her” (157-158). Just like the protagonist in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, Maya dreams that she is one of the “sweet little white girls who were everybody’s dream of what was right with the world” (4). Instead, Maya sees herself as “a too-big Negro girl, with nappy black hair, broad feet and a space between her teeth that would hold a number-two pencil” (5). Maya does not resemble the beauty standard, and she is convinced that if she looked different her mother would love her. “If growing up is painful for the Southern Black girl, being aware of her displacement is the rust on the razor that threatens the throat. It is an

unnecessary insult” (6). Maya’s situation is already painful, and being reminded that you are not good enough becomes an unnecessary insult. By giving Maya the white doll, Vivian reminds Maya of her displacement. The blue-eyed doll represents double rejection: her looks, as well as the rejection that her parents sent her away. Further, she critiques her mother for enforcing this beauty standard on her and making her feel inferior. By critiquing her mother for this choice Angelou shows support for the institution of motherhood, because the institution expects mothers to never impose feelings of rejection onto their children. As a black woman Vivian should know that the white beauty ideal makes black women and girls feel inferior to white women.

As a result of Vivian’s maternal absence, Maya has developed feelings of displacement. These feelings are enforced by Vivian’s beauty when they meet again after Angelou has spent many years with Momma in Stamps. Maya has searched for the answer to why her parents sent her away, and now she knows:

I knew immediately why she had sent me away. She was too beautiful to have children. I had never seen a woman as pretty as she who was called “Mother”. Bailey on his part fell instantly and forever in love. I saw his eyes shining like hers; he had forgotten the loneliness and the nights when we had cried together because we were “unwanted children” (65).

Maya thinks that Vivian is “too beautiful to have children” (65), and she thinks that this is the reason why she was sent to live with Momma. Angelou critiques Vivian for her superficial approach to life. Vivian is more concerned with herself, and living a certain lifestyle, than taking care of her children. Her children do not fit into the life she wants to live. Angelou shows support for institutionalized motherhood in critiquing Vivian for not succumbing to it. At the same time, Angelou critiques the institution to some degree, for only having one perfect version of what motherhood is. There is only one way to be the perfect mother according to the demands of the institution of motherhood. If more approaches to motherhood were accepted, maybe Vivian would not have felt the need to live her life without her children. She would have been present in Maya’s childhood, and Maya would not feel displaced. Vivian’s beauty becomes a trigger for Maya’s feelings of displacement, at the same time as it contributes to her feelings of being a rejected daughter.

Throughout *Caged Bird* Angelou writes mother with a capital M, which makes Vivian a formal figure. Someone she cannot quite touch: “My mother’s beauty literally assailed me” (65). Vivian is portrayed like a type of mother Maya has never seen before with “Her red lips (Momma said it was a sin to wear lipstick)” (65). Maya is not used to mothers being so

beautiful and glamorous as Vivian, and she is not what Maya expected her to be. “Vivian Baxter is diametrically opposite to the brown-faced nurturing mother Maya had mourned and yearned for in Stamps. Her beauty and animation keep Maya suspicious of consanguinity” (Arensberg 118). Angelou critiques her mother for not being able to make her feel loved, despite their different looks. She shows support for the institution of motherhood because she implies that Vivian fails to establish a close relationship to her daughter. Hirsch argues that the daughter writer often defines herself in opposition to the maternal figure (178), however it does not seem like this is what Angelou tries to achieve here. She did not try to distinguish herself from her mother by highlighting their differences; on the contrary, her biggest wish is to be close and connected to her mother. Angelou shows support for the institution of motherhood by critiquing her mother for not being able to establish a close relationship between them. According to the patriarchal ideals of institutionalized motherhood it was a mother’s duty to always be available to her children and their needs, neglecting her own.

Because of the parental rejection Maya develops feelings of displacement. Vivian’s beauty, and the white doll she sends Maya for Christmas enforce these feelings. Maya does not look like the beauty norm in America at the time, which considered white people more beautiful than black people. Since Vivian’s mother is white, she has lighter skin and straighter hair than Maya, who have more traditional African American features like curly hair. This difference between them becomes another obstacle in their relationship, and it makes Maya think that Vivian is too beautiful to be a mother. Maya wishes that she was a white girl with blue eyes, and when she receives a doll that looks like this, she feels rejected because she believes that her mother would love her more if she looked like the doll.

Othermothering – Momma Henderson

Further, it is impossible to discuss motherhood in *Caged Bird* without dedicating space to Annie Henderson, which is the main mother figure in the text. Momma is the matriarch on that side of the family. Momma runs, and owns the Wm. Johnson General Merchandise Store, which is the center of black activities in town, making her one of the more well off black people in Stamps. She runs the store with her crippled son, Uncle Willie. This is how Angelou describes Momma: “I saw only her power and strength. She was taller than any woman in my personal world, and her hands were so large they could span my head from ear to ear” (51). By the way Maya describes her grandmother it is clear that she represents stability and safety in her life. Momma is the tallest one Maya knows, and she has big, safe, strong hands, which are metaphors for how Maya considers her to symbolize safety and stability, in contrast to her

mother Vivian who represents uncertainty and instability. Throughout her life Maya would come to depend upon her grandmother several times, returning back to Stamps in her adult life when she needs help. Angelou writes that “Until I was thirteen and left Arkansas for good, the Store was my favorite place to be” (18). Angelou always writes the store with capital S, which may symbolize how much she respects and loves it. Momma is described as the polar opposite of Vivian. She is portrayed as the safe, caring mother figure who knows how to take care of children, clean and cook. Momma is the perfect mother according to the institution of motherhood, because she does everything the institution demands of her. By describing her strict and safe upbringing in Stamps, Angelou is supporting the institution.

Momma is the one who takes care of, and raises Maya and Bailey, because Vivian and Bailey Sr. are not able to. It is not uncommon in African American communities that women who are not the biological mother take care of children. Hill Collins writes about the term “othermothering”, which is other women than the blood mother taking care of each other’s children: “Othermothers are key not only in supporting children but also in helping bloodmothers who, for whatever reason, lack the preparation or desire for motherhood” (120). Othermothering was common in the slave era where one woman took care of all the children so their mothers could work. Hill Collins goes on to state that “Young women are often carefully groomed at an early age to become othermothers” (121). The focus on grooming young women to be othermothers, shows the significance of this practice in African American culture. When Vivian is not able to take care of Maya and Bailey, Momma has to do it. McPherson calls Momma “the adult upon whom Maya is directly dependent”, and that she “remains uncompromising in her support and protection, nurturing and sustaining the child with her love” (13). Momma is the one who is always there for Maya, even though she is strict and the children do not always like to do what Momma tells them to, she does everything out of her love for them, and according to what the institution of motherhood tells mothers to do. In her praise of Momma, Angelou shows support for the institution’s traditional approach to motherhood.

Even though Momma is portrayed as the caring grandmother who is good with children, she is not a stereotypical “Mammy”, often portrayed in American popular culture. She can for example be found on the Aunt Jemima products in the U.S. O’Reilly defines the “Mammy” as: “a figure based in historical fact but exaggerated in American cultural memory as an icon of the Old South” (“Mammy”). Birch writes of Momma that she “is no bandanna’d Mammy. She is a resourceful entrepreneur, God-Fearing, dignified and astute: the living refutation of the stereotypical Mammy, traditionally relegated to the kitchen of white

employers” (130). A key passage to understand Angelou’s respect for Momma as a mother figure is when she is bullied by some white children outside her store. Angelou describes the situation as “the most painful and confusing experience I had ever had with my grandmother” (31). Momma understands what is about to happen, so she asks Maya to go inside, and tells her that they only “frighten me if you’re around. Alone I know how to handle them” (32). To Maya’s dismay, they were “aping [her] grandmother” (33). The verb aping might be intended to remind the reader about how white people often disrespected African Americans by saying that they look like apes, and racist drawings and pictures from the slave era and onwards often portrayed African Americans with exaggerated features to make them look more like monkeys. Maya is horrified and scared of what will happen, but the girls eventually leave. This experience makes Maya respect her grandmother even more. “Whatever the contest had been out front, I knew Momma had won” (35), Angelou describes her grandmother as “beautiful” (35) after the powerful episode. The experience makes Maya consider Momma as even more safe and almighty; there is nothing Momma cannot overcome. This scene contributes to Momma’s portrayal as a powerful woman in Maya’s life, and the black community in Stamps in general. Angelou shows support for the institution of motherhood by praising Momma’s style of raising her. Being raised by such a strong, black woman has strongly influenced Angelou’s life.

Momma is Vivian Baxter’s polar opposite. Momma is a hard working, religious, Southern black woman, and she does not care about the superficial things in life. If Vivian refuses to bow down to the patriarchy, and ‘motherhood as institution’, Momma is more ‘willing to’ because she has to. She is also forced to be more careful than Vivian in many aspects of life because of the racism in the South: “Momma intended to teach Bailey and me to use the paths in life that she and her generation and all the Negroes gone before had found, and found to be safe ones. She didn’t cotton to the idea that whitefolks could be talked to at all without risking one’s life” (51), because Stamps is a town so racist that “a Negro couldn’t buy vanilla ice cream” (53). Angelou plays with words like ‘cotton’, linked to slaves who picked cotton on the plantations, which is a literary image used by Angelou to reinforce the focus on racism. She writes that “In cotton-picking time the late afternoons revealed the harshness of Black Southern life” (11). This harshness of black Southern life that Angelou writes about is much of the reason of why Vivian and Momma are so different. It seems like Momma has experienced more hardship and racism in her life than Vivian, Angelou writes about her grandmother: “Knowing Momma, I knew that I never knew Momma. Her African-bush secretiveness and suspiciousness had been compounded by slavery and confirmed by

centuries of promises made and promises broken” (208). Momma does everything that is expected of her, however the reader does not really get to know her inner thoughts and feelings, which contributes to the secretiveness Angelou describes. Vivian has grown up in a more racially accepting environment, and additionally, she looks more like a white woman with her light skin and straight hair. The racism of the South is what eventually makes Momma take the children back to Vivian in California, because Momma is afraid that something might happen to her beloved grandchildren.

Momma knows how to take care of children, and she represents safety and stability for Maya, even though her strictness sometimes becomes a source of argument between them. Momma is portrayed like a serious, strict woman, who “never giggled in her life” (103). She is a practical woman who works hard and knows the realities of the Southern black life and “Her world was bordered on all sides with work, duty and religion” (62). Momma is a woman who does what is demanded of her, and she does not pay attention to the superficial things in life. Momma does not shower Maya and Bailey with love in terms of kisses and hugs, and they get whipped when they do not behave. However, Angelou writes lovingly about Momma: “I don’t think she ever knew that a deep-brooding love hung over everything she touched” (62). Even though Momma does not show her affection through words of love, hugs and kisses, she loves the children unconditionally. McPherson suggests that “Grandmother Henderson is not demonstrative in her love for Maya. Yet she is uncompromising in that love” (29). When Maya struggles after being raped, it is Momma who comes to the rescue again. Momma represents a mother-figure who will make everything all right, in the absence of the biological mother. It is clear that Angelou shows her support for the institution of motherhood in praising the way Momma raised her, and critiquing Vivian’s outlook on motherhood. In an interview with Joanne M. Braxton, Angelou describes how she was amused by her mother, but could not trust her like she could trust Momma: “When I couldn’t really trust my mother or her mother, or my uncles... they amused me, of course... they were funny... but to trust them???? My grandmother loved me and Uncle Willie loved me UNCONDITIONALLY...” (11-12). Angelou describes the Baxter’s as someone who offered her amusement, but not safety and stability. Momma succumbs to institutionalized motherhood to a larger degree than Vivian, and Momma’s role as mother who was strongly influenced by the institution, represented stability and safety for Angelou. Because the institution meant stability (Momma) and the rejection of it meant the opposite (Vivian), Angelou shows her support for the institution of motherhood in her critique of Vivian’s lack of stability and warmth.

After the rape, Vivian has a hard time dealing with her traumatized daughter and as a result she sends her back to Momma Henderson. Angelou tells McPherson in an interview that “Vivian Baxter did simply could not...she didn’t know what to do with me...well, in any case, she didn’t know what to do with any child” (146). Vivian barely knows how to take care of Maya in the first place, and she definitely does not know what to do with her now. Again, Momma becomes the safe mother figure who makes everything all right. In *Stamps*, Maya could count on the support of Momma and the rest of the black community, whereas in *St. Louis* “there is a surprising inability on the part of Vivian Baxter and her family to provide adequate emotional support for Maya or to understand the psychological difficulties of an eight-year-old who has been traumatized by rape” (McPherson 42). Vivian abandons Maya when she needs her the most. Angelou illustrates how Vivian recklessly sent her children back and forth like packages. Of the experience Angelou writes: “I have never known if Momma sent for us, or if the St. Louis family just got fed up with my grim presence” (95). Angelou shows her support for institutionalized motherhood in her critique of how Vivian dealt with her daughter’s rape. In contrast, Rich draws on the myth of Demeter and Persephone: “Each daughter, even in the millennia before Christ, must have longed for a mother whose love for her and whose power were so great as to undo rape and bring her back from death” (240). Angelou is disappointed in her mother, because even though she could never have undone the rape, she could have handled the situation better. Vivian does not seem to make an attempt to make up for the rape, she does not take any blame for it. In contrast to *Sethe*, who begs her daughter Beloved to forgive her. In the myth of Demeter and Persephone “Demeter revenges herself for the loss of her daughter by forbidding the grain – of which she is queen – to grow” (Rich 240). Demeter is a mother who threatened to destroy the earth because of the wrongdoings that has been imposed on her daughter, whereas Vivian cannot deal with the situation and sends her daughter away. The institution of motherhood does not allow mothers to neglect their children, like Vivian does.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined how motherhood is presented in *Caged Bird*. Maya spends most of her childhood without her mother, and Momma Henderson is the main mother figure. The text is strongly influenced by Maya’s longing after her mother, and she wonders what made Vivian reject her. Maya lives with her grandmother in Arkansas for most of her childhood, only interrupted by one attempt to live with their mother, which ends with Maya being raped, and sent back to Arkansas. Maya feels like an unwanted child, and she develops feelings of

displacement as a result of the parental rejection. When Maya receives a white, blue-eyed doll for Christmas, it makes her feel even more displaced, because she does not look like the doll. Angelou shows her support for the institution of motherhood in her critique of Vivian's absence in *Caged Bird*. Vivian does not succumb to the patriarchal ideal of motherhood. Momma represents safety and stability for Maya, whereas Vivian represents chaos and anxiety. Angelou supports the institution of motherhood in her critique of Vivian's reckless behaviour. According to institutionalized motherhood, motherhood is a woman's sole purpose and job, something Vivian clearly rejects. The myth of Demeter and Persephone works as a good contrast to Vivian and Maya. Demeter is a mother who is willing to do anything for her daughter, and has endless love for her. Vivian, however, does not seem to have the same intense need to protect her daughter. Maya longs for attention and acknowledgement from her mother throughout her whole childhood. Momma, on the other hand is much more like Demeter, willing to do anything to keep Maya and Bailey safe.

Even though Angelou supports the institution to a great length she also critiques it. She is ambivalent in her approach to patriarchal motherhood. She critiques the institution for its demands on mothers, and how it only accepts one type of mother. She also blames it for taking her mother away from her. Further, when Maya becomes a mother herself, she critiques the institution for making her feel guilty about leaving her son to realize her own dreams. However, Angelou does not justify her mother's need for self-realization, only her own. Angelou largely shows her support for institutionalized motherhood in *Caged Bird* especially through her critique of her mother's absence, and for her praise of Momma's upbringing that would have been approved by the institution. Because Angelou critiques her mother for not being present in her childhood, she is at the same time showing her support for the institution of motherhood.

Angelou attacks her mother for not paying enough attention to her as a child. This chapter highlights two occasions when Vivian's reckless behaviour results in serious consequences. The first one is when Maya is raped by her mother's boyfriend. Vivian spends most of her time outside the home, which leaves Maya alone with Mr. Freeman who feels rejected by Vivian. Because Vivian is never there, he assaults Maya. Maya suffers in the aftermath of the rape, but Vivian does not know what to do with her, so she is sent back to Momma Henderson. When Maya needed her mother the most, she is rejected, and again separated from her mother. The second time Vivian should have been more attentive to her daughter, is when Maya has moved to live with Vivian in California at age 16. Since Vivian is too caught up in her own life, she does not notice that Maya is pregnant. It is not until Maya is

over eight months pregnant she tells her mother. Angelou critiques her mother for not paying more attention to her, and her needs. She has never been the warm and nurturing mother Maya has dreamed of. However, when Vivian is told about the pregnancy she becomes warm and supportive of Maya. It is ironic that Maya had to become a mother herself before her own mother treated her with the devotion and care she has always longed for. The relationship between mother and daughter improves further as Maya gets older, which she writes about in her later autobiographies. Angelou's last autobiography *Mom & Me & Mom* is homage to her mother Vivian and their relationship throughout Angelou's life.

4. Motherhood and Slavery

Introduction

Beloved (1987) is Toni Morrison's fifth novel, and it portrays a time that was especially challenging for black women, namely the slave era. The institution of slavery made the conditions of the institution of motherhood worse because slave women had to suffer under the conditions of slavery as well as the patriarchal ideal to control women's bodies. Slave women suffered a double burden. Slavery re-enforced the things that the institution of motherhood stands for: domination, oppression and absolute control over women's lives and bodies. Slavery added another dimension of control, namely the slave owner's right to separate the slave women from their children. The institution of motherhood tells women that their sole purpose in life is to become mothers and take care of their children, however slavery does not allow for this. Jessica Millward states that "Motherhood under slavery was the farthest thing from freedom" (14). The main goal of institutionalized motherhood is to keep women under male control. Slave women were not in control of anything regarding their own lives. They were property to the slave owners, who lawfully could do what they wanted with them, including buying and selling them. Even though slavery was horrible for both men and women, it was especially horrible for the women, because in addition to being slaves they had the added burden of being women who suffered under a patriarchal philosophy. The female slaves were expected to perform the same chores as the slave men; in addition they were expected to give up their bodies since sex was a part of their 'duties' as female slaves. Brenda E. Stevenson points out that: "Sexual desire and obsession, backed by racial and male privilege and pride, often led to physical brutalization of those who dared to resist" (115). Those slave women who dared to oppose the sexual exploitation allowed by the patriarchy were severely punished. Stevenson points out that slave women who denied their master sex

in some cases were killed because of their resistance (115). Other sources of punishment could be being sold or losing their children (Stevenson 115). One of the main differences between institutionalized motherhood and slavery is the notion that slave women were often robbed of their children. This is not in accordance with institutionalized motherhood which tells women that motherhood is their sole purpose of life. Slave women frequently went through the traumas of being separated from their babies and they had no say in the matter. Venetria K. Patton highlights that slaves were genderless, however the difference between them was “a sex difference based on the female’s ability to give birth” (8). As a result, the female slaves experienced ‘the worst of both worlds’. They were forced to work just as hard as the men, at the same time that they were used as breeders to increase the work force. However, the slave owners did not regard them as mothers to the children they birthed in terms of allowing them to take care of their babies. The slave women were in many cases used as breeders, but once the babies were born, they were not allowed to mother them as their own. The children were often taken away from them. As Davis points out: “when it was profitable to exploit them as if they were men, they were regarded, in effect as genderless, but when they could be exploited, punished and repressed in ways suited only for women, they were locked into their exclusively female roles” (4). Black and white women were treated very differently, white women were *never* treated as men. The institution of motherhood is certainly reinforced by slavery in terms of how slave women were not in control of their own bodies, in an already oppressive environment. The institution of motherhood allowed slave owners to have full control over the female slaves’ bodies. The patriarchal control was enforced by the fact that the slave owners lawfully *owned* the women.

Even though white women were also victims of the institution of motherhood at the time, they were not treated as badly as the slave women. Millward argues that white women’s struggles at the time “were nothing compared to that of enslaved women” (14). The slave women were considered animals, whereas the white women increasingly were considered to be mothers in a sacred way, often referred to as ‘the Angel in the house’, and having to spend all their time in the home tending their children and husband. As Rich highlights “the idea of full-time, exclusive motherhood takes root, and the “home” becomes a religious obsession” (44), however this role was only reserved for white women. The slave women were still working “the fields with their children strapped to their backs” (Rich 44). White women became more and more involved with the fight against slavery as they fought their own oppression in the home. Middle class women “acquired leisure time, which enabled them to become social reformers – active organizers of the abolitionist campaign. Abolitionism, in

turn, conferred upon these women the opportunity to launch an implicit protest against their oppressive roles at home” (Davis 32). White women did not have the right to vote at this time, but they still “were resisting an oppression which bore a certain resemblance to their own. Furthermore, they learned how to challenge male supremacy within the anti-slavery movement” (Davis 34). Even though slave women lived under much harder conditions than white women, they were both victims of institutionalized motherhood and strong patriarchal control. None of them were allowed to make decisions concerning their own bodies: “Certainly the mother serves the interest of the patriarchy” (Rich 45).

Slavery allowed the slave owner to treat his slaves like property, beat them, force them to work all day, deny them food, torture them and kill them. However, the institution of motherhood allowed the patriarchy to take it one step further with the female slaves. Since female inferiority and strict control over women’s bodies is the goal of patriarchy, the institution of motherhood allowed slave owners to treat the slave women even worse than the men, because women were the ones who could bear children. The institution of slavery allowed them to own and mistreat slaves, the institution of motherhood allowed them to treat women like cattle and gave them permission to control the slave women’s bodies. In *Beloved*, Morrison uses the infanticide to critique both the patriarchal ideals of the institution of motherhood and the institution of slavery. She illustrates how Sethe, who is a victim of both institutions, is driven to infanticide because of how the two institutions combined destroy the sacred bond between a mother and her children. This chapter will argue that Morrison uses the infanticide to critique the double burden slave women suffered under slavery, firstly being victims of slavery itself, and in addition being victims of the patriarchy’s ideal to control women and their bodies.

Infanticide

One of the most discussed and most intriguing elements of the novel is the infanticide. What drives a mother to kill her own child? The novel’s plot is captivating on many levels; still it is the murder of the daughter that is most fascinating. Morrison was inspired to write the novel after reading about a woman named Margaret Garner who ran away from slavery in Kentucky to the free state Ohio in 1856. When Garner’s owners came to take her back to Kentucky, she killed her daughter and tried to kill her other children in order to save them from slavery. In *Beloved*, Morrison uses the infanticide to critique the institution of slavery and the institution of motherhood. Sethe tells her daughter Denver later that “I had to get all my children out. No matter what” (44). Readers of the novel are forced to think about what they would have done

themselves in the same situation knowing the horrors institutionalized motherhood under slavery placed on women. The readers of *Beloved* are presented with the thoughts, memories and feelings of Sethe and other female slaves who have been separated from their children, and by reading their stories it gets harder for the reader to deem Sethe's actions to be wrong. In doing so Morrison is defending Sethe and she highlights that the institution of slavery and the institution of motherhood left her with no other choice than to commit infanticide. The novel resembles the traditional slave narratives written by former slaves like Frederick Douglas and Harriet Jacobs, about their experiences under slavery. These texts contributed positive to the abolitionist movement because they uncovered the horrors of slavery. However, even though *Beloved* is inspired by real events, it is still fiction. Harold Bloom writes that "While traditional slave narratives typically documented the slave's physical escape and their journey to freedom, Morrison enriches this structure by depicting how the slaves survive the psychological trauma" (16). Morrison uses the characters in the novel to explore different traumas slavery and institutionalized motherhood has imposed on them, leading up to the infanticide.

Sethe is only free for 28 days before the fatal incident. She lives 28 days in harmony with Baby Suggs, her children and the rest of the black community in Ohio before Schoolteacher comes to take her back, as he lawfully could according to the Fugitive Slave Act. "Sethe had had twenty-eight days - the travel of one whole moon - of unslaved life. From the pure clear stream of spit that the little girl dribbled into her face to her oily blood was twenty-eight days" (111). For those 28 days, Sethe is free and she can finally experience 'motherhood as experience' compared to 'motherhood as institution' that she lived under at Sweet Home. Sethe is finally able to see how motherhood can be when she is in charge herself. Patton argues that "When Sethe escapes slavery, it becomes an opportunity to own herself and her children. As a slave she had been seen as a breeder, not a mother, but once she escapes she can claim the mother role for herself" (126-127). Sethe can finally mother her children as she pleases. When Schoolteacher comes to 124 to take Sethe and her children back, she grabs her children and takes them to the back of the house. Stamp Paid, a family friend witnesses the incident. Like a hawk, Sethe picks up all her children before Schoolteacher gets to them: "she flew, snatching up her children like a hawk on the wing; how her face beaked, how her hands worked like claws, how she collected them every which way: one on her shoulder, one under her arm, one by the hand, the other shouted forward into the woodshed" (185). By comparing Sethe to a hawk, Morrison creates a metaphor of an animal mother desperate to save her babies. Sethe is described as a predator, getting ready to

fight for her children with words like wing, beak and claws. She becomes a Demeter-figure willing to destroy anything in her way to keep her children safe, even the children themselves because they are, by being alive, posing a threat to themselves. By justifying the infanticide, Morrison critiques the institution of motherhood for allowing slave owners to treat women like cattle. O'Reilly argues that "Motherwork, in Morrison, is concerned with how mothers, raising black children in a racist and sexist world, can best protect their children, instruct them in how to protect themselves, challenge racism, and, for daughters, the sexism that seeks to harm them" (*Morrison and Motherhood* 1). In *Beloved*, this is illustrated through Sethe who is willing to kill her children in order to keep them safe. Morrison critiques how the institution of motherhood tried to keep every aspect of the female body under male control. When Sethe sees Schoolteacher she thinks:

No. No. Nonono. Simple. She just flew. Collected every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful, and carried, pushed, dragged them through the veil, out, away, over there where no one could hurt them. Over there. Outside this place, where they would be safe (192).

Sethe thinks 'No' (192). There is no way her children are going back to Sweet Home. Sethe gains immeasurable strength from her desire to keep her children safe. Sethe collects 'every bit of life she had made' (192), meaning her children. Sethe is bringing her precious children to a place where no one could hurt them, i.e. death. She reclaims the right to her children by deciding that their future will not be at Sweet Home. O'Reilly points out that "Her decision to protect her children through death is, for Sethe, hers to make because, as a mother, she is responsible for assessing and providing for the well being of her children" (*Morrison and Motherhood* 136). She also claims her own right to be the children's mother, by making sure their lives are not destroyed by oppression like many of the novel's characters. Finally, Sethe is the one who has the upper hand. Morrison uses the infanticide to critique all the oppression and exploitation depicted in the novel.

Further, by describing the actual murder scene in a grotesque way, Morrison continues to show her attack on the exploitation of African Americans in the slave era. She does not downplay the infanticide; instead she explores its graphic details in order to shock her readers.

Inside, two boys bled in the sawdust and dirt at the feet of a nigger woman holding a blood-soaked child to her chest with one hand and an infant baby by the heels in the other. She did not look at them; she simply swung the baby toward the wall planks, missed and tried to connect a second time (175).

The scene itself is brutally portrayed, which is another way Morrison shows her critique. Instead of diminishing the conditions the slaves lived under Morrison highlights them.

Morrison wants to expose her readers to the real horrors of the slave era. Geneva Cobb Moore highlights the difference in weapons used to slit the baby's throat by the real Margaret Garner and Sethe. Garner used a butcher knife and Sethe uses a handsaw, which Moore considers as a "more forceful and crude weapon" than the one Garner used (36). Moore goes on to claim that by distinguishing between the weapons used "Morrison reveals the full force of authorial fury directed at human slavery: the buying, selling, branding, breeding, deeding, shipping, lynching, and murdering (with impunity) of human beings" (36). One can imagine that a knife makes a 'cleaner' cut than a handsaw, makes a more serrated cut. Again, Morrison uses these grotesque metaphors to underline the desperation Sethe, and many other slave women experience. Morrison uses the infanticide to show her critique of the institution of slavery in general, and the institution of motherhood specifically because of how it treated slave women. Morrison's anger is visible in her raw portrayal of slavery, she does not sugarcoat it, and she portrays it like it was: brutal, dehumanizing and terrifying.

Because of the infanticide, Sethe, for the first time, has control over her children instead of Schoolteacher. Patton states that "Sethe is asserting her right to her children" by trying to kill them (13). Her decision makes them hers in a world where slaves were not considered mothers. Sethe shows Schoolteacher that she is indeed their mother, and she is the one who will decide their future, not him. He is appalled when he sees Sethe with the dead baby in her arms, Sethe is calm: "By the time she faced him, looked him dead in the eye, she had something in her arms that stopped him in his tracks. He took a backward step with each jump of the baby heart until finally there were none" (193). This is the only situation where Sethe is in power over Schoolteacher, and not the other way around. Moore calls the fight between Sethe and Schoolteacher a fight between good and evil (36). The dead baby in Sethe's arms horrifies Schoolteacher, even for him this seems brutal. Sethe feels powerful since she manages to protect her most precious things. Sethe is stone cold, like Demeter, she did what she had to do in order to keep her daughter safe. Demeter threatened to destroy the crops so people would starve if her daughter were not returned to her. It could be argued that by killing her daughter, Sethe finally has control over her own body and children. Morrison justifies the infanticide by telling the reader the violence Sethe has endured under institutionalized motherhood and slavery. Morrison uses the infanticide to critique the institution of motherhood and the institution of slavery for making Sethe consider death to be the only way to save her children.

Sethe is convinced that death is better than slavery, and that is why she killed her own daughter. When Paul D, a former slave from Sweet Home, questions the infanticide, Sethe

replies: "I stopped him [...]. I took and put my babies where they'd be safe" (193). Paul D tells Sethe that her love for her children is too thick. "Too thick, he said. My love was too thick. What he know about it?" (239). Sethe does not want to listen to him. Paul D on the other hand, believes it is best to not love anything too much, and he thinks that Sethe is a fool for loving her children too much, having a too thick love for them: "Risky, thought Paul D, very risky. For a used-to-be-slave woman to love anything that much was dangerous, especially if it was her children she had settled on to love" (54). Sethe believes the opposite and she tells Paul D that she will protect Denver, who is the only child that lives with her at this point in the novel, no matter what: "I'll protect her while I'm live and I'll protect her when I ain't" (54). Morrison portrays Sethe's unconditional love and need to protect her children no matter what. Sethe shows her 'thick' love again at the end of the novel, when she tries to kill a white abolitionist, Mr. Bodwin, because she thinks that he is there to take Denver away from her. There is nothing that can come between her and keeping her children safe, not even Schoolteacher and the institution of slavery. The only person in the novel who seems to understand Sethe's actions is Stamp Paid, a family friend: "She ain't crazy. She love those children. She was trying to out-hurt the hurter" (276). Through Stamp Paid defending Sethe, Morrison justifies Sethe's actions, and at the same time critiques the institution of motherhood. As O'Reilly also points out: "Mothers, in Morrison, as they confront racism on behalf of their children, also challenge their own oppression in the patriarchal institution of motherhood" (*Morrison and Motherhood* 142). As Sethe is trying to keep her children away from racism, she is at the same time fighting her own oppression from the patriarchy.

Sethe is re-united with her daughter 18 years after the infanticide, as a woman named Beloved emerges out of the water close to 124: "A fully dressed woman walked out of the water. She barely gained the dry bank of the stream before she sat down and leaned against a mulberry tree" (60). Morrison flirts with magic realism in her portrayal of how Beloved appears out of the water, as it resembles a birth. When Sethe sees Beloved for the first time, she immediately needs to relieve herself: "the moment she got close enough to see the face, Sethe's bladder filled to capacity" (61). This instant need to relieve herself could be seen as a symbol of how a pregnant woman's water breaks when she is near the time of birth: "the water she voided was endless. Like a horse, she thought, but as it went on and on she thought, No, more like flooding the boat when Denver was born" (61). It is almost like Sethe gives birth to Beloved again when she sees her. Pamela E. Barnett calls this "a supernatural birthing" (420). However, Sethe does not immediately understand who Beloved is. *Beloved* illustrates how families were broken up, and how the motherline was disturbed by

institutionalized motherhood. Slavery made the institution of motherhood even more demanding for women. The slave mothers, like most women in history became mothers without choice (Rich 13), and they were often raped in order to produce workers. The address 124 Bluestone Road, could arguably symbolize Sethe's children, her third one being dead. Only number 1, 2 and 4 are alive. By calling their house 124, Morrison constantly reminds the reader that Sethe has lost one of her children, and again the effects of the violence the institution of motherhood and slavery endure. By doing this, she shows her critique of the institution of motherhood and the institution of slavery.

Sethe sees Beloved's return as a confirmation of her unconditional mother love, and she thinks that it is her 'thick love' that made her daughter come back to her: "BELOVED, she my daughter. She mine. See. She come back to me of her own free will [...]. She had to be safe and I put her where she would be. But my love was tough and she back now. I knew she would be" (236). Sethe repeatedly says that Beloved is hers. She is her daughter, and Sethe is the one who 'owns' her, not Schoolteacher. Carl Plasa argues that "Beloved comes back [...] to pass judgment on Sethe. [...] she wants desperately for the girl to understand that she tried to kill her babies so that they would be protected from captivity forever. Sethe assumes Beloved will forgive her. She does not" (63). However, it does not seem like Beloved forgives Sethe for killing her. "Sethe pleaded for forgiveness, counting, listing again and again her reasons: that Beloved was more important, meant more to her than her own life" (284). Sethe tries to explain, but Beloved does not want to hear it. She blames Sethe for the infanticide, and she does not agree that it was the right thing to do, representing the voice of the institution of motherhood and mother blaming. By denying the forgiveness of Sethe, Morrison uses Beloved as the voice of the patriarchy, which disapproves of the infanticide. Denver observes that: "Sethe was trying to make up for the handsaw; Beloved was making her pay for it" (295). When it becomes clear that Beloved judges Sethe for the murder Sethe desperately tries to explain that she saved her from a fate much worse than death.

By portraying how Sethe, Baby Suggs, Ella, Stamp Paid and Paul D have suffered from slavery Morrison portrays a fate Sethe deems worse than death. Sethe tries to explain to Beloved that white people can hurt her in ways she did not think was possible, things she will never get over. They can hurt her in a way that is much worse than death:

worse than [death] - far worse - was what Baby Suggs died of, what Ella knew, what Stamp saw and what made Paul D tremble. That anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind. Not just work, kill, or maim you, but dirty you. Dirty you so bad you couldn't like yourself anymore. Dirty you so bad you forgot who you were and couldn't think it up. And though she and others lived through and got

over it, she could never let it happen to her own. The best thing she was, her children. Whites might dirty *her* all right, but not her best thing, her beautiful, magical best thing – the part of her that was clean (295-296).

What Sethe is trying to make Beloved understand is the double burden of being a female slave, suffering from both institutionalized motherhood and slavery. Baby Suggs had such horrible experiences that it killed her in the end. Paul D puts all his awful memories in a tin box because he cannot bear to deal with them. Sethe is trying to explain how slavery will dirty and destroy her, like the milking did to her. The theme of milk will be discussed in greater detail later in the chapter. Sethe will not allow the patriarchy to ‘dirty’ her daughter, referring to sexual violence and the practice of breeding. Sethe was terrified that if she had not killed Beloved, she might be victim of “a gang of whites invaded her daughter’s private parts, soiled her daughter’s thighs, and threw her daughter out of the wagon” (296). Sethe is clearly referring to the treatment black women suffered under the institution of motherhood, which allowed the slave owners to sexually abuse the slave women. For Sethe this is much worse than being killed. Sethe’s trauma of being considered part animal, part human is also something that makes her think that slavery is worse than death: “And no one, nobody on this earth, would list her daughter’s characteristics on the animal side of the paper. No. Oh no. [...] Sethe had refused - and refused still” (296). Sethe will not allow anyone to take her children away from her, like they did to Baby Suggs. Sethe is desperate to make Beloved understand how much she loves her, and how she only killed her in order to protect her from the thing that killed Baby Suggs and makes Paul D tremble. “Sethe is determined that her daughter will not suffer parental neglect. Yet, in order to protect her child from the consequences of life in slavery, she must first free her at any sacrifice” (Lucille P. Fultz 38). It could be argued that Beloved’s voice is the institution of motherhood and the patriarchy talking, and Sethe’s voice represents all the women who are not allowed to mother in their own way. Morrison supports Sethe and critiques the institution that does not accept that a mother’s deep love for her daughter could make her kill her in order to save her from the horrible life of slavery. Hirsch writes that “When Sethe tries to explain to Beloved why she cut her throat, she is explaining an anger handed down through generations of mothers who could have no control over their children’s lives, no voice in their upbringing” (197). Sethe is acting on the anger of women through generations that have experienced the horrors of slavery and the patriarchy. Women have been denied the right to control their children’s lives, and Morrison illustrates this collective anger through the infanticide. This anger also stems from women being controlled by the institution of motherhood, in terms of not being in control over their own bodies.

Mother's Milk

Breast-feeding is a big part of motherhood, and nursing a baby is an important part of the bonding experience between mother and baby. However, the slave women were seldom allowed to nurse their own babies. To make sure the slave women were efficient, there was usually one woman who nursed all the babies, so the rest of the mothers could work. Lisa C. Rosen states that in *Beloved*, "Morrison creates her most complex portrayal of motherhood" (221). Milk is a big part of this portrayal of motherhood, and it is a reoccurring theme throughout the whole text. Several critics have highlighted the significance of breast milk in the novel. O'Reilly argues that "In *Beloved* the taking of breast milk through the practice of wet nursing signifies the appropriation and commodification of slave women's motherlove. A slave mother was seldom allowed to nurse her babies, and when she was, they received milk only after the white babies had suckled" (*Morrison and Motherhood* 129). Patton also highlights the significance of breast milk, and writes that for Sethe, motherhood is equivalent with having enough milk for all her children (129). Morrison uses the symbol of milk to critique the institution of motherhood and slavery. In *Song of Solomon*, Morrison uses milk as an important factor, which the main character's name "Milkman" derives from. Milkman gets his name because he is breastfed until he is four years old. In *Beloved*, milk symbolizes Sethe's bond to her children, and her claim to be their mother. A key episode to understand the significance of milk is when Schoolteacher and his nephews forcefully steal Sethe's milk. They hold her down and milk her like a cow: "those boys came in there and took my milk. That's what they came in there for. Held me down and took it" (19). This episode has traumatized Sethe. O'Reilly highlights how Sethe's stolen milk "metaphorically signifies the motherlove that is denied to her as a slave woman" (*Morrison and Motherhood* 130). In this scene Morrison illustrates the violence and degradation imposed on women by the patriarchy, since it allowed men to be in control of women's bodies. A slave woman's body was expected to bring children into the world in accordance to the institution of motherhood, but she was not in charge of her own body. She could be impregnated, raped, beaten, whipped, killed etc. By stealing her milk, they rob Sethe of the most precious thing she has, the thing that connects her to her baby and the only thing she can provide them with: "Milk was all I ever had [to give my children]" (187). This traumatizing episode is arguably one of the main reasons why Sethe commits infanticide. The 'milking' is the most horrible thing Sethe has experienced, mostly because they take away from her the ability to nurse her baby. Morrison uses this 'rape' to illustrate what Sethe tries to save her daughter from, and in doing so

critiquing the institution of motherhood.

Rape is a reoccurring theme throughout the novel, and the rape that is given most attention is the 'rape' of Sethe's milk. Other examples of rape are Sethe's mother who was raped multiple times on the slave ship, Baby Suggs who is forced into having sex with a straw boss in order to keep her child who later gets sold, Paul D is raped while he is at a chain gang in Georgia, Ella is repeatedly raped by a white man and his son that she calls 'the lowest yet', Stamp Paid's wife is forced into sex with her owner and Stamp cannot do anything to stop it. However, the 'rape' that is given most attention is when Schoolteacher and his nephews holds Sethe down and suck her breast milk. Barnett highlights how "Morrison revises the conventional slave narrative by insisting on the primacy of sexual assault over other experiences of brutality" (420). These sexual assaults are what make Sethe commit infanticide; she is terrified that her daughters will experience sexual exploitation if they are taken back to Sweet Home. Another traumatizing event of sexual abuse Sethe often reflects on is when she trades sex in order to pay for Beloved's tombstone. "Ten minutes, he said. You got ten minutes I'll do it for free. Ten minutes for seven letters. With another ten could she have gotten "Dearly" too?" (5). Sethe puts 'Beloved' on the tomb stone because she heard the priest say 'Dearly Beloved' in the baby's funeral. By focusing on sexual assault, Morrison critiques the institution of motherhood for allowing men to exploit women's bodies so brutally.

The stolen breast milk symbolizes a double tragedy for Sethe. Schoolteacher finds out that Sethe told Mrs. Garner about the milking, and to punish her he whips her so many times that it makes a tree on her back. "I told Mrs. Garner on em. She had that lump and couldn't speak but her eyes rolled out tears. Them boys found out I told on em. Schoolteacher made one open up my back, and when it closed it made a tree. It grows there still" (19-20). Because Sethe is pregnant they dig a hole in the ground for her stomach when they whip her. First they steal her milk, and then they beat her until her back opens up. However, for Sethe, the stolen milk is much worse than the beating. Her whole back is opened by the whip and it now looks like a tree. Schoolteacher, who is always writing in his notebook, uses his 'pen' to draw a tree on Sethe's back. The tree on Sethe's back could represent her family tree, which is ironic since Sethe never knew her mother or father. Like babies need milk to grow, a tree needs water. The milk has a double meaning because Schoolteacher takes away what her baby needs to grow, at the same time he 'plants' a tree on her back, a scar that will always be there to remind her about the incident with the milk. Slavery has marked Sethe's body forever. The white woman who helps Sethe give birth to Denver calls the scar on her back a chokecherry

tree: “It's a tree, Lu. A chokecherry tree. [...]. You got a mighty lot of branches. Leaves, too, look like, and dern if these ain't blossoms. Tiny little cherry blossoms, just as white. Your back got a whole tree on it. In bloom” (93). Because Sethe is afraid to get caught she tells Amy that her name is Lu. Amy Denver helps Sethe and even though her back is almost falling apart from the damage made by the whip, Amy tells her it looks like a beautiful tree. Sethe is never able to see the scars on her back herself, but because of Denver she believes it looks like a chokecherry tree. The tree on Sethe's back represents how she has been marked by slavery forever both literally and mentally. Sethe will never forget the traumatizing memory of being milked like a cow, and she will always have the scar on her back. It is impossible to forget the traumatizing experience. Morrison is critiquing the violence slavery generally imposed on slaves, and the patriarchy specifically imposes on women. The scar on Sethe's back symbolizes how she is permanently and violently marked by slavery. It was slavery that allowed Schoolteacher to brutally whip Sethe, however, it was the institution of motherhood and the notion that men are in control of women's bodies that allow them to hold her down and suck her milk.

Moreover, the milking is one of the main reasons why Sethe murders her daughter. After Schoolteacher stole her milk, Sethe understands that her children will never be safe at Sweet Home. The infanticide cannot be seen as an isolated event, it must be seen as a result of the demands the institution of motherhood and slavery combined places on women, and how this combination destroys the relationship between mother and child. O'Reilly highlights that it: “we must distinguish between Sethe's mothering before and after “the white men came in her yard” (*Morrison and Mothering* 135). The short period Sethe spends at 124 before Schoolteacher comes to get her back, she understands what it is like to truly live with motherhood as experience. She is free and can mother her children in a safe and loving way, knowing that they are safe. O'Reilly argues that “Prior to the sight of schoolteacher's hat, Sethe behaves in the way expected of mothers: she loves her children and strives to ensure their well-being and safety (*Morrison and Mothering* 135). The scene where Sethe's milk is stolen is a turning point in her approach to motherhood. This is the time she understands that her children's lives are in real danger, and she decides at this moment that they will never experience the same thing. Sethe understands that if she is taken back to Sweet Home nothing will keep Schoolteacher from separating her from her children, and nothing will keep him from exploiting them. The milking makes Sethe understand that she will never be able to protect her children in slavery, which makes it one of the key reasons for the infanticide.

Sethe's milking does not only traumatize her, it also destroys her husband Halle.

Again, Morrison illustrates how slavery and institutionalized motherhood combined ruin people and their relations. Paul D tells Sethe that Halle witnessed the milking, and it was so horrible for him to watch that he went mad: “I never knew what it was that messed him up. That was it, I guess. All I knew was that something broke him”(81). Seeing how Sethe was exploited, “broke him like a twig” (81). Sethe is shocked when she hears that Halle witnessed the rape and didn’t stop them: “He saw them boys do that to me and let them keep on breathing air? He saw? He saw? He saw?” (81). Sethe is furious, and hurt that Halle didn’t stop them from taking her most precious thing in the world, her milk. “It broke him, Sethe. [...]. You may as well know it all. Last time I saw him he was sitting by the chum. He had butter all over his face” (82). Sethe is hurt and angry when she hears that Halle saw what happened and didn’t interfere. He did not help her, or stop the men from ‘raping’ her. Morrison illustrates how slave men were not able to protect their women from abuse, and how they were forced to accept that their wives were raped and assaulted in other ways. By highlighting how the fear that something like this will happen to her daughter, Morrison critiques the institution of motherhood, because the institution allows men to exploit women’s bodies in any way they desire. The institution of motherhood aims to keep women under male control, keeping women from making decisions concerning their own bodies. Patton writes that “Female slaves were not recognized as women and mothers; they were merely sexed property” (12). The institution of motherhood allows Schoolteacher to decide what happens to Sethe’s body and her milk, which again makes Sethe fear for her daughter’s body that will be the property of Schoolteacher if he takes them back to Sweet Home. Sethe will not be able to stop Schoolteacher from abusing Beloved like he abused her, and this drives her to commit infanticide. The institution of slavery allows Schoolteacher to violently misuse women’s bodies in terms of violence and labor; the institution of motherhood allows him to misuse a woman’s sexuality and reproductive abilities because the patriarchy has always tried to keep women’s bodies under male control. Stevenson highlights how enslaved women were victims of sexual harassment and assault and how “being white was the only badge of authority necessary” to exploit slave women sexually (106). The fear of what the institution of motherhood might do to her children leads her to commit infanticide. O’Reilly highlights that “The aim of black mothering, [...], is to nurture children so that they may survive and resist the maiming of racism and, for daughters, sexism and grow into adulthood whole and complete” (*Morrison and Motherhood* 32-33). This is exactly what Sethe is trying to do for her children, but the institution denies her the ability to do so because it is in charge of all women. After the milking, Sethe understands that she cannot protect her daughter against the

patriarchy and prevent it from exploiting her body, and therefore she decides to protect her daughter by murdering her. The stolen breast milk is an eye opener for Sethe in terms of her children's safety.

The significance of breast milk is also visible in how Sethe, who like many other slave babies, was not nursed by her own mother when she was a baby: "Nan had to nurse whitebabies and me too because Ma'am was in the rice. The little whitebabies got it first and I got what was left. Or none. There was no nursing milk to call my own" (236). Many slave women were denied the possibility to nurse their babies, they were sent back to work with breasts full of milk. Othermothering was common so that the slave mothers did not have to miss work to nurse their babies. Patton points out how the "Mammy is seen as the ideal mother-figure, yet ironically, in breast-feeding the white mistress' children, she is often unable to perform the same duties for her own children" (33). It is ironic that the Mammy was viewed as an ideal mother, when she was kept from being an 'ideal mother' to her own children. She was only an ideal mother to the white children, not her own. Since Sethe never knew her own mother it is especially important to her to be present in her own children's lives. Sethe was nursed by another woman when she was a baby, and her mother "must of nursed me two or three weeks – that's the way the others did. Then she went back in rice and I sucked from another woman whose job it was" (72). Morrison critiques the institution of slavery of separating mothers from their children. It was common on the plantations that one woman nursed all the babies, so their mother's could work. Fultz argues that "Equating milk with motherhood and the natural link between mother and child, Sethe is horrified by the notion that somebody else could pre-empt her children's claim to their birthright" (38). She is horrified that someone will steal what belongs to her children, because she knows what it is like to be denied parental care. Further, by nursing her children Sethe claims them as her own. Patton highlights how "For Sethe, her mother's absence is translated as milk deprivation; therefore, she will mother her children with an abundance of milk" (130). Sethe never knew her own mother, and she is determined that she and her children will live together like a family. By focusing on the significance of breast-milk Morrison highlights how slave women were denied the most natural part of motherhood, and in doing so, she critiques the way slave women were used as breeders instead of letting them be real mothers to their children.

Morrison uses the significance of breast milk to highlight how slave women in the novel were kept from their babies, and for Sethe the stolen milk becomes a symbol of her helplessness in protecting her children from oppression. Since Sethe was not nursed by her own mother, it is especially important for her to nurse her own children. When Schoolteacher

robs Sethe of her milk, she understands that she will never be able to protect her children if they are slaves. As a result she must kill them to keep them safe, however, she only manages to murder her eldest daughter. After the killing, Denver drinks her mother's milk mixed with her dead sister's blood. Further, Sethe remembers her painful childhood memories of not knowing her own mother, and she does not want the same thing to happen to her children. By portraying Sethe's longing for her own mother, Morrison justifies the infanticide because she highlights how Sethe does not want her own children to grow up without their mother. Morrison uses breast milk to highlight how female slaves were degraded and often denied the opportunity to breast-feed their children. Morrison justifies the infanticide by critiquing the patriarchal treatment of mothers, especially the stealing of Sethe's milk and the separation of mother and child, represented through how Sethe never knew her mother.

Baby Suggs

Morrison continues to critique the treatment of motherhood under slavery, by showcasing how slave women, and especially Baby Suggs, suffered a double burden of being victims of both slavery and institutionalized motherhood. She does so by telling the stories of slave women in the novel who have been separated from their children, experienced sexual abuse and the practice of using slave women as breeders in order to maximize the number of workers. The character Baby Suggs is used to highlight these horrible conditions. In addition, Morrison uses this critique to justify Sethe's infanticide by narrating what would (most likely) have been her future if she were taken back to Sweet Home. Davis writes that "slave women were not mothers at all; they were simply instruments guaranteeing the growth of the slave labor force. They were "breeders" – animals, whose monetary value could be precisely calculated in terms of their ability to multiply their numbers" (4-5). Using slave women as breeders were a common practice, as was buying and selling slaves. Stevenson highlights how there were two especially valuable types of slave women on the market: "the "fancy girl" [...] and "good breeding" women, two categories of sexual commodification of enslaved females that were not mutually exclusive" (105). The 'fancy girl' was usually light skinned, had straight hair, and generally resembled white women more than black women. Stevenson goes on to highlight that "If these women proved to be fertile, and were impregnated by a white male, the child they bore would be even lighter, and thereby more valuable monetarily as "slave property" for their owners, especially if their offspring were female" (105).

Morrison uses the character Baby Suggs to illustrate the crushing effect slavery had on motherhood. She was robbed of all her children except Halle, her children were sold off to make profits for her owners. Baby Suggs tells Sethe that she should be happy because she has three children left. Morrison uses Baby Suggs' painful story to illustrate how slavery destroyed the relationship between mothers and their children:

'Not a house in the country ain't packed to its rafters with some dead Negro's grief. [...] Don't talk to me. You lucky. You got three left. Three pulling at your skirts and just one raising hell from the other side. Be thankful, why don't you? I had eight. Every one of them gone away from me. Four take, four chased, and all, I expect, worrying somebody's house into evil.' Baby Suggs rubbed her eyebrows. 'My firstborn. All I can remember of her is how she loved the burned bottom of bread. Can you beat that? Eight children and that's all I remember' (6).

As Baby Suggs points out, all houses in the country are filled with 'some dead Negro's grief' (6), insinuating that Sethe's grief over her daughter is not special. All black people have their own things to grieve and traumas to process. Stevenson points out that female slaves, based on their horrible treatment "suffered emotional scars throughout their lives" (115). Suggs points out that Sethe is lucky because out of four children, three of them are alive, whereas Suggs has lost all her eight children. Baby Suggs can't even remember anything but how her firstborn loved 'the burned bottom of bread' (6). Baby thinks Sethe is in the wrong for complaining when she 'only lost one' (6). The only child Baby Suggs were allowed to keep was Halle, Sethe's husband: "Halle she was able to keep the longest. Twenty years. A lifetime. Given to her, no doubt, to make up for hearing that her two girls, neither of whom had their adult teeth, were sold and gone and she had not been able to wave goodbye" (28). Morrison tells the reader that Baby Suggs' two girls were sold without her even being able to say goodbye. Here, Morrison illustrate show institutionalized motherhood under slavery is destroying the bond between mother and children. "Since slave women were classified as 'breeders' as opposed to 'mothers', their infant children could be sold away from them like calves from cows" (Davis 5). The slave women did not 'own' their children and had no say in what could happen to them. Hortense Spillers proposes that "kinship loses meaning" under these conditions, "since it can be invaded at any given time and arbitrary moment by the property relations" (74). Since slaves were treated like property, and could be sold at any time, argues that kinship loses its meaning because the kin was not allowed to be together. Morrison continues to present terrible memories from Baby Suggs' past, about her children who she never was able to know. Morrison critiques the practice under slavery, which allowed slave owners to separate mother and her children. Baby Suggs has learned that there

is no point in establishing a bond to a new-born baby, because as a slave mother you are most likely not allowed to keep it anyway.

The last of her children, whom she barely glanced at when he was born because it wasn't worth the trouble to try to learn features you would never see change into adulthood anyway. Seven times she had done that: held a little foot; examined the fat fingertips with her own - fingers she never saw become the male or female hands a mother would recognize anywhere. [...]. All seven were gone or dead. What would be the point of looking too hard at that youngest one? (163-164).

Baby Suggs' painful memories of her children will never leave her. She clings to the few memories she has. Suggs describes her sorrow over not knowing how her children grew up to look like. She grieves that she was never able to get to know her own children whom she carried inside her womb for many months: "Did Patty lose her lisp? What color did Famous' skin finally take? Was that a cleft in Johnny's chin or just a dimple that would disappear soon's his jawbone changed?" (164). A mother is not capable of forgetting her children no matter how fast they were taken away from her after birth. As Morrison metaphorically writes, a mother will recognize her children's hands anywhere, because she is their mother. Morrison uses Baby Suggs to attack the treatment of slave women, and how they were separated from their children.

During her time in slavery, Baby Suggs has experienced many gruesome things, and Morrison uses her as an example to show how terrible slavery was for women. By doing so she justifies the infanticide, because she shows how horrible the alternative to death would have been for Sethe's children, especially her daughters. Baby Suggs' story is especially gruesome, and Morrison uses it to show the reader what would have happened to Sethe and her children if Schoolteacher had taken them back to Sweet Home:

in all of Baby's life, as well as Sethe's own, men and women were moved around like checkers. Anybody Baby Suggs knew, let alone loved, who hadn't run off or been hanged, got rented out, loaned out, bought up, brought back, stored up, mortgaged, won, stolen or seized. So Baby's eight children had six fathers. What she called the nastiness of life was the shock she received upon learning that nobody stopped playing checkers just because the pieces included her children (27-28).

Eight times Baby Suggs went through the gruesome experience of losing her children. She calls it 'the nastiness of life', the fact that no one stopped 'playing checkers' with the pieces that was her children. The first time she experienced it, Baby was shocked that selling her children meant so little to the slave owners, they were just property to them, things that they could get rid off. Baby Suggs makes a list of what happened to the people she loved, all of which suffered terrible fates. Again Morrison is critiquing the brutal treatment of slaves

through Baby Suggs. Hirsch highlights that “If mothers cannot ‘own’ their children or even themselves, they experience separation and loss all the more intensely” (6). Baby Suggs has experienced Sethe’s worst nightmare; to lose her children. Baby Suggs tells Sethe that “‘Those white things have taken all I had or dreamed,’ she said, ‘and broke my heartstrings too. There is no bad luck in the world but whitefolks’” (104-105). The broken heartstrings symbolize Suggs’ cut off relation to her children. She loves them with all her heart, but since they have been taken away from her, her heartstrings has metaphorically been cut off. Her ties to them have been cut off by the slave owners. Morrison critiques the way slavery treated mothers in terms of taking their children away from them. They have taken everything from her, everything she has ever loved is taken away from her by ‘those white things’. By telling the reader about Sethe’s worst fear through describing Suggs’ life, Morrison shows her support of Sethe and the infanticide. By illustrating how horrible life could have turned out for Sethe, as highlighted by O’Reilly; “Had they been returned South, the children in all likelihood, would have been sold off and separated from their mother” (*Morrison and Motherhood* 136), Morrison supports the infanticide, in fact she uses it to critique the institution of motherhood and slavery. Some of the former slaves in the novel believe that it is best to not get too attached to people or things they care about, because it will most likely be taken away from them. If you love something or someone it will be worse when it is taken away from you, therefore Ella, a former slave tells Sethe: “Don’t love nothing” (108), when she sees Sethe with new-born Denver in her arms. Ella is insinuating that it is dangerous to love anything, because it will most likely be taken away from you.

Moreover, Morrison is critiquing the institution of motherhood by depicting strong, female lead families. After the infanticide, Sethe, Baby Suggs and Denver live alone at 124 for many years, making them an all female, three-generation family after Sethe’s sons run away. There are no happy families consisting of mother, father and children portrayed in the novel. Morrison presents no strong father figures, except arguably Stamp Paid and Paul D, but they both have their own traumas to process. Stamp Paid considers himself a sort of father figure for Denver since he was the one who helped Sethe when she arrived in Ohio with her as a newborn. He fed Denver with berries when she was a baby. O’Reilly points out that “Morrison is often read as a critic of the traditional nuclear family: namely, a familial structure composed of a mother and a father and their biological children in which the husband’s role is to be the provider while the wife is to be the “at home” nurturer” (*Morrison and Motherhood* 25). Sethe, Halle and their children were a family, but the family was broken up after they ran away from Sweet Home. O’Reilly highlights that “The majority of families

in Morrison's fiction are female-headed households in which three generations of women reside together" (*Morrison and Motherhood* 25), *Beloved* being no exception. Morrison critiques the core values of the institution of motherhood by critiquing the nuclear family. Morrison has a strong focus on strong female characters in her authorship, often telling stories where women are sole providers and care takers. The matriarch Baby Suggs is a high standing woman in her community, and she and Sethe live alone for a long time. Sethe works in a restaurant for many years in order to take care of her family. When *Beloved* makes Sethe sick with guilt, it is Denver that must seek help and provide for the family. In her portrayal of strong, female led families, Morrison critiques the institution of motherhood that says that a woman's place is in the home.

Conclusion

In *Beloved*, Morrison uses the infanticide to attack the institution of slavery and the institution of motherhood. Motherhood is one of the central themes in the novel, as it is in much of Morrison's works. O'Reilly states that "Motherhood is a central theme in Morrison's fiction" (*Morrison and Motherhood* 1). *Beloved*, is no exception, with its focus on Sethe and her children. Fultz states that "The relationship between slave mothers and their children is one of the overarching issues in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*" (32). Morrison highlights how female slaves suffered a double burden of being both slaves and women. Firstly, they were slaves, which meant that their slave owners could exploit them in terms of labour and violence. Secondly, since they were women they were also victims of sexual exploitation as institutionalized motherhood allowed them to. Morrison explores how the combination of the two institutions destroys the sacred bond between mother and child. She uses the milking of Sethe as an example of how motherhood was not respected by the slave owners. Slave women suffered a double burden because they were treated like men in terms of how much they had to work, but when it was profitable for the owners to exploit them like women they were raped and used as breeders. Women were seen as valuable assets because they could birth babies that would grow up to be a part of the slave owner's workforce. The women were considered to be breeding animals, not mothers. Many slave mothers like Baby Suggs never got to know their children because they were taken away from them, or like Sethe's mother, who threw away the children she birthed after being raped. A woman's price on the slave market reflected her breeding abilities and her beauty. Light skinned slaves were more valuable because as sexual objects they were more desirable to white men. The institution of slavery allowed the slave owners to separate mothers and children, leaving the slave mother's

with great emotional scars. Morrison uses the infanticide to attack how slave women were treated. By highlighting the horrible lives the female slaves in the novel have lived, she justifies the infanticide.

Beloved explores the relationship between mother and daughter, which for the most part is told from the mother's perspective. *Beloved* is a story about loss, more precisely a story about how a mother loses her daughter, which Rich calls 'the essential female tragedy' (237). Even though Sethe is the one who murdered her daughter, she only did it because she knew that slavery is a fate worse than death. Morrison portrays the mother-daughter relationship mainly through the mother's eyes, in contrast to *Caged Bird*, where the story is told from the daughter's point of view. Hirsch claims that "With this painful and fractured novel, Toni Morrison has done more than to shift the direction of her own work and of feminist theorizing: she has opened the space for maternal narrative in feminist fiction" (198). It is the mother's voice that is dominating, in contrast to much of Western literature that focuses on fraternal relationships. Through the focus on the mother, Sethe's thoughts and feelings, Morrison justifies the infanticide. By highlighting how the female slaves in the novel has been exploited, Morrison illustrates how institutionalized motherhood under slavery destroys the bond between mothers and children, and how it ruins the slave women's ability to be mothers. Morrison uses the infanticide to attack and critique both institutions.

5. Conclusion

This thesis explores motherhood in African American female literature. It does so by examining how motherhood is presented in *Caged Bird* and *Beloved*. The two texts offer two different portrayals of motherhood. However, they both deal with loss between mother and daughter, making up what Rich calls "the essential female tragedy" (237). By studying these two texts, it becomes clear that motherhood is extremely complex. Motherhood is not always perfect, and it is much more nuanced than the institution of motherhood believes it is. Rather, as this thesis uncovers, forcing women into a specific version of motherhood destroys the relationship between mothers and daughters, resulting in loss and separation. The institution of motherhood states that all women are born to be mothers and that motherhood is every woman's sole purpose in life. However, motherhood is very multifaceted, and it is impossible to impose one standard version of motherhood on all women. As this thesis illustrates, institutionalized motherhood destroys the relationship between mothers and daughters, resulting in "the essential female tragedy" (Rich 237).

In *Caged Bird* Angelou writes about her mother Vivian, who rejected institutionalized motherhood and her daughter. Vivian was not allowed to mother in her own way, which made her send Maya to live with her grandmother. This separation ruined their relationship until Angelou became an adult. Even though Angelou and her mother had a close relationship later in Angelou's life, her memories of abandonment never left her. The pain of being rejected by her mother never healed. Angelou portrays a mother who is far from perfect. Further, Vivian rejects all the things the institution of motherhood stands for. She is not the warm, caring mother who is willing to give up everything for her children. She is the polar opposite. She is more interested in living her life for herself, and she is not willing to sacrifice her own well being in order to take care of her daughter's needs. Angelou critiques Vivian for abandoning her, and in doing so she shows support or the institution of motherhood. However, Angelou has an ambivalent relationship to the institution of motherhood, because she also critiques it. Especially in terms of how it does not allow women to mother in different ways. When Maya becomes a mother herself, she attacks the institution for not allowing her to realize her own dreams without feeling guilty about leaving her son. Angelou critiques the institution for not allowing her to live her own life, even though this is what she critiqued her own mother for doing. Angelou is ambivalent in her approach towards the institution of motherhood, however she mainly supports it in terms of critiquing her mother's absence during her childhood and honoring the way Momma raised her in a safe and nurturing way.

Motherhood in *Beloved* contrasts how motherhood is presented in *Caged Bird*. If Vivian is the absent mother, Sethe is the mother who loves her children unconditionally. Morrison portrays this strong mother love through Sethe's determination to always protect her children. Sethe resembles a Demeter figure, a mother who is willing to do anything in order to keep her children safe. Sethe knows the horror of slavery, and nothing could be worse for her than seeing her children abused and exploited by Schoolteacher. The slave era Morrison portrays in *Beloved*, did not allow slave women to be mothers. They were forced to birth babies, but they were seldom allowed to mother them as their own, for example through nursing them. Children were seen as a way to expand the work force, destroying the relationship between a mother and her children. Morrison explores this through the character Baby Suggs, who were robbed of all her children throughout her life. Sethe is afraid that the same thing will happen to her and her children, and as a result she murders her daughter. Morrison uses the infanticide to critique both the institution of motherhood, and the institution of slavery. Slavery allowed the owners to treat slave women like they wanted in terms of labor and violence, however, it is the patriarchal institution of motherhood that allows them to

exploit the slave women like breeders and sexually. In *Beloved*, Morrison uses the milking of Sethe to portray how horrible institutionalized motherhood under slavery was. Sethe and the other slave women in the novel carry a double burden of being both slaves and women. Morrison illustrates how the institution of slavery strengthens the oppressing factors of institutionalized motherhood.

The issue of race could not be more relevant than it is today. After a black man named George Floyd was killed by a white police man on May 25 2020, the USA and the rest of the world came together to protest against police violence against African Americans, racism in general and the stigmas concerning African American males and crime. There is no doubt that there still is racism in the world today, and more examples of African Americans that have been brutally killed by the police in America surface almost every day. Issues of gender and racial oppression still exists today, therefore this is an important theme to explore. This thesis presents a study of motherhood in two texts written by African American women, where the characters have faced oppression concerning their race and gender. African American mothers have historically struggled with different obstacles than white mothers. First of all, the historical implications of slavery have had crushing effects on black women. Hill Collins states that “In spite of differences created by historical era, age, social class, sexual orientation, or ethnicity, the legacy of struggle against racism and sexism is a common thread binding African-American women” (22). Even though women throughout history have been suppressed and controlled by the patriarchy, African American women have been victims of much greater crimes than white women. Morrison portrays this in *Beloved*, a time in history where white women’s place was in the home, their sole job was to be the perfect mother and wife. The slave women, however, were brutally exploited both in terms of labor, and sex. Based on the gruesomeness of the slave era, Morrison states in *Beloved*, that “It was not a story to pass on” (323). They were not really seen as women, except when exploiting them as women; i.e. breeding or sexual abuse, was in the slave owner’s interest. Hill Collins states that “The dominant ideology of slave era fostered the creation of four interrelated, socially constructed controlling images of Black womanhood, each reflecting the dominant group’s interest in maintaining Black women’s subordination” (71). Because of the history and the racism in the United States, black women have experienced motherhood differently than white women. Black women have historically been more exposed to oppression because of their race, and many black feminists, like bell hooks, have attacked white feminists for not including them and their causes in the women’s movement.

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