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The Presence, Roles and Functions of the Grotesque in Toni Morrison's Novels

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THE PRESENCE, ROLES AND FUNCTIONS
OF THE GROTESQUE
IN TONI MORRISON'S NOVELS

A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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May 2009

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This dissertation focuses on Toni Morrison's use of the grotesque as a social and political aesthetic. Various definitions and applications of the grotesque in art and literature are discussed in general and particular definitions and applications that pertain to Morrison's novels are discussed and analyzed in terms of roles, functions, and purposes. In addition to the colloquial definition of the grotesque, the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, John Ruskin, and Sigmund Freud aids in the identifications, as well as the work of more modern scholars of the grotesque such as Philip Thomson, Geoffrey Harpham, Bernard McElroy, Arthur Clayborough, Sherwood Anderson, Mary Russo, and Dieter Meindl.

Discussions and analyses are situated in regard to Morrison's potential purposes for writing, as well as recurring themes, motifs, and issues. Purposes, such as revealing African American female and adolescent self-hate, exposing oppressive social, cultural, and educational systems that negatively affect African Americans, and showing the paradoxical intersection between love and violence, are explored. Motifs, issues, and themes such as beauty, myth, mothering, stigmatization and marginalization of blacks, poverty, Western standard of beauty and double consciousness are examined as well.

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PREFACE

To date, Toni Morrison has published nine novels. I discuss seven of the nine novels in the thesis. The two that are not mentioned are *Paradise* and *A Mercy*.

While comparisons and connections to themes, motifs, and issues could be briefly mentioned about *Paradise*, there is nothing on a large scale that I felt was necessary to mention in this text. In addition to *Paradise*, I did not include Morrison's latest work, *A Mercy*, which was released on November 2009; almost all of the body of the thesis had been written by that time.

INTRODUCTION

“The grotesque is the slipperiest of aesthetic categories.” (Harpham 461)

One of the most prolific and powerful writers of contemporary fiction is Toni Morrison. The 1993 Nobel Prize winner’s works continue to be heavily debated, explicated, and theorized as she continues to write more novels. Due to Morrison’s multi-layered, non-linear and dialectic approaches to her writing, Morrison’s works evoke endless discussion. This text focuses on one main area within Morrison’s works, while also exploring a number of other related areas. The primary focus of this dissertation is the use of the grotesque in Toni Morrison’s novels. Various aspects, definitions, and related terms of the grotesque frame the discussion. Thus, the initial and fundamental question is: What is the grotesque? Bernard McElroy opens his book, *Fiction of the Modern Grotesque*, by saying that everything from neckties to relationships have been deemed grotesque (1). McElroy’s example clearly demonstrates that the term “grotesque” in modern-day usage varies from circumstance to circumstance and thus does not seem to have a concrete definition since vastly different things can be considered grotesque. And, as Geoffrey Harpham declares, the grotesque is a slippery concept.

The concept of the grotesque varies tremendously because there are numerous definitions, definitions that have changed throughout the years. Moreover, in many cases, the grotesque is applied differently among disciplines, such as between art versus literature, for instance. Because the concept and meaning of the grotesque are so varied, people have trouble fully tracing, defining, and applying it. For example,

article titles such as Michael Steig's "Defining the Grotesque: An *Attempt at Synthesis*" (my emphasis) and chapter titles such as Wolfgang Kayser's "An *Attempt* (my emphasis) to Define the Nature of the Grotesque¹" reveal the complexity, if not impossibility, of defining the "grotesque". Similarly, the most extensive sources on the topic often declare that they only work towards a definition. Phillip Thomson's and Dieter Meindl's works are examples of this: Thomson has a chapter titled, "Towards a Definition" (my emphasis), and Meindl's book has a chapter titled "Toward the Postmodern Grotesque" (my emphasis). In the beginning of Geoffrey Harpham's article, "The Grotesque: First Principles," Harpham, a scholar of the grotesque, even suggests that there is little point in tracing the term. After all, he says, "Perhaps the germ, the secret of the grotesque, lies not in the origins or derivations of the word....Perhaps we should approach the grotesque not as a fixed thing," because it is an "aesthetic orphan, wandering from form to form, era to era" (461).

Even though Harpham and many others say that tracing the term is perhaps moot, they nonetheless attempt to trace the term, discussing how other scholars have defined it. Almost all sources tracing the grotesque disclose that the term derives from "grotto". The grottoes were caves discovered in the 16th century near Rome where murals containing "human and animal motifs were combined with foliage and floral decorations" (Clayborough 1-2). The most famous grotta/e is Nero's House of Gold. According to Clayborough in *The Grotesque in English Literature*², the connection of the grotesque to literature first appeared in France approximately a century later (3). Phillip Thomson, author of *The Grotesque*, reports that the concept

not only extended to literature during this time period, but also to other non-artistic things such as body parts. Later, in the 18th century, the grotesque widened further and became associated with caricature. Thomson further reports that in the 19th century and to some extent into the 20th century, the classification of the grotesque maintained both the original application to art and its application to caricature and the burlesque (13).

Other scholars of the grotesque, however, dispute the connection of the grotesque to buffoonery. Wolfgang Kayser³ for instance, the leading German scholar of the grotesque whose work is widely read, discards the idea that the grotesque is associated with buffoonery. Rather, Kayser believes that only one type of caricature is actually grotesque, the third of three that Christoph Martin Wieland identifies. The third type of caricature is one ““where the painter, disregarding verisimilitude, gives rein to an unchecked fantasy...with the sole intention of provoking laughter, disgust, and surprise about the daring of his monstrous creations by the unnatural and absurd products of his imagination”” (qtd. in Kayser 30). Some well known painters of these caricatures are Francisco de Goya, Pieter the Younger Brueghel/Bruegel (also known as Hell Bruegel), Hieronymous Bosch, and Raphael. Wieland thus describes the grotesque as something which evokes several contradictory feelings (Kayser 31). This idea of several simultaneous contradictory or paradoxical feelings is typically known as co-presence. Thus, when someone sees a grotesque painting or reads about a situation or character that is grotesque, he or she experiences co-presence of feelings, usually one being a sense of horror or disgust and the other one of amusement or laughter. Interestingly, Wieland’s work, as interpreted by Kayser, is

what many first credit to John Ruskin, an English art critic during the Romantic Period who cites in *The Stone of Venice* that the “true” grotesque involves a ludicrous and a terrible element⁴ (126). Even in the 21st century, people that discuss the grotesque consider this co-presence an essential part of the definition—if not the definition.

Overarching Characteristics of the Grotesque

Loosely applied, the colloquial usage of the grotesque considers an object as extremely horrifying or creepy or obscene—hence McElroy’s statement about the necktie to a relationship application. However, the term has not always been so arbitrarily defined. As mentioned, the grotesque was initially used to describe art. The murals, with the incorporation of human and animal features and foliage, were stylistically extraordinary. Such paintings, as Clayborough points out, are a “rejection of natural order not merely the sense of ‘strange’ but that of ‘abidingly strange’” (12). The concept of incongruous objects in art that upset the natural order is the basis for the characteristics of the grotesque in reference to literature as well. As an aesthetic form in literature, the overarching characteristic of the grotesque is disagreeing diametrics.

Opposing diametrics often has to do with the seeming failure of verisimilitude. Stories, for example, might not readily classify as being realistic or unrealistic or occurring in this world or another. Because of the confusion of reality versus unreality and the real world versus the supernatural, the grotesque is closely linked with the concepts of magical realism and the gothic. In fact, as Clayborough reports, the terms “gothic” and “grotesque” were used synonymously during the

Romantic period (11). However, as I discuss in the following chapters, the functions and purposes between the grotesque as an aesthetic form and the gothic and magical realism, differ.

Another area of exploration of opposing diametrics is the responses of characters and readers. Sometimes readers, and even characters, experience and respond with paradoxical feelings, that is, co-presence. And if experiencing paradoxical feelings, one is more than likely experiencing a grotesque situation. In his book, Thomson describes such a reaction: “one’s perception of the comic is countered and balanced by perception of something incompatible with this. One may not know whether to laugh or not...” (54). And, as discussed, the “or not” is usually because the person also feels that the person, thing, action or idea is also horrific or disgusting, thus eliciting feelings of shock, revulsion, or terror as well.

Of course, some people might only see something or someone as funny or horrifying in which case the grotesqueness is not evident to that person—or arguably does not exist at all. In fact, someone reading the following chapters might believe that some or many of the examples cited are actually more macabre or bizarre rather than grotesque. Harpham maintains that if laughter is not a response, then the grotesque ceases to even exist (464). The same is true for feelings of disgust and horror. However, Thomson still says that while there are variations in responses, most people will respond to the grotesque with both laughter/amusement and terror/disgust (26-27). Nonetheless, reader response is likely to be one reason why there are many variations of the definition today.

Typical Functions and Purposes of the Grotesque

Authors use the grotesque for a number of reasons, but there are several that are typically highlighted and emphasized. In art and literature, artists and authors, respectively, like to experiment with form and content. The concept of the grotesque itself derived from the experimentation of the clashing forms depicted in the grottoes. Since the time of the painted murals in the caves, artists and authors have continued to experiment. Grotesque literature can be considered grotesque in either content, that is subject matter, or form, that is structure. Beginning with the moderns, literature has typically been grotesque in both subject matter and form, which is why Joseph Millichap argued in 1977 that the grotesque is a modernist genre. Grotesque forms include experimental techniques like stream-of-consciousness, multiple narrators, disjoined levels of narration, and isolated chapters (Millichap 347; Thomson 64). The forms are considered grotesque because they represent the fragmentation of the modern world. Grotesque content can include monomaniacal characters, physically abnormal characters, horrific events that are presented in a comic manner, and supernatural events that occur in the real world. Some famous modern grotesque writers include James Joyce, Sherwood Anderson, Franz Kafka, Nathanael West, Flannery O'Connor, William Faulkner, and Carson McCullers (the latter three all connected in particular with the Southern grotesque).

A reason authors use the grotesque is to represent alienation in the world. They take something that is familiar and in an effort to symbolize its ugly reality, they deform it. The deformation can be in content and/or form, but is more than likely in content. Thus, even though images, situations, characters, and events might seem

entirely exaggerated, there is an element of truth in them (McElroy 5). As Kayser remarks, the ways in which we are “affected by it [the grotesque] results from our awareness that the familiar and apparently harmonious world is alienated under the impact of abysmal forces, which break it up and shatter its coherence” (37). The grotesque alerts people to the forces or possibilities of forces that do or could destroy the seeming perfectibility of the world. The alerting of readers is a related, yet another reason why authors use the grotesque. The grotesque is, as Thomson reveals, an “aggressive weapon” used to stun readers and provide them with different perceptions (58). The grotesque acts as a weapon because of co-presence and opposing diametrics: co-presence and opposing diametrics create a multitude of feelings, causing most readers to analyze the purposes of the grotesque. In the modernist grotesque, for example, authors often use disabled characters or other literary grotesques to represent a fragmented and alienated world. Similarly, the postmodern grotesque takes advantage of disabled bodies to symbolize oppressive systems, such as racism. However, the key difference between the modern and postmodern grotesque, as is discussed in detail in Chapter 3: Pariahs as Literary Grotesques, is the purpose of it. The physically aberrant in the postmodern grotesque are clearly viewed as symbolic, and thus their bodies are transcendent. In the modern grotesque, bodies remain pathologized, despite the symbolization.

In addition to the experimentation of form and the symbolization of the non-idealistic modern world, authors use the grotesque as a means to enable readers to absorb atrocities in the world. The horrific in the world is less scary and intimidating when there is also an element of laughter added. As Thomson points out, the

grotesque “serve[s] to bring the horrifying and disgusting aspects of existence to the surface, there to be rendered less harmful by the introduction of a comic perspective” (59). A perfect example of the comic perspective interspersed with a horrifying event occurs at the beginning of Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*. The novel begins with Robert Smith committing suicide. Mr. Smith, ironically a North Carolina Mutual Life insurance agent, believes that he can fly from Mercy hospital (also known by black residents as No Mercy Hospital, because they could not be admitted there) to the other side of Lake Superior. Mr. Smith even wears “blue silk wings,” suggestive of Superman’s cape (9). However, unlike Superman, Smith cannot fly from atop the building, and thus there is no mercy for him. Hence, he dies in the street among a veritable welcome committee of 40-50 black onlookers. Among them, Pilate Dead sings lyrics that initially seem to mock the experience: “O Sugarman done fly/Sugarman done gone/Sugarman cut across the sky/Sugarman gone home... (6). And even though the hospital is next door, it cannot save Smith.

While suicide is without a doubt troubling, one cannot help but laugh at Smith’s death—or more specifically, the circumstances surrounding his death. Given Smith’s job title and physical description, and the curious spectators watching as Smith, with his blue wings, jumps, the scene is funny. Furthermore, Morrison also has the narrator reveal that, at first, spectators think the whole scene might be some sort of “racial-uplift” vigil or perhaps “some form of worship” because Philadelphia, where Father Divine rules, is nearby and the two little girls in the crowd with the baskets of flowers could be two of his virgins (6). Even though Smith’s death is presented comically, it is because of the funny elements that readers pause to consider

the purposes of Smith's suicide and how it might forecast future events and relate to themes and motifs within the novel, predict how Smith might connect with other characters in the novel, and speculate about his personal struggles. If Morrison began the chapter with the shocking death of Smith in a different manner, it is likely that readers would not have paused to think—or to think as much. Because of the dissonance in emotions, one is, arguably, forced to analyze. And analysis is likely Morrison's goal. In fact, in my conversation with Morrison in 2006, she stated that horror and violence, juxtaposed with something comical, allows readers to absorb material more so, enabling them to consider the significance more easily.

Presence, Roles, and Functions of the Grotesque in Toni Morrison's Novels

The purpose of this dissertation is to focus an entire study on the presence, roles and functions of the grotesque in Toni Morrison's novels with the hope that others will begin to look at her, as they do with Faulkner, as a writer of the grotesque. While this text does not intend to provide an exhaustive list of the uses of the grotesque and its purposes and functions, it does provide enough evidence to establish Morrison as a writer who uses the grotesque as part of her social and political aesthetic. In the simplest sense, Morrison uses the grotesque to develop characters and create the plot. Most important, Morrison uses the grotesque to accomplish some of her goals for writing, which include, but are not limited to: educating readers about African and African American cultures (primarily folklore and religion); telling stories that have never been told or have been neglected (primarily those related to the female slave experience); emphasizing the importance of the oral tradition; stressing the importance of one's roots in the formation of self; and exposing interlocking

systems of race, class, and gender that negatively affect black persons. Toni Morrison indirectly reveals her purposes for writing fiction in her book, *Playing the in Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. In her monumental book, Morrison outlines many of the problems with canonical “American” literature, noting the complete absence of the Africanist presence or the racialized Africanist presence in such literature. In particular, she analyzes works by Carson McCullers, Edgar Allan Poe, Herman Melville, and Ernest Hemingway. Before analyzing their works, Morrison highlights the impetus for the book, as well as many of her ponderings as a reader, writer, and critic. More specifically, Morrison comments that she has been meditative concerning what constitutes knowledge and the assumptions inherent in it (4). She critically discusses how the canon contains literature that is conveniently “uninformed and unshaped by the four-hundred-year-old presence of, first, Africans and then African Americans” (4-5). Thus, there is no surprise that Morrison actively writes stories about Africans and African Americans, focusing on historical issues and cultural aspects. In essence, she tells the tales that many have not, and in the process, presents alternate ways of thinking about knowledge and the presence and influence of blackness in America.

To accomplish her goals for writing, Morrison uses the grotesque as part of her narrative strategy. By means of the grotesque, the irrational and supernatural can be introduced (for example, the character of Beloved, the myth of the flying African). By means of the grotesque, readers are provided images that burn in their minds, causing them to pause and think (for example, Sethe’s chokecherry tree). Through the grotesque markings on bodies, readers are able to understand the historic

degradation of blacks in America, particularly women (for example, Sethe's tree, Paul D's iron collar, Nan's missing arm, Baby Suggs' hip). By means of the grotesque, readers understand the repercussions of war (for example, Shadrach's hands and National Suicide Day). By means of the grotesque, readers receive a glimpse of characters' psychoses, created by insecurities that arise from a lack of cultural awareness (for example, Pauline and Pecola Breedlove). Through the author's use of the grotesque, she is able to "force" readers to comprehend actions and images often neglected or desensitized through other means of presentation. And in the process of comprehending characters' struggles and situations, which are, in many cases representative of African American struggles, readers are able to have a better understanding of institutional racism and sexism against, in particular, black women.

In order to determine potential roles, functions, and purposes of the use of the grotesque in Morrison's work, this text first identifies grotesque actions, settings and characters (particularly physical traits). In an effort to label actions and characters grotesque, a number of definitions of the grotesque—derived from art and literature—are applied. In addition to the colloquial definition of the grotesque, the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, John Ruskin, and Sigmund Freud assists in the identifications, as well as the work of more modern scholars such as Philip Thomson, Geoffrey Harpham, Bernard McElroy, Arthur Clayborough, Sherwood Anderson, Mary Russo, and Dieter Meindl. More important than listing grotesque actions, situations, and corporeality, are the analyses of these actions, situations, and physical traits, and why Morrison chose to create them. Therefore, in the following chapters, character analyses, as well as investigations into other themes, issues, and motifs are provided.

Issues, themes, and motifs, such as African myths, cosmology, slavery, folklore, stigmatization, marginalization of blacks, class, race, gender, love, self, poverty, socialization and standards of beauty, popular culture and double consciousness, are examined.

More specifically, in Chapter One: Grotesque as a Social and Political Aesthetic to Reveal Racial Self-loathing, I investigate female grotesqueness and monomania. Female grotesqueness refers to abjectness in regard to female corporeality (for example, vagina), along with the process of transforming into different stages of womanhood (for example, menstruation), something which Morrison has no problem writing. In fact, it is evident that she, like many other African American writers, does not view abjectness as something to ignore or be ashamed of. Monomania occurs in the novel because all members of the Breedlove family in *The Bluest Eye* suffer from it, particularly the mother-daughter pair of Pecola and Pauline Breedlove. Using Sherwood Anderson's definition of monomania as a basis, I talk about how these characters have adopted a single truth and turned it into an obsession. Characters' monomaniacal thoughts and behaviors make them grotesque characters because they have difficulties focusing on anything else and thus have lost touch with reality. Investigations into what causes their obsessions are provided and are where some of the aforementioned themes, issues, and motifs play a role. More specifically, among other areas, Chapter One: Grotesque as a Social and Political Aesthetic to Reveal Racial Self-loathing provides readers with a good sense of the effects of racism and white ideologies on black people.

Chapter Two: Love and Violence Motifs and the Grotesque focuses on grotesque actions performed in the name of so-called love or grotesque situations that arise because of it. Most of the grotesque actions and situations that occur throughout Morrison's works revolve around love gone awry or misplaced love. For the largest part of Chapter Two: Love and Violence Motifs and the Grotesque, I investigate the strong connection between the opposing diametric of love and violence. In particular, I categorize different types of grotesques into three categories: excessive motherlove, obsessive, "romantic" love, and perverse love. I examine instances of excessive motherlove by analyzing two cases of infanticide, one in *Sula*, the other in *Beloved*. I also investigate cases of obsessive love, focusing on three in particular: the sexual relationship between Milkman Dead and Hagar Dead in *Song of Solomon*, the competitive relationship between Christine Cosey and Heed Cosey for the deceased Bill Cosey's affection in *Love*, and the bizarre love triangle between Joe Trace, Violet Trace, and Dorcas Manfred in *Jazz*. Lastly, I explore acts of pedophilia and incest in *The Bluest Eye*, *Song of Solomon*, and *Love*.

Chapter Three: Pariahs as Literary Grotesques describes characters' physical abnormalities and disabilities, and the ways in which they apply to the grotesque. I begin the chapter by discussing why abnormalities and disabilities have a place in a discussion of the grotesque. Then, I analyze characters' disabilities and abnormalities, showing that Morrison's disabled characters are not antagonists who are morally or religiously bereft—or have some such other symbolic personality flaw. I show how Morrison's use of the grotesque bodies as part of her social and political aesthetic. Through her disabled characters, Morrison shows how African Americans

have lost their roots; how Western ideologies have negatively impacted the black community; and how racist and sexist social, cultural, educational, and political systems have prevented or reduced African Americans' opportunities and degraded their mythic knowledge, their bodies and their overall sense of value.

For instance, I primarily focus on the characters of Pilate Dead in *Song of Solomon* and Marie Therese Foucault in *Tar Baby*, describing in detail how their disabilities help to establish them as keepers of cultural knowledge that other characters lack. Moreover, I talk about Golden Gray's (*Jazz*) missing arm and how it physically represents his struggle as a mulatto. Finally, I talk in depth about many of the battered slave bodies that are present in the novel *Beloved*, particularly those of Beloved and Sethe. Hence, I investigate the functions and roles of the disabled characters and their abnormalities. I separate the self-invention strategy of creating disabled characters that fit into one of two categories: modern grotesque or postmodern grotesque. For the most part, I reveal that many of the abnormal bodies in Morrison's novels are postmodern grotesques, stating how their bodies metaphorically represent corrupt social, political, and cultural systems.

In her interview with Charles Ruas, Morrison sums up her intent of using the grotesque as a narrative strategy and identifies the purposes: "I like the danger when you're right on the edge, when at any moment you can be maudlin, saccharine, grotesque but somehow pull back from it [laughs], well, most of the time. I really want this emotional response, and I also want an intellectual response to the complex ideas there. My job is to do both at the same time, that's what a real story is" (97). In all three chapters of this thesis, I illustrate how Toni Morrison uses the grotesque as a

subversive methodology to reveal issues of race, class, and gender. Morrison creates resistant matriarchal⁵ characters like Sula in *Sula*, resilient slave and former slave females (and males) like Baby Suggs, Paul D, and Sethe in *Beloved*, defeated characters like Cholly and Pauline (*Beloved*) and Hagar (*Song of Solomon*) who are burdened by racist and sexist attitudes and actions of others toward them, wayward characters like Son (*Tar Baby*), Golden Gray (*Jazz*), and Macon Dead III/Milkman (*Song of Solomon*) who find salvation by returning to their roots, as well as independent-minded female characters like Marie Therese, True Belle, and Pilate who guide the aforementioned wayward characters to their roots. In all, I attempt to show how Morrison engages readers emotionally and intellectually by using the grotesque as a means to highlight important and complex issues.

Endnotes

¹ The chapter is located in Kayser's book, *The Grottesque in Art and Literature*.

² Read Clayborough's book for the detailed semantic development of the term.

³ Read Wolfgang Kayser's book, *The Grottesque in Art and Literature*, for a comprehensive study of the grotesque.

⁴ Phillip Thomson also discusses how others noticed the playful element of the grotesque before Ruskin. Thomson, like Kayser, acknowledges the work of Friedrich Schlegel.

⁵ My use of the term matriarch is extracted from bell hooks' book, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*. One characteristic of a matriarch is that she has control over her body in terms of sexuality and reproductive rights. The character of Sula is a perfect example of such a woman. However, hooks and Angela Davis are skeptical of the term because the term insinuates that matriarchs have complete control over their lives and that is simply not the case with black women in America or in Morrison's fiction. Eva Peace is a perfect example of this: she has power over herself and those who reside in her house, but is powerless to the racism that exists outside of her home.

CHAPTER ONE: GROTESQUE AS A SOCIAL AND POLITICAL AESTHETIC TO REVEAL RACIAL SELF-LOATHING

The use of beauty as a trope is present in all of Toni Morrison's novels. Certainly, *The Bluest Eye* is no exception. In fact, it is perhaps Morrison's prime example. The narrator of *The Bluest Eye* reveals it as such, claiming that beauty is one of the "most destructive ideas in the history of human thought" (122). This novel explores how Western standards of beauty are created and propagated—even within and among the black community. Morrison investigates how the perpetuation of beauty myths affects individuals, particularly female adolescents. Through the characters of Pecola and Pauline Breedlove readers come to understand the devastating effects that accompany the failure to succeed in achieving white standards of beauty. Furthermore, these characters, and others in the novel, are all linked because they accept others' truths as their own, thereby causing distorted self-images. Morrison shows that the "truths" are learned primarily during adolescence, the stage crucial to developing a strong sense of self and pride. To better understand the media's, community's and family's influence on the development of self, an investigation of the use of the grotesque is helpful. By scrutinizing the grotesque actions, bodies, and scenes in *The Bluest Eye*, readers are able to better understand the impact of the internalized oppression that causes Pecola's schizophrenia, Cholly's incestual desires, and Pauline's religious fanaticism.

The Female Grotesque¹ and Consequences of Becoming²

Sarah Gleeson-White's article, "Revisiting the Southern Grotesque: Mikhail Bakhtin and the Case of Carson McCullers," attempts to reclassify the southern

grotesque in a positive manner. More specifically, using theories Mikhail Bakhtin establishes in *Rabelais and His World*, she demonstrates how the grotesqueness of a changing body, a body in flux, can lead to a “kind of dynamism and active potential” (112). She applies this idea specifically to McCullers’ work, but believes it pertains to a lot of the southern grotesque.

Technically, Morrison is not a southern writer. She was neither born nor raised in the South—although her parents were. However, Morrison has much in common with southern styles of writing and the use of the Southern Grotesque and the Southern Gothic³. Her topics and themes are reminiscent of many southern writers. Consider, for example, the description Gleeson-White uses to describe McCullers’ work: “McCullers’ worlds are said to represent alienation, loneliness, a lack of human communication, and the failure of love” (109). This description could easily be one describing Morrison’s texts. In fact, these are the same themes and issues that are talked about in this chapter. Morrison also has been specifically compared to numerous southern writers, particularly William Faulkner, the subject of her master’s thesis. Determining whether Morrison is a southern writer is, however, outside the scope of this document. For the purposes of this study, we shall label Morrison as a southern writer.

To some extent, Bakhtin’s understanding of the grotesque does apply to Morrison’s fiction⁴. Simply stated, Bakhtin offers a positive outlook of the grotesque. He focuses much of his energy on the regenerative power of laughter, emphasizing the importance and purposes of the carnivalesque and “abusive” language. He also talks extensively about the body. Essentially, Bakhtin views the abjectness and the

distortions of the body as a means of defeating terror. Because bodies and bodily processes are often exaggerated and hyperbolized, they frequently create comic matter and in doing so help to lessen what could otherwise be viewed as negative. Furthermore, Bakhtin believes that in grotesque realism, the extreme emphasis on the body is to show the body as a “cosmic and at the same time an all-people’s character,” not as a sterile “isolated biological individual” (19). By presenting the body grotesquely, the transitional and cosmic nature of life can be seen: From death comes life. In essence, the corporeal provides hope, because of its ever-transforming nature.

Just as Gleeson-White uses the concept of “becoming” to analyze McCullers’s work, the idea can be used to understand the characters of Frieda and Claudia MacTeer and Pecola Breedlove in *The Bluest Eye*. As adolescents, these girls, as well as other adolescents in the story, are in a liminal state of being—they are neither adults nor children. This act of “becoming” is a major storyline in *The Bluest Eye*. Changes to the adolescents’ bodies are continuously inspected, chattered about, and documented, particularly by the adolescents themselves. Moreover, speculations about sex, body orifices, and conceiving and giving birth occur throughout the novel.

In addition to “becoming,” Mary Russo would further argue that all of the females in the novel are inherently grotesque. In her book, *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity*, Mary Russo creates an analogy between the grottoesques (i.e., the caves where the paintings were found) and the female body. Through the extension of this metaphor, she argues that the female body is grotesque, because it is a cavernous entity that secretes bodily fluids, many specific to women. Because

the female body emits “Blood, tears, vomit, excrement—all the detritus of the body,” it evokes terror and revulsion, further making it grotesque (2)⁵. Like many African American fiction writers, Toni Morrison does not shy away from the corporeally abject, particularly in reference to women. Nothing seems to be taboo in her works. Often in detailed descriptions, women in her works give birth, menstruate, urinate, defecate, have intercourse, clean up vomit and excrement, and so on. *The Bluest Eye* is no exception. In fact, the novel begins with eleven-year-old Pecola Breedlove having her first menstruation. Pecola’s menstruation is one of several “firsts” in this novel. As young adolescents, Darlene and Cholly have their first sexual experience with one another. Later, readers learn about Pauline’s first sexual encounter with Cholly when they were young. Pecola and Frieda both have their first “sexual” encounter: Frieda is “picked at” by Henry Washington (99), and Pecola is raped by her father and has her first child as a result.

Gleeson-White believes that female adolescents are even more grotesque than female adults, because they are in that “liminal state between childhood and adulthood”; furthermore, because they are not fully developed, they are neither male nor female (111). Certainly, all of the adolescents in the novel are in that “liminal state”. The MacTeer girls, Pecola Breedlove and their classmates are learning about their bodies and maturing throughout this novel. In fact, their naïveté about their bodies often produces amusing scenes. For instance, Claudia wishes to be grown up so she can be like the woman in songs who has “a thin di-i-ime to my name,” because “my man has left this town” (26). Frieda and Claudia are particularly interested in Mr. Henry (as they affectionately call him) and his “girlie magazines,” but won’t

touch them, because they have been warned against such lifestyles (26). The same thing is true of the MacTeer girls and their interaction with the “ruined” (101) prostitutes in the novel. Because of their mother’s warnings, the girls have little interaction with the prostitutes, but remain curious about the women. A number of the kids insult one another by saying that their fathers sleep naked. When Pecola has her period, the concerned young Frieda asks, “Hey. You cut yourself?” (27). Once Claudia identifies Pecola’s state of affairs, Pecola casually asks, “Am I going to die?” (28). In an effort to secretly take care of the “problem,” the three of them run into the yard where they attempt to bury the soiled underpants. Most of these scenes occur within the first third or half of the novel, immediately setting up the novel as a bildungsroman.

Because the children in *The Bluest Eye* are coming of age, they are quite impressionable and vulnerable. While the girls in McCullers’ fiction feel pressured to convert to southern belles, the black females in Morrison’s fiction feel pressured to look and act white. In “The Euro-Americanization of Race: Alien Perspective of African Americans vis-à-vis Trivialization of Skin Color,” Ronald E. Hall states that “As a function of Western civilization, race has been consistently portrayed on the basis of inferiority as if racial identity were the demarcation of different species” (119). Features of Africans and African Americans have persistently been devalued and stereotyped, the most obvious being the dark skin. In addition to skin color, features such the nose, lip, posterior, and hair have historically been compared to Euro-American features and deemed second-rate and thus considered as evidence of an inferior race. Because the label of inferiority (in part determined by corporeal

features) has been directly and indirectly communicated to Africans and African Americans for hundreds of years, the pressure to assimilate to Western standards of beauty and behavior has been a dilemma for people of color. Thus, many African Americans have purchased and continue to purchase skin products to lighten or bleach their skin and pomades, hot combs, and irons to straighten their hair, for example⁶. It is not accidental that Morrison's fiction tends to focus on females who have self-worth issues and that the females who have the hardest time with self-image and self-acceptance are those that range from childhood to their mid-20s⁷. These characters are vulnerable to the white agenda that requires blacks to hate their bodies—their very being—and to the blacks that believe the propaganda and perpetuate it. Characters such as those in *The Bluest Eye* are particularly susceptible and pliable, because they have no fixed identity. For some, like the MacTeer girls, particularly Claudia, they attain what Gleeson-White refers to as “active potential”: they have positive self-images and self-knowledge and are able to look at the outside world skeptically. For others, namely Pecola Breedlove, their outcome is dismal. Their souls and minds are crushed, necessitating retreat.

Pecola's "Truth" and Consequences

Sherwood Anderson's novel, *Winesburg, Ohio*, begins with a section titled “The Book of the Grotesques.” This section (as well as the entire novel) is commonly used as an example in literary studies of how the grotesque is used in modernist literature. Without question, *Winesburg, Ohio*, aids in the analysis of *The Bluest Eye*—as well as Morrison's other novels. In fact, *The Bluest Eye* is structurally quite similar to *Winesburg, Ohio*. Presumably, Morrison has read *Winesburg, Ohio*. This

novel was, and is, still a required or recommended book for English majors to read, so Morrison more than likely read it while working on her bachelor's or master's degree. Furthermore, like Morrison, the author is an Ohioan, and the novel is set in Ohio. Structured in separate character sketches, the novel, told by a writer-narrator, describes the grotesques in his town of Winesburg, Ohio. Each chapter in the novel focuses exclusively on an individual person in the town of Winesburg. *The Bluest Eye* is not narrated according to separate character sketches, but rather by seasons and the use of the primer as a common thread. Interestingly, however, the seasons are sectioned off according to character, too. The first half of the book (i.e., Fall and Winter) is primarily about Pecola. Then, at the beginning of the Spring section, there is a chapter talking about Pauline's life, followed by Cholly's, which is followed by Soaphead Church. The last section of the novel, Summer, is about Pecola. Therefore, like the characters in Winesburg, Ohio, the characters in Lorain, Ohio, are paraded before readers as well.

The characters in *Winesburg, Ohio*, and *The Bluest Eye* are quite similar as well. Readers recognize that Morrison's characters are as trapped and delusional as Anderson's. According to "The Book of the Grotesque," when a person takes "one of the truths to himself, called it his truth, and tried to live his life by it, he became a grotesque and the truth he embraced became a falsehood" (25). Essentially, Anderson's definition explains that when people obsess over something—even if well intentioned—they become grotesques, in other words, characters whose visions and perceptions become distorted as a result of the latching onto "truths." Like Anderson's characters, the Breedloves in *The Bluest Eye*, allow "truths" to direct and

control their lives. The Breedloves hold on to and live by “truths” to the point of monomania, affecting everything they do and say. Thus, the characters become doomed—some more so than others. When the narrator introduces the Breedlove family, readers learn that the family members are ugly, but only because of their own convictions: “You looked at them and wondered why they were so ugly; you looked closely and could not find the source. Then you realized that it came from conviction, their conviction. It was as though some mysterious all-knowing master had given each one a cloak of ugliness to wear, and they had accepted it without question” (39). Like true grotesque figures, the Breedloves accept the “truths,” even though these “truths” are falsehoods. Each of them had “rearranged lies and called it truth, seeing in the new pattern of an old idea the Revelation and the Word” (206). The all-knowing master, white superiority, is the one who reveals the Word. Insubordinates like the Breedloves, who have no power and place, do not question the ideologies inherent in the Word. Living a “peripheral existence” (17) as a child, and neglected by her parents, Pecola is especially vulnerable to the dogma. Pecola’s “truths” are that she is an inferior, ugly black child incapable of being loved and that the only way to reverse these qualities and her living situation is to become white. Even though the “truths”/convictions that the dogma creates are falsehoods, Pecola nonetheless believes in them and lives by them to the point of obsession, affecting her actions and day-to-day life.

Pecola learns the “truth” from several places. One major site where the struggle between Pecola and her environment is present and where the “truth” is instilled is at school. At a very early age, Pecola and her playmates, Claudia and

Frieda MacTeer, learn to view themselves as the Other. Presumably, their schoolbooks do not portray realistic representations of African-Americans. In fact, it is quite likely there is no representation at all. bell hooks claims that the “absence of recognition is a strategy that facilitates making a group the Other” (*Black Looks: Race and Representation* 167). Such a strategy is evident in the stories about Dick and Jane used in the novel. The absence of black characters informs black readers that they are inferior. Thus, the primers serve as a means of control, whereby the black children reading them learn to hate themselves and prompt them to participate in Western norms. Gurleen Grewal illustrates the controlling aspects of the primers in “Laundering the Head of Whitewash,” by urging readers to consider the definition of “prime.” Using *Webster’s New Universal Unabridged Dictionary* as her source, Grewal reveals that to prime is “‘to prepare or make ready for a particular purpose or operation’; ‘to cover (a surface) with a preparatory coat or color, as in painting’” (125). Implicitly, the primers ask their audiences to coat themselves with white paint, that is, white looks.

The readers/primers contain stories about perfect white children who live in perfect houses and lead very perfect and quaint lives. Obviously, neither Frieda and Claudia MacTeer nor Pecola Breedlove live such enchanted lives. For this reason, Morrison juxtaposes the Dick and Jane story throughout the novel with the lives of the little black girls to show the stark contrast between the living situations of the girls to Dick and Jane’s. To demonstrate the disparity, the primer is also used symbolically to document Pecola’s erasure. The more Pecola becomes obsessed with the “truths” and becoming white, the more the Dick and Jane story becomes

unreadable. Typographically, the story uses proper punctuation and spacing at the beginning of the story. As Pecola becomes more obsessed, the punctuation and spacing become more erratic. Finally, the story becomes incomprehensible, with run-on sentences and no punctuation, signaling Pecola's madness.

Pecola is even further ostracized at school because the teachers ignore her and the children use her as a trashcan where they "dumped on her and which she absorbed" (205). Her classmates and others perceive Pecola as an easy target, "Because they regard her body as worthless" (Mermann-Jozwiak 194). For example, on the way home from school one day, the MacTeer girls rescue Pecola from four male classmates who taunt her, saying, "Black e mo Black e mo Ya daddy sleeps nekked" (65). Like Pecola, the boys have learned to hate their blackness, and they release their frustrations on Pecola by mouthing the same insulting words and phrases that they most likely have heard others say. However, by performing a "macabre ballet around the victim, whom, for their own sake, they were prepared to sacrifice to the flaming pit," the boys are able to discharge their frustrations. Pecola, on the other hand, has been beaten—literally and figuratively—so many times by others that her only response to the taunting is to "fold into herself, like a pleated wing" (73).

Audre Lorde's distinction between pain and suffering helps to explain the differences in reactions between Pecola and the boys who verbally attack her and between Pecola and the MacTeer girls. According to Lorde's definitions, Pecola is suffering, while the others are experiencing pain. Lorde explains that pain is an event that causes hurt, but is "recognized, named, and then used in some way in order for the experience to change, to be transformed into something else—strength or

knowledge or action”; suffering, on the other hand, is “unscrutinized and unmetabolized pain” (171). To some extent, the boys are suffering, because they have not identified the source of their hurt or transformed it into something positive. However, they have *transferred* their suffering to Pecola. In this manner, they have eased their suffering—at least for a few moments.

The boys are not as successful as Claudia MacTeer, though. Claudia metabolizes the pain and therefore is able to clearly recognize and name the source of pain: the “*Thing* to fear was the *Thing* that made *her* beautiful ” (74). Claudia identifies that the *Thing* is Western beauty standards that make her not as prized and valued as white children and mulatto children like Maureen Peal (i.e., the *her* in the quote). As the primary narrator, nine-year-old Claudia is one several feminist voices of resistance in the novel and serves as the foil to Pecola and the other young girls who idolize Shirley Temple. In spite of her young age, Claudia comes to the realization that because she is black and female, she will not be as valued as a black girl—if valued at all. Claudia makes this clear when she declares to Pecola and Frieda that she has “unsullied hatred” for Shirley Temple (19). Interestingly, it seems that Claudia believes that it is because of her age that she recognizes the *Thing*: “...I had not yet arrived at the turning point in the development of my psyche which would allow me to love her [Shirley Temple]” (19). But it seems as if Claudia is not a good judge of herself; rather, she seems very mature and prodigious. Claudia’s maturity is initially detectable in her response to baby dolls. She sees no point in playing with anything that is not a real human her “own age and size” and furthermore, she has no desire to be a mother. Moreover, unlike almost all of the characters in the novel,

Claudia rejects consumerism, preferring instead connections to human beings: “I did not want to have anything to *own*, or to *possess* any object (my emphasis). I wanted to rather feel something” (21). And what Claudia prefers to have on Christmas day that would enable her to feel (as opposed to a doll) is to sit in Big Mama’s lap listening to Big Papa play the violin only for her. In essence, she rejects baby dolls, tea parties, dresses, and other commodities as sociological tools to prepare her to be a wife and mother, preferring instead to have heartfelt connections with friends and family.

Unlike Claudia and the boys, Pecola is absolutely suffering. Raised by parents who despise and neglect her, and a community complicit in her “unbeing” (Afterword 215), Pecola idolizes the *Thing*, the *Thing* that creates her grotesqueness. The symbolic wing gesture signals early in the novel that Pecola Breedlove is a defeated character, a character whose outcome is going to be grim. Pecola receives the educational lesson that she is deficient primarily from the media created and sustained by the *Thing*, the “all-knowing master” (38). White culture spreads its hegemony through popular culture and the media. In a conversation, Toni Morrison stated that much of the writing in *The Bluest Eye* is about the dangers of consumerism (Baker-Putt). The media encourage people to consume what is being portrayed, even if the information is situated in unreality and subjugates the consumers. In *The Bluest Eye*, material goods, such as primers, baby dolls, candies, movie advertisements, movies, and movie tie-ins, serve as “national discourse[s] of whiteness” (McKittrick 133). The products serve to uphold the social order by implicitly teaching black consumers that only whiteness is valued and revered. Not only do the products

instruct black consumers to despise themselves, they encourage decadence. hooks believes that “As long as black folks are taught that the only way we can gain any degree of economic self-sufficiency or be materially privileged is by first rejecting blackness, our history and culture, then there will always be a crisis in black identity” (*Black Looks* 18). Both Morrison and hooks seem to have similar political agendas: to show the connection between consumerism and decadence, and how the two aid in the erasure of the black culture, community and self.

Through the use of the grotesque, Morrison is able to show the connection between consumerism and decadence. McElroy argues that in modern fiction, the art of decadence and the grotesque “have long been at home in each other’s company” (129). McElroy believes decadence has one or more of certain attributes: “an erosion of previously upheld personal and communal values; a dwindling of energy, or of the will to survive, or of the ability to create; a growing unconcern with the future and concentration on the present moment; and spreading of nihilism or cynicism” (129-130). Many writers employ the use of the grotesque because they are fearful of modernistic ways of living and how these ways cause decadence. Therefore, the grotesque exposes what they perceive as some sort of decadence occurring in society. In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison warns readers that consumerism, capitalism, and popular culture are acts of decadence or causes of decadent behavior.

A perfect example of material goods that stultifies creativity and energy, erodes personal and communal values, and causes nihilistic attitudes are baby dolls. As an “educational” tool, baby dolls are used to socialize little girls to become mothers, but inadvertently they also cause self-hatred. Claudia says that even though

she hated receiving the blue-eyed baby dolls for Christmas, she knew what was expected of her: “I learned quickly, however, what I was expected do with the doll: rock it, fabricate storied situations around it, even sleep with it” (20). Given that this is the only Christmas present the MacTeer girls receive, and the given expectations requested of it, there is little room for creative play. Perhaps more important, the other implicit message received from the dolls is that the dolls are more precious than their owners, because the dolls are white and pretty. Claudia declares that the recipients of the dolls have to prove to their parents that they are even worthy of owning them. The parents’ demand that children prove their worthiness is, of course, proof of how pervasive Western norms have infiltrated the black community, demonstrating eroding communal values. The act of passing down self-loathing from generation to generation erodes communal values, because a mother’s role in the black community is to teach love and self-acceptance to her children.

Audre Lorde recalls growing up in the late 30s and early 40s (the time setting for *The Bluest Eye*) when one’s mother was vital to instilling a sense of pride, especially for a young black girl. She comments in *Sister Outsider* that a mother’s love was particularly important to black girls because they had no support from anyone else:

Little Black girls, tutored by hate into wanting to become anything else. We cut our eyes at sister because she can only reflect what everybody else except momma seemed to know—that we were hateful, or ugly, or worthless, but certainly unblessed. We were not

boys and we were not white, so we counted for less than nothing,
except to our mommas. (159)

Unfortunately, like their parents, the doll owners will learn to hate themselves. Lorde further comments that black people have to love themselves before they can love others (174). Because the givers of the dolls do not love themselves, they pass this feeling onto their children and, perhaps unknowingly, encourage negating blackness through the use of the dolls. Even girls like Claudia, who are critical, will learn to worship the “blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll,” even if they know it is “adjustment without improvement” (23). Like the Dick and Jane primers, the baby dolls serve the purpose of creating racial self-loathing.

Another product that conveys Western cultural norms, including standards of beauty, is film. In her article, “Re-membering the Body: Body Politics in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*,” Elisabeth Mermann-Jozwiak states that the “pervasiveness of images projecting physical perfection reflects the subtle workings of ideology: as we learn this language, we become part of the social order” (193). Pecola is bombarded with images whereby she learns that as long as she is black, she is not entitled to be beautiful, to be loved, or to rise up out of poverty. The “subtle workings of ideology” do not present themselves more clearly than in film, the main media outlet that Morrison has chosen to expose in *The Bluest Eye* as a major culprit in upholding the social order. Film reinforces to Pecola the conviction that she is ugly, because she has “support for it leaning at them from every billboard, every movie, every glance” (39). For example, one day as Pecola, the MacTeer girls, and Maureen Peal walk home from school, they pass the Dreamland Theater seeing the

faces of Betty Grable and Hedy Lamarr looming at them on an advertisement/billboard. Because Pecola and the MacTeer girls do not reflect Western standards of beauty, the name of the theater is a witticism pointing out that only in the girls' dreams could they look like Grable and Lamarr or have the lifestyle they lead. The faces looking at the impressionable children are glamorous women valorized primarily because of their dashing looks. The girls have learned via these visible icons and others that "One's visibility depends upon one's beauty" (Walther 777).

The reality is that these girls will never attain the desired looks to be seen on a large scale. In fact, the girls are often victims of "mistaken identities" in their own community. When Henry, the MacTeers' boarder, sees the girls, he always greets them by calling them Greta Garbo and Ginger Rogers or by some such movie star's name. In this respect, Henry negates who the girls are. Furthermore, immediately after greeting the girls, he often gives them goods or money. In her article, " 'Black and 'Cause I'm Black I'm Blue': Transverse Racial Geographies in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*," Katherine McKittrick claims that "By moving through scales—from the nation to the home and the body, for example—material goods transform discourses such as whiteness and belonging into a kind of currency" (130). Henry achieves moving through the scales by offering the MacTeer girls gifts. Henry perpetuates the national discourses of whiteness in the home of the MacTeers and onto their bodies (and indirectly into their bodies, because the girls buy candy with the money) by trying to win their favor through "compliments" and material goods. Several types of currency are being exchanged between Henry and the girls.

Literally, Henry gives the girls money and products. Through the use of money and other material goods, the girls are tricked into trusting Henry—until he molests Frieda. The other type of currency is emotional and mental currency. Not only does Henry mislead the girls about his intentions and attitudes, but the products do also. As discourses of whiteness, the goods trick the girls into believing that their status as poor, black girls is not important, because they are able to consume the same goods as white children. Furthermore, Henry's message to the girls—which is really the national discourse—is that they are not worthy of his attention or gifts, but the movie stars are. The money and gifts, therefore, are given to Greta Garbo and Ginger Rogers, not Claudia and Frieda MacTeer.

Desperately wanting to become visible and worthy, many characters in this novel feel compelled to imitate actresses' looks⁸. Pecola, however, does not want to merely imitate the beauties she sees on advertisements; she literally wants *to be* one of the Shirley Temples of the world. While staying at the MacTeer home, Pecola drinks cups of milk, not because she is thirsty, but because she wants to drink out of the Shirley Temple cup. She wants not to consume what is inside, but Temple herself. Pecola craves the attention that Shirley Temple's "cu-ute"ness demands (19). In her mind, if she could become Shirley Temple, her parents might love her, her teachers and classmates might pay attention to her and perhaps like her, and people might *see* her.

Pecola's presence in *The Bluest Eye* really is her absence. Malin LaVon Walther asserts that "Pecola's ugliness, defined visually by white standards, forces her into a position of invisibility and absence, which in turn becomes her only mode

of presence” (777). Very few people in the novel see Pecola. In fact, they spend much of their time not looking at her. At one point in the novel, Mrs. MacTeer even refers to Pecola as *something*, not someone (24). Perhaps this is because Pecola hides behind her ugliness, “peeping out from behind the shroud very seldom, and then only to yearn for the return of her mask” (39). John Bishop argues that even Pecola’s name is a phonic play on the fact that she is absent. At one point, Maureen Peal inquires if Pecola is named after the character in *Imitation of Life*. Bishop points out that the main character’s name in the film is Peola, not Pecola. Bishop shows that the misnaming is crucial to understanding characters’ reactions to Pecola. He claims that people cannot see Pecola because only the “pretty, pale Peola [in *Imitation of Life*] is deemed worthy of notice—they do not *c* the real girl” (254). One could further argue that the title of the film, *Imitation of Life*, is a pun, emphasizing that Pecola unsuccessfully attempts to be/imitate others, yet remains invisible throughout the novel.

Another instance where Pecola’s presence is absence is when she goes to Mr. Yacobowski’s store to purchase Mary Jane candies. Mr. Yacobowski cannot, does not, and will not, look at Pecola, because, after all, the narrator asks rhetorically, “How can a ...white immigrant [with] his mind honed on the doe-eyed Virgin Mary... *see* a little black girl?” (48). Instead, his eyes “hesitate, and hover,” because he does not want to “waste the effort of a glance” on a poor, inconsequential, little black girl (48). Unfortunately, Pecola knows this look well, the look of “distaste” for “blackness” that she has seen “lurking in the eyes of white people” (49): “He does not

see her, because for him there is nothing to see,” which is why, as Bishop points out, the emphasis on “see” is stressed in the question (48).

Pecola’s response to Mr. Yacobowski’s treatment is further evidence of her suffering. As she leaves his store, Pecola demonizes the dandelions that she, just a few moments earlier, deemed pretty: “Dandelions. A dart of affection leaps out from her to them. But they do not look at her and do not send love back. They *are* ugly. They *are* weeds” (50). Pecola readily accepts Mr. Yacobowski’s stance that she is not visible, not worth his time. To rid herself of the “inexplicable shame,” Pecola renders the dandelions—and by extension herself—ugly. Unlike Claudia, Pecola cannot metabolize the pain, name it, and learn from it. Because her “anger will not hold,” despite the “tears [that] come,” Pecola’s only defense is to eat the Mary Janes, “for whom a candy is *named*” (my emphasis) and from which she receives “nine lovely orgasms” (50). Just as Hedy Lamarr and Betty Grable are visible, because they are beautiful, so too, is Mary Jane, whose picture is printed on the candy wrapper. Like Shirley Temple, Mary Jane is the epitome of beauty. She has beautiful white skin, playful hair, and blue eyes. Pecola is mostly mesmerized by Mary Jane’s eyes and believes that by attaining them, she will be seen by those like Mr. Yacobowski: “To eat the candy is somehow to eat the eyes, eat Mary Jane. Love Mary Jane. Be Mary Jane” (50).

Several uses of the grotesque are applicable to this scene where Pecola eats the Mary Janes. To John Ruskin, the Victorian critic credited with fully recognizing and developing the concept of the grotesque, the grotesque has to be both sportive (ludicrous) and terrible (fearful) (126-127). This scene is, in many ways, quite

playful and innocent. Simply, Pecola strolls to the store with her savings to purchase candies. She then savors the candies rather than gobbling them. She is merely enjoying one of the few pleasures afforded her. However, this scene is also terribly sadistic. Metaphorically, Mary Jane is the candy, which Pecola cannibalistically eats. Cannibalism is also viewed as a grotesque act. Cannibalism is listed in McElroy's continuum of the grotesque as one that is "so bizarre... that human dignity is obliterated" (12). Pecola's consumption of the candies is also terrible, because it can easily be read as a sexual act performed by a child onto a child. Pecola *eats* Mary Jane and, as a result, has orgasms. In many ways, Pecola's psyche resembles cannibalistic serial killers, like Jeffrey Dahmer, who eat their victims to become part of them.

Pecola, believing in the "b[li]nding conviction that only a miracle" would enable people to *c/see* her, prays every night to receive baby blue eyes like Mary Jane's and Shirley Temple's. However, the concept of Pecola having blue eyes is grotesque. In its most colloquial sense, the term "grotesque" refers to something monstrous, bizarre, shocking, or fantastic. Certainly, there are African-Americans who via miscegenation, whether forced or voluntary, have green, or, in some cases, blue eyes. However, the notion that the dark-skinned girl with distinctly African features could have blue eyes is quite fantastic. If blue eyes were bestowed on Pecola, as she thinks they are toward the end of the novel, she would be hideous looking. Morrison agrees. In the Afterword of *The Bluest Eye* and in her interview with Charles Ruas, Morrison talks about the impetus for writing the novel and explains that she had a friend who wished for blue eyes. While telling the story,

Morrison says she remembers imagining her young friend having blue eyes and being “violently repelled” by the image and thinking “how awful it would be if she had gotten her prayer” (Afterword 209; Ruas 95). Because Morrison was so appalled and shocked by the request, especially from someone she considered beautiful, instead of being understanding, she “ ‘got mad’ ” at her friend⁹.

Pecola having blue eyes is also uncanny. In his investigation of how the term “grotesque” has been used historically and in more recent applications, McElroy talks about Freud’s development of the term “uncanny” and how it applies to situations that invoke a special kind of fear, “the eerie, unsettled feeling, the combination of fascination and revulsion so difficult to define but so unmistakable in our felt response to certain situations” (3). Readers’ “felt response” to Pecola having blue eyes is a “combination of fascination and revulsion.” Through Morrison’s vivid and powerful language and the images she creates, we are able to see Pecola wishing to disappear, Pecola praying for blue eyes, and finally, Pecola’s two selves talking about her blue eyes. Moreover, we are curious about Pecola’s wishes, desires, and downfall. Like Morrison as a child, readers are curious about the concept of Pecola having blue eyes, and are easily able to picture it, but then are repulsed by it. McElroy argues, however, that not everything that is uncanny is necessarily grotesque; he believes that the key to making something grotesque is the role physical debasement plays, a concept Ruskin also talks about (6). Pecola’s praying for blue eyes is shocking because she physically humiliates and degrades herself by wishing for blue eyes. Because Pecola is assailed by messages that her appearance is evidence of inferiority, she is willing to “mutilate” herself in an effort to

reverse/correct her inferior status. Recognizing Pecola's desperation, readers are easily able to picture Pecola urgently praying for and "receiving" blue eyes.

The "reception" of blue eyes causes Pecola to further spiral into madness because she creates a false self. Yet, it is this madness that apparently saves her. In "The Laugh of the Medusa," Helene Cixous says that "By writing her self, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display -- the ailing or dead figure, which so often turns out to be the nasty companion, the cause and location of inhibitions" (284). The stranger on display is Pecola's real self, the dead figure, who inhibits her from being white, and beautiful, and loved. In an effort for Pecola's real self to remain a mystery, Pecola creates a false self. Consider a conversation Pecola has with herself:

You are my very best friend. Why didn't I know you before?

You didn't need me before.

Didn't need you?

I mean. . . you were so unhappy before. I guess you didn't notice me before. (196)

Once Pecola's other self materializes, her suffering ends. She finally has a friend—herself. Unfortunately, as Morrison states in the Afterword, Pecola is not "seen by herself until she hallucinates a self" (215). The self could not be discovered in reality because the outside gaze damns Pecola. Pecola is not able to escape her life through appropriation but rather madness. The madness, however, enables Pecola's personal suffering to end. Keith E. Byerman states in "Intense Behaviors: The Use of the

Grotesque in *The Bluest Eye* and *Eva's Man*,” that Pecola’s schizophrenia is a realm where “suffering will seldom come into her consciousness” (451). Pecola’s suffering is over because the madness enables her to believe she has blue eyes. Her purpose and focus are now to determine if she has the bluest eyes, indicating that she will spiral into further madness and continue to hear the “beat of a drummer so distant only she could hear” (204).

The concept of madness, itself, is often considered grotesque, especially in modern usages. Madness classifies as a decadent behavior. As aforementioned, one of the attributes of decadence is a lack of energy and will to survive. Furthermore, madness is considered grotesque because those who are mad are situated somewhere between reality and unreality. Short of committing suicide, madness enables people to revert to other consciousnesses, because they have a lack of energy and will to survive. McElroy states that, “For the modern, the grotesque is by nature something exceptional, something set apart or aberrant, and in its most extreme forms, situated in the realm of fantasy, dream, or hallucination—in the realm, that is, of unreality” (6). In her schizophrenic state, Pecola most definitely is situated in unreality. She has conversations with herself and is often seen roaming the streets among the garbage. By the end of the novel, Pecola further devolves by morphing into a bird. Initially, Pecola “fold[ed] into herself, like a pleated wing” (7). By the novel’s end, Pecola is described as “Elbows bent, hands on shoulders, she flailed her arms like a bird in an eternal, *grotesquely* [my emphasis] futile effort to fly. Beating the air, a winged but grounded bird, intent on the blue void it could not reach . . .”¹⁰ (204). Because Pecola now lives in a different realm, Claudia and the others disregard her.

At the end of the novel, Claudia says that Pecola's madness "protected her from us simply because it bored us in the end" (206). Sadly, Pecola remains rejected and isolated, even by the few who cared about her, because she lives in a world they cannot comprehend.

However, Pecola seemingly saves their worlds before and while retreating to her own. Several scholars have made brief references to Pecola as a Christ-like figure. For example, in *A Study of the Literary Grotesque and Motherhood: The Southern Woman's Search for Love*, Lori Ann Stephens states that Pecola's annihilation of the self is the "nails that permanently affix the [sic] Pecola Breedlove to her cross" (87). She further states that by the novel's end, Pecola Breedlove "climbs onto the sacrificial cross" (91). Byerman also argues that Pecola is a grotesque Messiah¹¹: Pecola is "sacrificed so that others may live with the perversions of society. She is a grotesque within a grotesque" (452). However, the community of Lorain, Ohio, is blinded to their perversity. As an adult narrator recollecting Pecola's story, Claudia recognizes how the community encouraged and enabled Pecola to become a sacrificial lamb. At the end of the novel, Claudia says, "We honed our egos on her, padded our characters with her frailty, and yawned in the fantasy of our strength" (205). As Claudia says, community members were able to strengthen themselves by criticizing Pecola. The best example of this in the novel is when the old women in the community are gossiping about Pecola's pregnancy. Positioned in a terrible situation, Pecola believes she cannot escape, has been raped by her father (and is now pregnant with his child), and has no family support or guidance. However, the women do not have any sympathy for her or offer to help in any way.

In fact, they concentrate on two main things in their conversation—Pecola’s ugliness and her potential of “carry[ing] some of the blame” (189). These focal points indicate that the community was able to bolster their own selfhood by passing judgment on Pecola instead of themselves. The community’s strength is a fantasy, though. Claudia tells readers that community members were not “strong,” but “aggressive,” and not “free” but “merely licensed” (205). Ironically, Pecola’s “death” “saves” community members’ self images, but they are the ones who have to “hid[e] like thieves from life” (205). Pecola, on the other hand, is free in her own world—even if that world is a demented one.

Pauline’s “Truth” and Consequences

Like Pecola, Pauline learns the “truth” at a fairly young age. Pauline’s primary teacher is film. The movie theater is one of the sites where Pauline receives the education that she is ugly, unlovable and unworthy, the same “truths” that Pecola discovers. In this manner and in many others, Pecola and Pauline are parallel characters. Both females have internalized that their bodies are valueless. Like Pecola, Pauline focuses on one major body part as the site of her problems: “The easiest thing to do would be to build a case out of her foot. That is what she did” (110). Pauline believes that because she has a damaged foot that drags as she walks, it is the cause of her feelings of “separateness and unworthiness” (111). Like the young girls in the novel, Pauline recognizes the message demonstrated by the media that beauty equals visibility. With a damaged foot, she is not beautiful and, thus, not visible—just like Pecola. Miles points out that one of the reasons women are grotesque is that the media focuses on individualized body parts, causing women to

do the same: “women are encouraged to think of themselves as parts that must be evaluated, judged, and *altered* separately” (my emphasis; 103). Both Pecola and Pauline devote much time attempting to alter their body parts. The movies enable Pauline to escape her invisibility and disability because she can romanticize about becoming healed and live vicariously through those who become healed in the movies: “There the flawed became whole, the blind sighted, and the lame and halt threw away their crutches” (122). The romantic notions further Pauline’s self-hatred, though, because she never becomes healed herself. She eventually learns to despise her entire body, not just her foot.

The main reason Pauline retreats to the movie theater is because she has no sense of culture or community. In her article, “*The Bluest Eye: Notes on History, Community, and Black Female Subjectivity*,” Jane Kuenz says that “blacks up north who feel isolated from their past and alienated in their present are more likely to look elsewhere for self-affirming context¹²” (424). In her interview with Carolyn Denard, Morrison affirms this point: “Some of the fault of the urban areas, it seems to me, was it took a longer time to become part of that community” (3). Frequently in her novels, Morrison demonstrates the consequences of communities falling apart or the sense of community lost. By moving north, Pauline has lost her community and sense of place and being. Upon moving north, Pauline says, “It was hard to get to know folks up here, and I missed my people” (117). Pauline soon finds that the demographics and attitudes in the North are much different, too. There are many more white people and fewer black people. Pauline claims many of the black people were also “Dicty-like. No better than whites for meanness.” (117). The few black

women who are in Pauline's town make fun of Pauline's countrified black looks: hair not straightened, no makeup or misapplied makeup, and wearing of plain clothing and no high heels. With no one to interact with other than her husband Cholly, it is Pauline's "lonest time of my life" (117). But eventually Cholly stops paying attention to Pauline, frequently leaving to hang out with his friends (118).

Because Pauline has no sense of connection, she seeks it elsewhere. The movie theater is where Pauline looks for a "self-affirming context" in an attempt to escape her loneliness. Her escape mechanism quickly becomes addictive, though: Pauline spends practically every day of a two-year time span in the movie theater. Patricia Hill Collins says that many black female authors create black female characters that attempt to escape their lives through addictive behaviors (84-85). hooks explains the impetus for addictive behaviors: "Since black people, especially the underclass, are bombarded by messages that we have no value, are worthless, it is no wonder that we fall prey to nihilistic despair or forms of addiction that provide momentary escape, illusions of grandeur, and temporary freedom from the pain of facing reality" (*Black Looks* 19). Ironically, Pauline's comforter is also her tormentor.

Like Frieda, Pecola, Maureen Peal and others, Pauline worships iconic actresses and judges her beauty and others' looks against the standards of the actresses. Like Pecola, Pauline "learned all there was to love and all there was to hate" about others and herself (122). The hate includes hating herself, her family, and the black community, because none of them can achieve the beauty ideal. On the "scale[s] of absolute beauty" which Pauline learns from her "education in the

movies,” she soon discovers that she and her family fail miserably. The movies often make “looking at Cholly hard” (123) for Pauline, because, among other reasons, she is able to “look at a face and...assign it some category in the scale of beauty” (122). Like herself, Cholly is assigned to the “ugly” category. Pauline even affirms that her own daughter is ugly. Upon seeing Pecola for the first time after giving birth to her, Pauline declares, “Head full of pretty hair, but Lord she was ugly” (126). The adage of a baby having a face only a mother can love does not even apply. After giving birth to Pecola, Pauline describes Pecola in grotesque terms, saying she looks like “A cross between a puppy and a dying man” (126). Hence, the messages received from the movies are so influential that Pauline despises her offspring. Thomas H. Fick and Eva Gold argue that Pauline’s womb is not even real to her, because she is really a “surrogate [mother] of paternalistic white culture” (59). Pauline is so obsessed with white culture that she can easily separate herself from her role as a mother, making it easier for her to criticize Pecola just after giving birth to her.

Not only is Pauline a surrogate of white culture, she is the surrogate mother of the little white Fisher girl. With her, Pauline perfects the lessons that the fake dolls teach Frieda and the other girls. The Fisher girl is Pauline’s baby doll. Living vicariously through the Fishers for whom she works, Pauline can create fictitious stories about her own life. In the process of taking care of the Fishers, Pauline can pretend that their lives and lifestyle are hers. Therefore, she relishes their home and material possessions. She spends hours each day organizing the Fishers’ goods, meticulously placing each item. The organizational behaviors learned in her childhood home take place not in her adult home, but in the Fisher household, the

place where Pauline would rather be, where she can fulfill her need to be surrounded by white culture.

Like many of the other females in the novel, Pauline has also subconsciously learned that the only way to regain worth and attention is to imitate who and what she sees on the big screen. Pauline attempts to look like Jean Harlow, but falls short. In fact, this attempt and failure produce one of the most grotesque scenes in the novel. In a conversation I had with Toni Morrison, she claims that her intention with the following scene was not to be grotesque, but in hindsight agrees that it is. After seeing Jean Harlow on screen and in a magazine, Pauline copies Harlow's hairstyle and goes to the movies sporting it. After the film ends, Pauline decides to see it again and buy more candy. While watching the movie for the second time while eating candy, Pauline realizes that one of her teeth has fallen out. Pauline recounts the experience: "There I was, five months pregnant, trying to look like Jean Harlow, and a front tooth gone" (123).

This scene is the epitome of Ruskin's definition of the grotesque. On the one hand, Pauline's situation is tragic. She is in the movie theater, because she has no friends and family. Even though she is pregnant, her husband ignores her. She is so lonely that she is watching the same movie for a second time. Pauline literally fills herself with sweets in an effort to become metaphorically full and whole. She is so desperate for attention that she imitates someone else's hairstyle, hoping people will notice and think well of her. On the other hand, her situation is pathetically funny. She is a pathetic character whose situation just keeps getting worse, and she is oblivious to it. Pauline is so entranced by the images she sees in the movies that she

does not realize her teeth are rotting. Pauline is what hooks refers to as “cinematically ‘gaslighted’” (“The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators” 203). Pauline is one of many black women who do not recognize the racist actions and ideologies occurring in films. Instead, she assumes a “posture of subordination” and submits to the “cinema’s capacity to seduce and betray”¹³ (203). Pauline does not have what hooks refers to as the oppositional gaze, that is, looking in a resistant way (“The Oppositional Gaze” 199). Even after Pauline’s tooth falls out, she continues to go to movies for a while longer. She does not view the movies as betraying her, but rather her body, which is why she resigns to wearing plaits again, while continuing to go to the movies. The scene is also comic because Pauline looks absolutely nothing like Jean Harlow. Aside from the obvious fact that she is black and her hair is not white blond, Pauline’s hairstyle does not really resemble Harlow’s; she is pregnant; and her teeth are falling out. Ironically, the sweets do not make Pauline whole. Rather, they aid in the destruction of her teeth, the symbolization of Pauline’s inner decay (Grewal 125).

Even though the tooth incident is perhaps the most specifically grotesque scene, more important is the state of grotesqueness that occurs to readers while reading about Pauline. The character of Pauline causes two polar reactions in readers: repulsion and attraction. Again and again, Pauline performs actions toward her family and herself that are repulsive. We hate her for beating Pecola. We hate her for neglecting Pecola. We hate her for not protecting Pecola from repeated sexual assaults by Cholly. We hate her because she loves the Fishers more than her own family. However, we are also attracted to Pauline. We are attracted to discovering

why Pauline does and says the things she does. By Morrison revealing the proverbial two sides to every coin, readers become aware of the suffering that Pauline has endured, thus creating sympathy for her. She has lived her entire life in poverty. She is perpetually lonely, with no friends or family in the North, and has an alcoholic husband. Other black women ostracize her. She is forced to work because her husband will not. While giving birth to Pecola, she is referred to by doctors as a horse. Throughout *The Bluest Eye*, readers come to understand that Pauline has been systematically subjugated by white society. Racist, classist, and sexist attitudes and actions have repeatedly confronted Pauline, which is why she lives in poverty, can only get a job servicing white people, and is not loved or respected by Cholly. In *Sisters of the Yam: Black Women and Self-Recovery*, bell hooks argues, “Systems of domination exploit folks best when they deprive us of our capacity to experience our own agency and alter our ability to care and to love ourselves and others” (130-131). Because Pauline has internalized the systematic hatred conveyed to her, she does not have any agency and does not love herself or others. hooks believes the lack of agency and caring is a common occurrence among black people: “Given the politics of black life in this white supremacist society it makes sense that internalized racism and self-hate stand in the way of love” (*Sisters of the Yam* 130). Like Pecola and a number of others, Pauline is not able to metabolize the pain; she is suffering. Pauline’s self-hate does “stand in the way of love.” Because Pauline does not love herself, she cannot love her family. Lorde says that black women have to “learn to love yourself before you can love” others (174). Upon finding out why Pauline

cannot love herself, readers are able to sympathize with Pauline, despite her negative and destructive actions.

The same feelings of repulsion and sympathy are stimulated when reading about Cholly Breedlove. His rape of Pecola is a despicable act that many readers cannot even begin to fathom. For others, though, they understand what causes Cholly to rape his child. While readers do not excuse his actions, they understand that, like Pauline, Cholly has a severe distortion of love and sex. Abandoned by both his parents (dismissed twice by his father), Cholly does not understand what it means to love or know how to be a parent. He does not know how to show his love toward Pecola or Sammy; therefore, he believes it is easier to ignore them.

Cholly is also confused about sex. A pair of white men essentially “rape” Cholly when he is an adolescent. During his first sexual encounter, several white hunters spot Cholly having sex with Darlene in the field. The men then force Cholly to continue while they watch. Cholly feels emasculated, but he cannot take his anger out on the white men. Instead, he directs it toward Darlene.

Until he meets Pauline, sex causes hatred or revulsion to arise in Cholly. For a little while at least, he and Pauline are in love and have meaningful and earnest sex. Their relationship eventually goes sour. Even though he does not show it, Cholly apparently misses his relationship with Pauline, which is one of the reasons why he rapes Pecola. Triggered by Pecola scratching her foot—the same body part Cholly immediately began kissing upon meeting Pauline—Cholly is reminded of Pauline, while also feeling sorry for his daughter who is so sad and forlorn. Not knowing how to help his daughter, while also being reminded of his relationship with Pauline,

Cholly does what seems natural to him—have sex with Pecola. In addition to his ineptitude as a father, Cholly is in a state of grotesqueness himself, so he does not know how to properly act toward Pecola. Cholly's emotions toward Pecola are often incongruous and constantly change. While Pecola is washing dishes (i.e. the rape scene), Cholly “became aware that he was uncomfortable; next he felt the discomfort dissolve into pleasure. The sequence of his emotions was revulsion, guilt, pity, then love. His revulsion was a reaction to her young, helpless, hopeless, presence” (161). The pinnacle of his state of grotesqueness is when he feels “He wanted to break her neck—but tenderly” (161). His response to Pecola is the same as someone experiencing something grotesque: He does not know whether to comfort and love her or be repulsed by her.

Because readers recognize Cholly's issues of abandonment, rape, failure as a parent, and loneliness, we are sympathetic to him, his problems, and his “solutions”. Like our revelations into Pauline's life, we are able to see Cholly as a victim who becomes a victimizer. The process of trying to understand Cholly's repulsive actions positions readers in a state of grotesqueness.

Pauline, however, does not have any compassion toward Cholly. She is relieved that Cholly is just as incompetent as a parent. Cholly enables Pauline to be a grotesque Messiah, a position she willingly and knowingly serves. Quite frequently and in public, Pauline “bore him [Cholly] like a crown of thorns, and her children like a cross” (127). After failing to find comfort in her home, Cholly, the children, and movies, Pauline focuses on religion, which enables her to play a martyr. By the novel's end, Pauline is quite fanatical about religion. By playing a martyr, Pauline is

able to justify her behaviors and those of her family. She clearly cannot stop Cholly from drinking, carousing, and being shiftless. Instead, like the gossiping women talking about Pecola, she uses Cholly's deficiencies and sins to boost her own ego and mask her own sins. Pauline "was not interested in Christ the Redeemer, but rather Christ the Judge" (42). Rather than looking to Christ to redeem herself and her family members, Pauline is concerned with Christ punishing others, namely Cholly. By focusing on Christ the punisher and Cholly's sinning, Pauline is able to avoid focusing on her own sins and deficiencies, such as neglecting her children, her husband, her home and herself. She is able to divert her shortcomings and sins onto Cholly, which is why Pauline is often "heard discoursing with Jesus about Cholly, pleading with Him to help her 'strike the bastard down from his pea-knuckle of pride'" (42).

Similarly, when Pauline participates in religious activities, beliefs, and functions, she is able to justify the "abandonment" of her children, home and self. Hill Collins writes that black women writers often create black female characters that use excessive religion in an effort to escape harsh realities of female black life (83-84). Hill Collins cites Pauline as one of these characters and says that religion permits Pauline to ignore Pecola (84). Rather than being with her children, she spends countless hours praying for God's help to damn Cholly. Presumably, in addition to going to church, Pauline spends a lot of time serving on the Stewardess Board and being part of the Ladies Circle. Of course, Pauline's participation in the church and its activities is not altruistic. She is able to further her own victim status at the events. For example, at one church meeting, she "moaned and sighed over

Cholly's ways, and hoped God would help her keep the children from the sins of the father" (126). By blaming Cholly for the children's wayward actions, personal problems, and personality deficiencies, Pauline is able to escape responsibility and blame by "fulfilling a mother's role conscientiously when she pointed out their father's faults" (128). In addition to escaping blame, Pauline's martyr status earns her sympathy from the church community.

McElroy claims that the grotesque "distorts or exaggerates the surface of reality in order to tell a qualitative truth about it" (5). While Morrison might argue she does not distort or exaggerate, the point of Pecola's and Pauline's stories is to situate them as a backdrop of reality. Mother and daughter are representative of black females who feel pressured to loathe themselves, to assimilate—to drive nails into their crosses. The use of the grotesque in *The Bluest Eye* emotionally charges readers to understand the impact of internalized oppression, oppression so great that a little girl and her mother desperately want to be other people, namely white movie stars. As a preface to Pecola's story, the narrator says that since "why is difficult to handle, one must take refuge in how" (6). She then proceeds to tell us *how* Pecola and Pauline learn the "truth" and what happens as a result. However, the grotesque draws attention to the "why" and "how." By creating grotesques who perform grotesque actions, Morrison is able to "remove [the audience's] cataracts," (qtd. in Bakerman 37) enabling us to see both Pauline and Pecola as victims. To us, neither Pauline nor Pecola is invisible; we see them clearly and, by seeing them, we are able to remove our cataracts to recognize the debilitating effects of racial self-loathing.

Endnotes

¹ This is a portion of the title of Mary Russo's book, *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity*, published in New York in 1994 by Routledge.

² In the process of relaying Bakhtin's view of the body, Sarah Gleeson-White says that the body is "always in a state of becoming." More than likely, Gleeson-White extracted this concept from Bakhtin: "The grotesque image reflects a phenomenon in transformation, an as yet unfinished metamorphosis, of death and birth, growth and *becoming*" (my emphasis; 24).

³ Consider, for example, the fact that Morrison is listed as a product of the Southern Grotesque in Lori Ann Stephens' dissertation, *A Study of the Literary Grotesque and Motherhood: The Southern Woman's Search for Love*.

⁴ Susan Corey also applies Bakhtin's ideas to Morrison's *Beloved*. See "The Religious Dimensions of the Grotesque in Literature: Toni Morrison's *Beloved*" and "Towards the Limits of Mystery: The Grotesque in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*."

⁵ For additional discussion about the female grotesque, see Margaret Miles' "Carnal Abominations: The Female Body as Grotesque." In addition to other emphases, this article talks about the fetishization of women's bodies and the historical belief that female genitalia are the inversion of male genitalia.

⁶ Alyce Baker-Putt's article, "Highlighting Artistic, Cultural, and Political Hair in Literature During the Black Arts and Black Power Movements," historically traces African and African American hair and its political, artistic, and cultural significance as reflected in literature during the Black Arts and Black Power Movements, respectively.

⁷ Characters from *The Bluest Eye*, Hagar from *Song of Solomon*, and Alma Estee from *Tar Baby* are all young characters whose lack of self-acceptance causes them to engage in grotesque actions. They are all further linked by the fact that none of them is able to ignore Western standards of beauty; they all feel compelled to achieve Western standards of beauty. Their obsessions to do so and the failures that result cause these characters to become grotesques.

⁸ In addition to Pecola's desire to be Shirley Temple, Maureen Peal tells a story about a woman named Audrey who goes to the beauty parlor requesting to have her hair fixed like Hedy Lamarr's. Furthermore, Pauline Breedlove imitates the hairstyle of Jean Harlow.

⁹ Given Morrison's disbelief of her friend's desire for blue eyes, perhaps Claudia is based on Morrison's voice of resistance as a child. After all, Morrison was in elementary school when the event took place.

¹⁰ Pecola's transformation into a bird is reminiscent of the human/animal hybrids painted in the caves of the grottoes. These drawings/paintings are widely considered to be the original grotesques. Even though Morrison uses the word "grotesque" to describe Pecola's unsuccessful and pathetic attempts at metaphorical flight, one could consider her a grotesque hybrid as well. As in the cave paintings, no such figure (i.e., half human/half bird) actually exists, but the point is that the realm of the grotesque exists between reality and unreality. Interestingly, as Pecola's life becomes more unreal, she devolves more into an animal.

It is also crucial to mention Gleeson-White's discussion of the trope of flight used in literature in reference to the female adolescent's desire to escape. Pecola's broken

wing symbolizes her inability to resist, adjust, cope or escape from the detrimental messages she receives from her peers, teachers, family, community and media.

¹¹ For a serious discussion concerning the intersection of the grotesque and religion, read *The Grotesque in Art and Literature: Theological Reflections* edited by James Luther Adams and Wilson Yates.

¹² Jane Kuenz and Katherine McKittrick write their articles from a materialist feminist point of view, documenting how Pauline and Pecola Breedlove are triply oppressed (i.e., poor, black, female). Both authors discuss the impetuses for, and consequences of, blacks moving to the North during the early-mid 20th century. McKittrick's article is especially good for contextualizing the economic conditions of the United States, particularly the North. Furthermore, McKittrick looks at how places, spaces and bodies are inscribed upon, racialized, gendered, and classed. Both of these authors and their respective articles explain how class is an important variable in the oppression of the Breedlove family in *The Bluest Eye*. Because Pauline and Pecola are confronted with a triple threat, they find comfort in capitalism. Consuming mass culture, such as movies, and material items, gives them the illusion that they belong and are equal to whites.

¹³ Similarly, Alma Estee in *Tar Baby* is seduced and betrayed by material possessions associated with America. As with so many of Morrison's characters in *The Bluest Eye*, Alma is guilty of not reflecting Western standards of beauty, even though she desires to look like the white beauties she has heard about and seen. Alma believes in the American Dream and wants desperately to have the wealth and recognition that she erroneously thinks all Americans possess. By associating herself with American

commodities, she thinks she is able to escape her life of menial labor and poverty. Using the character of Alma Estee, Morrison creates another grotesque scene in *Tar Baby* to demonstrate how destructive self-hate is. The scene is almost equally as grotesque as Pauline's situation in the movies. Eventually, Alma obtains a wig from America. The wig is grotesquely described in abject terms: "Her sweet face, her midnight skin mocked and destroyed by the pile of synthetic dried blood on her head" (299). The combination of innocence and black skin with fake, red hair resembling blood is a ludicrous and appalling concept to Son and readers. It becomes even more comic when a tug-of-war ensues: Son tries to remove the wig, but Alma fights to keep it on and in place.

CHAPTER TWO: LOVE AND VIOLENCE MOTIFS AND THE GROTESQUE

“Even a cursory reading of Morrison’s canon reveals that she is as fascinated with love as she is with death, exposing them as close allies.” (Wardi; “A Laying on of Hands: Toni Morrison and the Materiality of *Love*” 201)

In Toni Morrison’s fiction, love and death are indeed allies. Furthermore, death is often the result of violent acts perpetrated by lovers who purportedly love their victims. To illustrate, consider the physical description (which serves as foreshadowing) of Southside in *Song of Solomon*: “Not the poverty or dirt or noise, not just extreme unregulated passion *where even love found its way with an ice pick*, but the absence of control” (my emphasis; 138). Hundreds of scholarly articles have been written about the motifs of love and violence in Morrison’s works. Many articles and some books are completely devoted to the motifs, while others mention them in the process of discussing other issues and topics. Ultimately, it seems that one cannot discuss Morrison’s works without talking about love and/or violence. This chapter is no exception. The difference, however, is that I am going to discuss how love, violence, and the grotesque are interconnected in Morrison’s work. Namely, the interconnectivity between love and violence will be discussed in response to three types of grotesque “love”: excessive motherlove¹, obsessive romantic love, and perverse love.

Love, Violence, and Grotesque

In Morrison’s works, love and violence are intricately woven. In her interview with Jane Bakerman, Morrison talks about how closely tied love and violence are in her novels. Morrison says that people “do all sorts of things, under its

[love's] name, under its guise. The violence is a distortion of what, perhaps, we want to do" (41). Examples of violence as distortion in the name of love or for love are plentiful throughout Morrison's fiction and can often be categorized as either excessive motherlove, obsessive romantic love, or perverse love. For several reasons, Toni Morrison's concepts of love and violence correspond well with the grotesque. At the very least, the colloquial definition of the grotesque is something that is horrifying. And since violence is in itself ghastly, what can be more discomfiting and confusing than reading about characters who commit violent acts against people they supposedly love? Moreover, by its nature, the grotesque is "aggressive and aimed at discomfiting in some way" (Thomson; *The Grotesque* 42). In Morrison's novels, characters often do things in the name of love, for love, or because of love that garner feelings and/or actions that are frequently illogical and violent. Sometimes the illogical nature of events, feelings, and actions provoke comical responses from readers. Furthermore, more often than not, the violent acts committed by lovers in Morrison's novels are also comical. Thus, Morrison accomplishes Ruskin's definition of the grotesque in that violent events are paradoxical, invoking revulsion, amusement and amazement.

Another characteristic of the grotesque is that readers or viewers (in the case of art) need time to process the images and actions that they see or have read—if that is even possible, because with the grotesque, readers and viewers are often confused as they try to figure out how they are supposed to feel. As a result, readers simultaneously experience paradoxical feelings, a common reaction when imagining grotesque material. When lovers perpetrate acts of violence against one another, it

can be difficult for viewers or listeners to ascertain desired or appropriate reactions, particularly when there is a comical aspect to the violence committed. For example, in literature, perhaps the language that the author uses makes the violent act funny. Perhaps the author has characters wear clothing that makes the violent act seem completely out of place. Perhaps the violent act is over exaggerated or ironic. Whatever the case, there are numerous instances in which readers take time processing information and the way it is presented in an effort to determine how they should react. Of course, the processing time and the determinacy vary from person to person. All in all, though, there is a strong likelihood that readers will at least smile when confronted with material that is simultaneously shocking, yet funny.

Excessive Motherlove

In her interview with Gloria Naylor, Toni Morrison says it is noteworthy that the “best thing [i.e., love] that is in us is also the thing that makes us sabotage ourselves, sabotage in the sense that our life is not as worthy, or our perception of the best part of ourselves” (208). There are several characters in Morrison’s novels that love so much that they knowingly or unknowingly sabotage themselves, as well as the ones they supposedly love. The paradox of love being the best, yet worst thing is quite apparent in instances of excessive motherlove in Morrison’s novels. In *Sula*, Eva Peace is a classic case of excessive motherlove wherein she sabotages herself on several occasions. First of all, in order to support her family (after her husband, Boy Boy, abandons them), Eva Peace sacrifices her body to a train (as rumor has it), so that she can collect insurance money from the so-called accident. The end result is that Eva loses a leg, for which she supposedly receives \$10,000. The money enables

Eva to support her family. Therefore, Eva loves so unselfishly that she is willing to commit violence to her body so that her children can be financially secure.

Since Eva accomplishes her intended goal, she pretends the “accident” is no big deal. In fact, she even jokes about her missing leg, saying how it “got up by itself one day and walked on off” and how she “hobbled after it but it ran too fast” (*Sula* 30). She also tells the story of how she had a corn on her toe and it just “grew and grew and grew until her whole foot was a corn and then it traveled on up her leg and wouldn’t stop growing until she put a red rag at the top but by that time it was already at her knee” (*Sula* 30-31). The images produced by Eva’s stories are quite grotesque in several ways—and even more so because they are primarily told to entertain children.

The image of a sore growing until it essentially encompasses most of the leg is disgusting. As discussed in Chapter 3, physical deformities have historically been considered grotesque. Much of the literature talking about the grotesque addresses the topic of deformities, because “Even in cases in which the deformity is the result of injury or disease rather than birth defect, the impression can be grotesque when the degree of mutilation seems to alter human identity or to suggest gross violation of the body’s physical integrity” (McElroy 10). The process of the sore growing and growing until it overtakes the leg forces alteration and violates the body’s physical integrity in the sense that it is no longer complete.

The image of a dismembered leg hobbling around while Eva hops on one leg to catch it is ridiculously funny, yet visually disturbing. In *The Grotesque*, Thomson says that, at its core, the grotesque is a clash between “gruesome or horrifying content

and the comic manner in which it is presented” (2). The co-presence of terrifying and humorous content is at the heart of the grotesque and is present in the images produced by Eva’s stories: The scene of Eva hopping after her leg certainly fits the description. While readers recognize Eva’s disabled status and the sacrifice she made to receive it, they cannot help but laugh at the stories—and the subsequent images—produced by them. Furthermore, since the images are coupled in the foreground with the ever-present image of Eva as a strong matriarch who daily wheels herself around in a child’s red wagon, the co-presence is even more apparent and effective.

When her children are young, Eva intentionally harms herself, but when Plum does not live up to her standards, she sacrifices her adult son by killing him. The murder of Plum is definitely an example of excessive motherlove and raises a number of ethical questions and speculations, including: Why does Eva kill her son? Is Eva’s act altruistic or selfish? Right or wrong? Upon returning from World War I, Plum is a defeated, drug addicted character who lies and steals. Eva cannot stand to watch him physically wither away from drug addiction and malnutrition, not to mention witnessing his complete lack of will to live. In a lengthy narrative description, the narrator reveals that Eva kills Plum by soaking him with kerosene and setting him on fire while he “lay in snug delight” (*Sula* 47). In the only metanarrative² in the novel, Eva reveals that she kills Plum because “There wasn’t space for him in my womb” (71). The heart wrenching metanarrative reveals how much Eva loves Plum, from when he is first conceived and even after his death. She talks about how hard it was to bear him, birth him, and kill him. Her pain is quite evident when she talks about how she lay awake at night worrying about him, feeling terrible about his plight, her

heart having “room enough,” but not her womb (71). In essence, while Eva loves Plum, she cannot stand her son being a helpless adult, thinking “baby thoughts and dreaming baby dreams,” so she eases his pain and hers by killing him (71).

Further evidence of Eva’s pain is discernible in the scene where she actually kills Plum. In “Toni Morrison’s *Sula* and the Ethics of Narrative,” Axel Nissen and Toni Morrison emphasize the importance of narrative form and how it indirectly reveals ethics in fiction. For example, the scene where Eva kills Plum is over two and one half pages, yet there is practically no narrative devoted to describing the twenty eight years that Eva spends in nursing homes. Furthermore, the two and one half pages provide a minute-by-minute account of the event, accentuating the painful, yet premeditated murder of Plum (Nissen and Morrison 267). Nissen and Morrison also note other aesthetic choices that suggest Eva’s killer motherlove³ is a sacrifice on her part, including the metaphor of Eva as a heron and Eva’s language use during the account. Described as the mothering heron and the eagle who sets Plum—and by extension, herself—free, Eva swoops and swings into Plum’s room, holds him like a mother bird, swoops out to the kitchen to get fuel, and then proceeds to douse him with kerosene—which she then sets alight—as Plum imagines the “great wing of an eagle pouring a wet lightness over him” (*Sula* 48). And during the entire time Eva does these things, she only speaks once, thereby revealing that she is “beyond words” (Nissen and Morrison 268).

Given the narrative space devoted to describing the death of Plum, the minute-by-minute chronology of the murder, Eva’s description as birds and her voicelessness, it seems that Plum’s death is an act of mercy. Yet, one could easily

argue that Eva's perpetration is entirely selfish. Consider, for example, what Morrison says about Eva in her interview with Robert Stepto:

You know, she's god-like, she manipulates—all in the best interest. And she is very, very possessive about other people, that is, as a king is. She decided that her son was living a life that was not worth his time. She meant it was too painful to her; you know, the way you kill a dog when he breaks his leg because he can't stand the pain. He may very well be able to stand it, but you can't so that's why you get rid of him. (16)

In this extended description of Eva as the euthanizer of a crippled dog, it is clear that Morrison views Eva's actions as selfish ones despite what the form of the text might reveal.

However, whether the execution of Plum is right or wrong or is committed for selfish purposes or not, does not necessarily matter. After all, as Phillip Thomson points out, “the grotesque writer does not analyse and instruct in terms of right or wrong, or true or false, nor does he attempt to distinguish between these” (42). What matters about Morrison's contradictory statements is that they lend proof to her dialectical style of writing that provides readers the ability to determine the ethics of a situation. Such writing, according to Dieter Meindl—who uses the work of Brian McHale—is characteristic of the existential grotesque as seen in modernist fiction that is epistemological in nature (174-175). Like much of Faulkner's writing, Morrison “experiments in narrative point of view...with the aim of suggesting a transcendence of any particular perspective”⁴ (Meindl 175). Thus, readers interact

with and decode the language within Morrison's texts to determine perspective and ethics in narrative.

Another example of killer motherlove occurs in *Beloved* when Sethe attempts to kill her children. An escaped slave from Sweet Home plantation in Kentucky, Sethe attempts to kill her children when her former master, schoolteacher, comes back to claim Sethe and her children a month after she escapes. Upon recognizing schoolteacher's hat as he rides up the road on horseback, Sethe rushes into the woodshed where she attempts to kill her children by savagely sawing at their necks with a saw. While Sethe only succeeds in killing one daughter, Beloved, she is, however, successful appalling schoolteacher and the white and black communities alike to the point that they want nothing to do with her. In her article, "Toward the Limits of Mystery: The Grotesque in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*," Susan Corey emphasizes how the black community views Sethe's murderous actions: killing her baby is a "grotesque event in its shocking violence, and one that renders Sethe a grotesque figure in the eyes of her community" (36), because she has "transgressed all bounds of normalcy and, together with her family, must be strictly avoided" (37). And for 18 years, the black community primarily avoids Sethe. However, Sethe does not care; in her mind, she is triumphant because "I stopped him [schoolteacher]" and "I took my babies where they'd be safe" (*Beloved* 164). Sethe's attitude toward infanticide was a common one among slaves, particularly female slaves, according to Angela Davis. In her book, *Women, Race, and Class*, Davis maintains that infanticides and abortions were "common," yet "reluctant acts" committed out of "desperation... [because of] the oppressive conditions of slavery" (205). Sethe's

justification for committing infanticide reveals the desperation of which Davis speaks.

Paul D, a former slave and friend to Sethe and her husband while at Sweet Home, does not view Sethe's choice to commit infanticide as reasonable. When Sethe reveals the story to Paul D (after he comes to visit Sethe), he responds by pointing out that her plan failed because she killed Beloved (who haunts the house and then returns in corporeal form), made a recluse out of her daughter Denver, and her sons Buglar and Howard run off because they were afraid of the ghost of Beloved. He also insinuates that by attempting to kill her children she acted in a beastly manner by declaring, "You got two feet, Sethe, not four" (165). Sethe maintains her position, though, saying "It's my job to know what is and to keep them away from what I know is terrible. I did that" (165). Sethe does indeed prevent schoolteacher—or anyone else—from taking her children or her, but the cost of committing violence against her children, as Paul D points out, has been high.

Similar to the questions that readers ponder when reading about Eva committing infanticide, they are confronted with a number of philosophical and ethical questions concerning Sethe's situation, the most important ones arguably being: How can a mother kill her children? Is it ever justifiable? Does committing murder against one's child imply that the victimizer is insane? As is the case with Eva, there are narratological strategies that suggest what Sethe does is unjustified—even if she meant to protect her children from the horrors of slavery. Paul D's speech certainly suggests that Sethe's motherly instinct to commit infanticide is still unwarranted. The fact that Sethe is compared to a hawk (rather than Eva as a heron)

hints at the idea that Sethe is a predator rather than a protector. Readers are provided with the image of Sethe “snatching up her children like a hawk on a wing” with “hands [that] worked like claws” (157). However, the reverse is true as well. For instance, the rising action of Sethe’s emotions is exposed in her increasingly and rapidly repetitive speech. She says that when she recognized schoolteacher’s hat, she thought, “No. No. Nono. Nonono” at the same time she “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 where no one could hurt them” (163).

The description of Sethe as a hawk, as well as Paul D’s comment about Sethe having two feet and not four, is interesting to note because animalism is commonly explored in the modern grotesque. Humans acting animal-like provide “powerful impressions of things having gone out of control, of the animal in man having been given free rein, and of the monstrous forces of the psyche having been loosed” (McElroy 130). In *The Fiction of the Modern Grotesque*, Bernard McElroy talks about animalism in grotesque art and literature, listing a continuum of five categories, ranging from animal, to human-animal, to human. Two of the descriptive categories apply to Sethe and Eva. The first is “The combination of human and animal features and traits to produce a hybrid man-beast (totem masks and figures, anthrotheriomorphic gods, the kinds of demons most often depicted by Bosch)” (McElroy 11). While perhaps it is a stretch to say that Sethe as a hawk and Eva as a heron are in the same category as a demon painted by Bosch, particular bird metaphors are deliberately chosen—whether in a positive or negative manner—to

portray the women. The second descriptive category applies even more so as well as helps to legitimize the first. The second descriptive category is “The depictions of humans is [sic] some state so bizarre, macabre, or gross that human dignity is obliterated and even identity is threatened (decomposed corpses, skeletons; cannibalism, some behavior of the insane)” (12). Many, if not all, readers recognize the stressful situations that prompt Eva and Sethe to engage in such animal-like behavior as the killing of their children. Moreover, readers can easily question the women’s dignity as well as their sanity. But the point is that by having characters acting so grotesquely, readers are urged to ponder the forces that help to guide characters’ thoughts, actions, and reactions. In Sethe’s case, her acting animal-like by killing her children really illuminates that slavery was so horrible that a mother was willing to kill her children, so that they would not have to endure their lives as slaves.

Morrison seems to understand the motives behind Sethe attempting to kill her four children; at the very least she has tried to understand. In fact, Sethe’s story is based on the real-life story of Margaret Garner, a young escaped slave woman from Kentucky who attempted to kill her four children with a shovel. Unlike Sethe’s, none of Margaret Garner’s children died. In her interview with Gloria Naylor, Morrison recounts Margaret Garner’s full story and tells how she was fascinated by the woman who seemed like a “very quiet and very serene-looking” woman, despite attempting to murder her children (207). Morrison even admits that she did not quite understand the full import of Margaret Garner’s story until she recalled a particular picture and story of a young woman in Van der Zee’s *The Harlem Book of the Dead*. The particular woman had been killed by her lover. While she was dying, she refused to

admit that her lover was the one who had done it, because she “wanted him to get away” (Naylor 207)⁵. Upon recalling this story, Morrison says that it became clear to her that Margaret Garner and the young woman “loved something other than herself so much.... She had placed all of the value of her life in something outside herself” (207). In Margaret Garner’s situation, she attempted murder because her children were the “best part of her and she would not see them sullied” (qtd. in 207) by slavery: “She would rather kill them, have them die” (qtd. in 208). Because slavery was such a grotesque system, it is not surprising that Margaret Garner acted in the manner in which she did. Unfortunately, sometimes reality provides the best grotesque material. Since the realities of being a slave were horrific, it is not too surprising that Garner resorted to attempted infanticide. Whether Garner’s (re)actions were sane, insane, or temporarily insane, the fact remains that Margaret Garner had to experience such powerful emotions of trepidation and sorrow as she attempted to kill her children in an effort to preserve their innocence.

Obsessive Love

In “The Grotesque: First Principles,” Geoffrey Harpham says that “One of the most frequent ways for an artist to use the grotesque...is through the creation of grotesque characters” and that “Victims of obsession particularly lend themselves to grotesque characterization” (465). Morrison makes use of the technique of creating grotesque characters who are obsessed with their lovers. In *Song of Solomon*, Morrison refers to obsessive love as “anaconda love,” because these snake-like lovers smother their partners (137). Usually, the obsessive behaviors end with tragic circumstances. In Morrison’s works, a lot of tragic happenings are precipitated by the

behaviors of crazed lovers. And in many of these cases, the actions displayed are grotesque in the traditional sense of being bizarre, but also in the more formal sense of being simultaneously funny and horrific or strange. There are at least three specific examples of obsessed lovers in Morrison's works: In *Song of Solomon*, Hagar is obsessed with her cousin/lover Milkman; in *Love Heed* Johnson and Christine Cosey are obsessed with Bill Cosey, particularly his money; and in *Jazz*, Violet and Joe Trace are both obsessed with Dorcas Manfred.

In *Song of Solomon*, cousins Hagar and Macon Dead II (a.k.a. Milkman) are lovers. When Milkman is twelve years old, he meets seventeen-year-old Hagar in her mother, Pilate Dead's home. For fourteen years they have a sexual relationship, until Milkman breaks it off. Their relationship, however, was never exclusive as Milkman continued to date and be intimate with other women. Furthermore, he never took Hagar to certain places as she would not be accepted by "people of his own [upper/upper-middle class] set" (*Song of Solomon* 91). Hagar, on the other hand, unquestioningly relies on him as she continues to age, hoping that the two of them will be married. Unbeknownst to Hagar, Milkman views her as his "private honey pot, not a real or legitimate girl friend—not someone he might marry" (91). Furthermore, Milkman could easily have sexual relations with her, and therefore "There was no excitement, no galloping of blood in his neck or his heart at the thought of her" (91). Thus, after fourteen years, at Christmas time, he writes her a "Dear-John" letter, includes money, and thanks her for all that she has done for him.

Surprisingly, Hagar is not upset at Milkman's card—so the narrator says—but rather is infuriated by the fact that soon after receiving the card, she sees him with

another woman. The sighting of Milkman with another woman sparks a multitude of emotions within Hagar, initiating her obsession with him. Her emotions are so misplaced that she attempts once per month to kill Milkman. The scenes where Hagar attempts to kill Milkman are some of the most grotesque in any of Morrison's novels. The co-presence of the playful with the frightful is very clear in the scenes. First of all, despite the fact that Hagar is truly trying to kill Milkman, the attempts are downplayed by Milkman and other characters. The nonchalance of Milkman, Guitar, and community members makes these attempted killings funny. Furthermore, despite the fact that Hagar could one day be successful, the particular things that the characters say or do prior to and during the attempts on Milkman's life are also funny. So while knives are wielded and blood is shed, the scenes are also quite comical.

Hagar Dead attempts to kill Milkman a total of seven times before she dies, and she is always unsuccessful. Prior to the seventh attempt, Guitar and Milkman have a long discussion concerning Hagar's murderous intentions. Because Hagar always attempts to kill Milkman on a particular day each month, Guitar knows that when Milkman shows up at his door, Milkman is looking for a place to hang out while he awaits the arrival of Hagar. Prior to and during the seventh attempt, there are a lot of grotesqueries, namely that Hagar's attempts to kill Milkman are a joke to Milkman and Guitar. When Milkman arrives at Guitar's, Guitar invites him in, but asks why Milkman seems so comfortable knowing that today is *the* day. Guitar is certain that there is some sort of secret that Milkman is hiding. In truth, there is no secret; Milkman is just tired of hiding from life in general, and so he's not overly concerned with Hagar coming. He even wonders if she will come, to which Guitar

responds, “She ain’t missed in six months. You countin on her taking a holiday or something?” (118). Guitar’s statement is the first of many that reveal the seriousness of the situation, while simultaneously makes light of it. Hagar is likely coming for the seventh time with an attempt on Milkman’s life; she is likely not going to take a vacation or holiday from it. Guitar’s comment is also the first of many that reveal that neither Milkman nor Guitar understands or cares to understand Hagar’s pain, frustrations, and motives. They simply view her as a knife-toting crazy woman.

When Guitar thinks that Milkman has a secret up his sleeve, the conversation regarding Hagar’s soon-to-be seventh attempt becomes even more grotesque. Figuring that Milkman can deal with Hagar while he goes to purchase more cigarettes and hang out with the Seven Days, Guitar comments to Milkman:

Okay, Mr. Dead, sir. You on your own. Would you ask your visitor to kind of neatn things up a little before she goes? I don’t want to come back and have to look through a pile of cigarette butts for your head. Be nice if it was laying somewhere I could spot right off. And if it’s her head that’s left behind, well, there’s some towels in the closet on the shelf in the back. (119-120)

Guitar’s entire farewell statement is grotesque due to the co-presence. Even though the situation is serious, Guitar playfully addresses Milkman formally by calling him Mr. Dead. Of course the emphasis on Milkman’s last name reveals that he is metaphorically dead inside, and soon may be literally dead as well. The formal address also nicely begins the smart-alecky, callous, yet funny comments that follow. In the same formal vein with which Guitar addresses Milkman, he also implicitly

refers to Hagar as a lady friend who is coming over for a visit. In fact, if the rest of the paragraph after the word “goes” did not exist, one would assume that a lady might simply be coming over for a spot of tea!

Drinking tea is far from what happens, though. Rather, Guitar’s other comments about chopped-off heads are closer to the mark. These statements, however, reveal that he either thinks Hagar will not be successful or that such a dreadful situation can only be alleviated with playfully, grotesque images. Treating the visit as a casual and friendly one—even though he knows it probably will not be—Guitar requests that his place be clean when he gets home and that heads and blood are properly disposed and situated. Even though the intent is not satiric, the humor could very well be considered black, because, once again, Guitar is trivializing murder, violence, and death. Murdering someone is treated as if it is easy to commit and that like washing dishes or doing laundry, one can easily clean it up.

In response to Guitar’s request to clean up, Milkman jokes that he “Ain’t ...giving up no head” (120). The overt implication is that Milkman does not plan on dying. However, Morrison also created this crafty retort as a sexual pun—that Milkman and Guitar recognize: “They laughed at the suitability of the unintended pun, and it was in the sound of this laughter that Guitar picked up his leather jacket and started out the door” (120). Thus, Milkman does not plan to die by Hagar’s hands or to have sexual relations with her. The lightheartedness and vulgarity with which Guitar and Milkman treat the subject enable them to shrug off the attempts on Milkman’s life. Furthermore, the joking gives them the sense that the seventh attempt on Milkman’s life will end the same as the other six—with Milkman

succeeding, therefore treating the situation as if it is no big deal. Guitar's and Milkman's actions also indicate that they are not overly worried. In fact, right after Guitar and Milkman make the "head" joke, Milkman requests cigarettes from the store and Guitar leaves to go get them and to hang out with his consort.

Use of irony is common among authors who use the grotesque as an aesthetic. In fact, in Thomson's book, he lists "irony" as a related mode and talks about the intersections of irony and the grotesque, as well as differentiates between them. Thomson says that irony is more "intellectual in its function" versus the grotesque which is more emotional (47). Thomson believes that the goal of the grotesque is one of "sudden shock" versus the goal of irony being intellectual in the sense that readers will likely take great satisfaction in detecting it and its functions (47). In "The Grotesque: First Principles," Geoffrey Harpham also lists irony as one of the rhetorical modes and says that it "undercuts and subverts language" (467). Much of Guitar's language use as a member of the radical Seven Days is subversive. However, in this case of talking with Milkman it is not. Nonetheless, Guitar's language shows that he and Milkman do try to subvert Hagar's attack: By imagining that Hagar will not come, or that her attempt will fail, or that her attempts on Milkman's life do not matter, they are able to pretend that the situation is not of dire concern.

As expected though, Hagar does come to Guitar's apartment to try to kill Milkman, and the attempted murder scene that ensues is quite grotesque. While Hagar sneaks into Guitar's window, Milkman patiently awaits in Guitar's bed because he has resigned himself to either living on his own terms or dying. No time

is wasted before Hagar attempts to murder Milkman. In her hand, Hagar carries a butcher knife, her “comfortably portable weapon,” which she tries to drive into Milkman’s neck, but ends up hitting his collarbone instead. Little damage is done; a small wound bleeds lightly. Hagar then tries to strike him again, but she can not bring herself to hurt him: “Try as she might, the ball joint in her shoulders would not move” (130). Thus, because of Milkman’s stubbornness and Hagar’s love for Milkman, they become “The paralyzed woman and the frozen man” (130).

The scene is grotesque for a number of reasons. First of all, the two of them are essentially playing a cat and mouse game, making the attempted murder comical rather than wholly ominous or vicious. Moreover, Hagar just can not seem to kill Milkman even though Milkman more or less sits idly by. After all, she cannot even strike him in the right place even though he is lying perfectly still; instead, she hits his collarbone. In fact, she is referred to as the “world’s most inept killer” (129), which is comical because it is bizarre to think of killing as something that one can or cannot be good at doing. Also, the butcher knife being described as “comfortable” and “portable” sounds more like Morrison is describing a tampon rather than a weapon. Furthermore, Milkman and Hagar are creatively described as freaks that one might have seen at a Barnum Freak Show—Hagar as the Paralyzed Woman and Milkman as the Frozen Man.

The presentation of the two of them as immobile is interesting to note because people usually consider marionettes, puppets, robots, dead bodies, wax dolls, and other inanimate people or objects as grotesque⁶. Inanimate objects and people are considered grotesque because while “Human-like, animated yet actually lifeless

objects, they are apt to be simultaneously comical and eerie—comical because of their imperfect approximation to human form and behaviour, eerie probably because of the age-old, deep-rooted fears in man of animated and human-like objects” (Thomson 35). Conversely, human beings acting as inanimate people and objects are considered grotesque, because the attempt to be inanimate is, according to Philip Thomson, “comical and strangely disturbing at the same time” (35). Milkman’s and Hagar’s temporary inert state fits Thomson’s description because it is natural for living people to move, making their immobility disturbing. However, it is also comical because they reach a standstill: Hagar can not kill Milkman because she cares too much for him, and Milkman is taking a stand for the first time in his life by ironically doing nothing.

Milkman and Hagar are not the only ones who are “immobile.” The community also literally sits by and watches Hagar repeatedly try to kill Milkman: “Women watched her out their windows. Men looked up from their checker games...” (128). In essence, Hagar’s rampages are a spectator sport. When she leaves Pilate’s home, people watch Hagar and report if she “done took off after Milkman again” (128). Community members also speculate if Hagar will be successful, while they share stories about other “graveyard loves” (128) like Hagar’s and Milkman’s wherein someone is “‘lifer’ by love” (129) and cannot accept that his or her former lover does not want to be with him or her and the tragic end result is that one of the two die. So not only are the attempted murders comical, the community’s involvement watching the charade makes the situation amusing as well. Readers can picture Hagar wandering the streets with her comfortably portable

weapon while townspeople watch and shake their heads as she heads out to kill her former lover.

In the novel *Love*, lovers do not attempt to kill one another. However, several women vie for Bill Cosey's attention, love, and money. A wealthy, black man who owned a hotel resort in Up Beach, Bill Cosey marries Heed Johnson (a.k.a. Heed the Night) when she is just eleven years old. When Bill Cosey purchases Heed for two hundred dollars and a purse (the money going to Heed's father and the pocketbook to her mother), several relationships become severed. First of all, May, Cosey's daughter-in-law, is furious that a fifty-two-year-old man would conceive of marrying a child, not to mention a Johnson, a well-known shiftless family (hence the fact that they "sold" their daughter). Additionally, May balks at the idea that her mother-in-law is actually younger than her own daughter. Also, she recoils at the thought of having to train a child to learn how to run the hotel after she had been running it for the past seven years after the death of her husband, Billy Boy. Lastly, because May is worried that the situation will "infect her daughter" as the Cosey home is "throbbing with girl flesh made sexy" and there is an oversexed man who immediately wants Heed to have children, May sends her daughter (and Heed's friend) Christine, to Maple Valley School where for years she lives and goes to school (*Love* 139). Christine does not understand why she is sent away and therefore becomes irritated with her mother's choice. And since Christine is sent away, she and Heed are no longer friends. Thus, connections between friends and mother and daughter are severed.

Decades later, Bill Cosey mysteriously dies. Cosey's official will, destroyed by his cook L prior to his death, bestows everything to his mistress, Celestial. Because L does not approve of Celestial receiving everything, she secretly replaces the will with another one she scrawls on a menu. The second will clearly bequeaths the resort to May, but Cosey's home on One Monarch Street and the money are ambiguously given to "my sweet Cosey child"⁷ (98). Since Heed always calls Cosey "Papa," the child could be her; however, Christine is his granddaughter and when he last saw her she was still a child. The vague will obviously creates friction among the women. While the will is read, Heed is shocked to discover that the family's source of income, that is the hotel, is left to May whom Heed forthrightly calls a "nutcase" (98). Christine and Heed are stunned and furious at the ambiguity of the will, and each believes she should be the one to inherit Cosey's money and property. After all, "each had either 'saved' him from some disaster or relieved him of an impending one" as well as worked for him (98). Thus, wife, daughter-in-law, and granddaughter—particularly wife and granddaughter, as May eventually dies as well—engage in a life-long struggle with one another over past experiences and the inheritance.

Soon after the reading of the will, Cosey is buried. The scene of his burial is perhaps the most grotesque in all of Morrison's novels and has not gone unnoticed by critics. In her book review, "Books of the Times; Family Secrets, Feuding Women," Michiko Kakutani labels scenes, like the burial one, as "cartoon violent catfights." Such wording, "cartoon" and "violent," reveals the grotesqueness of the scene, and cartoonish, violent behavior is what occurs at Cosey's funeral. All three unsatisfied,

vengeful, and strangely-attired women attend Cosey's graveside funeral. May wears her perfunctory military gear, believing that since she has had such bad things happen to her, a war has personally been declared on her and thus she is declaring one in return. Despite the fact that she cannot read or write and that she comes from a ne'er-do-well family, Heed wears her *Gone-With-the-Wind* hat, as she has had the finer things in life as the wife of Cosey and likes to flaunt her wealth and put on airs. Christine wears a beret as she has spent the past few decades in the role of a revolutionary. Thus, all three women, having very different mentalities, gather around Cosey's coffin looking distinctly different—and strange—from one another.

The tension among the strangely-clad women builds while standing graveside. Each woman, particularly Heed and Christine, harbors much resentment for one another and for a variety of reasons. Christine offers her diamonds to Cosey—given to her from Dr. Rio, a former lover—but, as Cosey's wife, Heed denies Christine's offer. Moreover, from May's and Christine's perspective, Heed puts on a wonderful show of "false tears" and "exaggerated shuddering shoulders," causing even more resentment on Christine's and May's part (98). Christine and May also feel like outcasts because the townspeople treat Heed as if she is the only mourner. Due to the high emotional levels, it does not take long before the three women actually engage in a brawl while the funeral is being conducted. Christine breaks out a knife and leaps toward Heed. She is thwarted by L, who actually murdered Cosey with poison, before she can use the knife. Threatened by L, both Heed and Christine do not engage in a physical fight, but settle for maliciously staring at one another instead. Sticking up for her daughter, however, May decides to get involved in the "feline heat" by

knocking off Heed's hat into the air (99). As the uncrowned, "false queen before the world," Heed then chases her hat around the yard, while another person can be heard giggling at her circumstances (99). The whole funeral ends up being a farce with eccentrically-dressed women who hate one another engaging in cat-fights and other petty acts when they should be mourning the loss of their respective husband and relative. But because they are more concerned with appearances, inheritance and revenge, the opposite is true.

Not only is the funeral scene grotesque to readers of the novel, the same is true for the funeral goers:

The tacky display, the selfish disregard for rites due the deceased whom each claimed to honor, angered people, and they said so. What they did not say was how delighted they must have been by the graveside entertainment featuring beret, bonnet, and helmet. (99)

Based on the narrator's description of the funeral goers' reception, they are appalled by the whole spectacle, yet enjoy it nonetheless. As the narrator says, audience members are angered, but they also have the paradoxical feeling of delight. What is particularly important is that funeral goers do not openly, according to the narrator, show their amusement. Not overtly showing one's amusement, because the traditional response might call for a high level of seriousness, is common when responding to grotesque material. Quite often, the nature of the situation traditionally calls for one to be disgusted, appalled, frightened, and so on, yet there is also something about it which causes one to smirk or chuckle. Because displaying amusement in a somber situation is not the norm—and thus not mannerly—one may

or may not openly show pleasure. Ambivalent reactions, specifically as to whether one should laugh or be appalled, to texts or art are likely an indication of grotesque material. In the case of Cosey's funeral, attendees only pretend to be frustrated by May's, Christine's and Heed's actions, because to otherwise laugh at a funeral would be in bad taste. Secretly, though, they find the whole scene ridiculously funny.

Like the funeral goes, readers do not really know how to respond either, because norms suggest certain reactions, yet responses might be the complete opposite. In general, readers are prepared to read about a graveside funeral with seriousness. However, at Cosey's funeral, how the situation is presented demands something different from us. We are presented with scorned women whose clothing reveals their idiosyncrasies. Heed and Christine get into a fight which L breaks up. May acts like a child and knocks off Heed's showy hat, which she then chases around on the ground. All in all, the funeral becomes about them because they are, as the narrator says, the entertainment. And it is important to note how Morrison, through the narrator, reveals the women's unintended function. They are the "graveside entertainment featuring beret, bonnet, and helmet." Interestingly, the writing is reminiscent of what one might write when advertising for a play, comedy act, band, or other show: that is, a particular group, featuring particular people, plays or performs at a particular venue. Respectively, Christine (beret), Heed (bonnet), and helmet (May) perform in all sorts of unconventional ways at Cosey's funeral. By Morrison writing in this manner, the scene becomes even funnier and alerts readers to respond in an unconventional way by laughing like the one funeral attendee who

openly giggles when Heed loses her hat. Thus, a scene where characters—and readers—would typically respond with solemnity, calls for laughter as well.

Another grotesque scene that takes place funeral side occurs in the novel *Jazz*. The deceased, eighteen-year-old Dorcas Manfred is lovers with middle-aged Joe Trace who is married to Violet Trace. Throughout the first part of the novel, Dorcas, Joe, and Violet are involved in a crazy love triangle in which Joe exhibits obsessive love for Dorcas, and Violet displays obsessive love for Joe as well as Dorcas. The love triangle ends badly as Joe is Dorcas's murderer and Violet attempts to "kill" the deceased Dorcas at her funeral.

For three months, Joe and Dorcas have a love affair, but she tires of him, seeking instead the attention of the more desirable and younger Acton. Because of his obsession with and desire for Dorcas, Joe is bothered by her desire to quit him and to engage in age-appropriate activities. Because Joe cannot stand the thought of his "memory failing to conjure up the dearness" of Dorcas and their time together, he shoots her (*Jazz* 28). The murder of Dorcas suggests a If-I-can't-have-her-then-no-one-can mentality. In her article, "Following Traces of Female Desire in Toni Morrison's *Jazz*," Elizabeth Cannon confirms this mentality. Cannon says that Dorcas is Joe's object. As a traditional male subject, Joe needs what he perceives as his object. When his object becomes someone else's object, he loses his subjectivity. Thus, in order for Joe to "fix the image of her in his mind, so that he can always have his object with him," he kills Dorcas. In Joe's mind, Dorcas's death then permanently locks images of them together as opposed to her with others and in other

places. So unlike Hagar's attempts on Milkman's life, Joe is able to kill the object that has denied him.

Joe is not the only one who "kills" and "stalks" Dorcas. Violet is so obsessed with Dorcas that she attempts to mutilate the already-dead Dorcas at her funeral. After the funeral, both Violet and Joe are obsessed with the dead young woman's picture that sits on the mantelpiece in the parlor⁸. Each secretly sneaks out of bed in the middle of the night to peek at Dorcas—Joe because he mourns his loss (which he caused) and Violet because she desires to understand why Joe is obsessed with a dead girl. Of course trying to figure out Joe's motivation for the affair and his reactions to the loss of Dorcas is no easy task, because Dorcas is already dead when Violet finds out. So, Violet gets Dorcas's picture—and derives information about Dorcas—from Alice Manfred, Dorcas's aunt, who, after a number of visits from Violet, eventually empathizes with Violet's circumstances.

In the process of trying to figure out why Joe is obsessed with Dorcas, Violet engages in a number of grotesque actions and wonderings. As Violet works on a customer's hair, Violet tells her that Joe has not been eating or sleeping. The customer tells Violet that Violet will not be able to compete with a dead girl, because she will "Lose every time" (15). Violet knows this, yet nonetheless attempts to learn as much about Dorcas as she can, so that she can be competitive. The need to be competitive with someone who is already dead definitely classifies as bizarre, if not grotesque. Even more disturbing is that Violet wonders if she is also in love with Dorcas:

...she wonders if she isn't falling in love with her too. When she isn't trying to humiliate Joe, she is admiring the dead girl's hair; when she isn't cursing Joe...she is having whispered conversations with the corpse in her head; when she isn't worrying about his loss of appetite, his insomnia, she wonders what color were Dorcas's eyes. (15)

As the passage reveals, Violet continues to view Dorcas as a living figure, someone with whom she can speak. Certainly, Violet's "relationship" with Dorcas is troubling. She potentially loves a deceased woman she has never met, and she imagines conversations with her.

Not surprisingly, Violet opts to learn everything about Dorcas's beauty regime. In her article, "Following the Traces of Female Desire in Toni Morrison's *Jazz*," Cannon emphasizes that Violet is "reduced to wanting to be wanted by Joe," which is why she goes to such efforts to know Dorcas. Violet's *idée fixe* is that if she learns what Dorcas looks like and how Dorcas acts, then she can mirror those looks and personality to get Joe to fall in love with her again. The delusional belief that transforming oneself to mirror another will result in like treatment for the copycat is not an uncommon theme in Morrison's novels. As mentioned in Chapter One, Pecola Breedlove believes that if she is white and has blue eyes, then she will automatically be loved, and her life will mirror someone like Shirley Temple's. Pecola's mother, Pauline, also wishes to be like the movie stars she watches, which is why she imitates their hairstyles. Hagar also desires to be another person. After Milkman breaks up with her, Hagar spies him with a beautiful red-headed, "lemon-colored" woman with "gray-blue" eyes (*Song of Solomon* 316). Hagar then compares herself to Milkman's

latest object of desire. As a result, Hagar goes shopping and buys new undergarments, clothes, accessories, makeup, and perfume to make herself look more desirable to Milkman. And, as is the case with Pecola and Pauline, Hagar's life situation is ultimately a grim one, because she dies of a fever (and perhaps the proverbially broken heart and depression) easily contracted from her worn down immune system.

Unlike Pecola, Pauline, and Hagar, Violet attains self-actualization, and subsequently, her life situation ends positively. As mentioned earlier, automatons are generally considered grotesque. On some level, Violet could be considered robotic-like because she is really only a shell of herself, which is why she initially thinks becoming like Dorcas is a good solution to regaining Joe's attention and affection. Like Hagar obsessively thinking about Milkman, Violet's life revolves around thinking about Dorcas because Dorcas's "memory is a sickness in the house" (28). While Joe wants to hang on to Dorcas's memory, Violet wants to destroy it, needs to destroy it in order to reclaim Joe's attention and to transform herself. In fact, as Cannon points out, prior to and during the attempted mutilation of Dorcas, Violet is the 'object' her. It is not until after she stabs the already-dead Dorcas that she begins to kill the 'killing' her, which then leads to her final transformation of the 'subject' her (241).⁹ In other words, before Violet stabs Dorcas, she is merely an object in patriarchal society. After she "kills" Dorcas, Violet "kills parts of herself before she create" her final self (241). So while slashing a dead woman's face is paradoxical in the sense that dead people do not feel, the act of doing so enables Violet to alleviate pain and kill her obsessions with Dorcas. In her final transformation, Violet is no

longer controlled by her need to be an object of desire; rather, she is a subject. Instead of trying to look like Dorcas, or be like Dorcas, or be dependent upon Joe, she resolves to be herself by being more independent and in control.

Perverse Love

The final category of grotesque love is perverse love. Perverse love is not grotesque in the Ruskian sense of having a co-presence. In fact, there is nothing funny or comical about perverse love. Rather, perverse love is deplorable. Normally, people do not condone perverse kinds of love. Perverse love includes bizarre types of “love” like pedophilia and incest, thus fitting the colloquial understanding of the grotesque. In Morrison’s works, there are three mind-numbing relationships that occur: Cholly Breedlove’s rape of his daughter; Ruth Dead’s suggested incestuous relationship with her father and son; and Bill Cosey’s marriage to the eleven year-old child Heed Johnson.

As discussed in Chapter One, in *The Bluest Eye*, Cholly Breedlove, in a state of grotesqueness himself, rapes his daughter Pecola. Unlike the boys in *Love* who gang rape a teenage girl, Cholly’s sexual encounter with Pecola—as strange as it may sound—is heartfelt and sincere. Obviously though, Cholly’s love is misdirected. After all, Pecola is his daughter, and she is an adolescent. Unfortunately, Cholly does not quite comprehend that he is committing rape—and of his own daughter. Rather, he feels that he is offering the best part of himself—the only part of himself with which he associates love. And, unfortunately, Cholly does not have a healthy notion of love. For him, love, sex, and violence are intertwined. So while Cholly’s love for

Pecola might be sincere—because Pecola reminds him of a young Pauline—it is certainly not acceptable.

In addition to Cholly's forced incestuous relationship with Pecola, there are three cases of incest that occur in *Song of Solomon*, and the pattern of victim becoming victimizer is quite prevalent. For starters, Ruth (Foster) Dead and her father, the prominent Dr. Foster, have an incestuous relationship. Readers first hear of Ruth's strange relationship with her father from her husband, Macon Dead II. In a conversation he has with son Milkman, Macon reveals his long-held suspicion that the relationship between Ruth and her father is more than father-daughter. Macon cites the fact that Dr. Foster delivers Milkman's two sisters, finding the state of affairs quite peculiar and disturbing. He says, "I didn't like the notion of his being his own daughter's doctor, especially since she was also my wife. [...] Anyway, Ruth wouldn't go to any other doctor. I tried to get a midwife..." (*Song of Solomon* 71). Dr. Foster, however, insists that "midwives were dirty," to which Macon says they are fine, and that he thinks there is not anything "nastier than a father delivering his own daughter's baby" (71). Apparently, Macon's comment dissolves the relationship between him and Dr. Foster. The severance begs the question: Is there something more going on between Dr. Foster and Ruth, or is Dr. Foster, as a gynecologist, making sure his daughter receives proper care? Perhaps Dr. Foster just does not want to justify his position because he feels it does not need one. Nonetheless, as Macon states, "She had her legs wide open and he was there. I know he was a doctor and doctors not supposed to be bothered by things like that, but he was a man before he was a doctor" (71).

Certainly one could question whether or not Macon is a reliable narrator, and one could determine that the deliverance of Macon's and Ruth's children is responsible doctoring from a loving father and soon-to-be grandfather. However, Dr. Foster acting as Ruth's doctor is not the only suggestion that she and Dr. Foster are sexually involved. In a very grotesque scene, Ruth is caught in an uncompromising position with her dead father in his bed. As an Ether-sniffing drug addict, Dr. Foster gets ill, and since there is nothing anyone can do for him, he dies. When Macon enters the room to pay his respects and comfort Ruth, he finds her in father's bed, "Laying next to him. Naked as a yard dog, kissing him. Him dead and white and puffy and skinny, and she had his fingers in her mouth" (73).

In "The Long Strut: '*Song of Solomon*' and the Emancipatory Limits of Black Patriarchy," Rolland Murray makes several observations regarding the very unsettling actions of Ruth. His main argument is that Ruth, governed by patriarchy, is obsessed with her father's status, and their house and material possessions, which is why she seeks no company outside of her father. Murray claims that Ruth's grotesque mourning is the best evidence of her "investment in her father's symbolic authority," because his fingers serve as a phallic symbol from which she garners her mode of being (124). And as Murray points out, Ruth is demonstrating regression: she suckles at the fingers of her father seeking nourishment as she has so many times during her childhood. In "The Novelist as Conservator: Stories and Comprehension in Toni Morrison's '*Song of Solomon*,'" Theodore Mason concurs, saying that Ruth has "too great a need for parental support and guidance," which is "echoed in the overtones of Ruth's unnatural affection for...her father (570). The suckling of the fingers also

suggests an incestuous relationship. Because Dr. Foster was a drug addict, he apparently, according to Macon, couldn't "fuck anything" (73). Thus, if Dr. Foster and Ruth did engage in anything sexual, it would have been oral sex or fingering. Therefore, it is interesting to note that the extremity that Ruth sucks is Dr. Foster's fingers.

Ruth's dependence upon her father is further revealed in the relationship she has with her son, Macon Dead III. In her perverse desire for attention, Ruth breastfeeds Macon well past the recommended age. In fact, in one scene, Ruth is caught by Freddie, the janitor of the Macon property, breastfeeding the tall Macon. From an outside window, Freddie secretly notices Macon's feet practically touch the floor as Ruth holds him in her lap breastfeeding him. Thus, one could safely assume that Macon is at least five years of age. Given the set of bizarre circumstances, Freddie's response is a natural one. Even though Freddie recognizes Ruth's shame, he initially smirks and then laughs, and in this process, says to himself, "Have mercy. I be damn" (14). Freddie's utterance of shock while laughing is the perfect example of the incongruous emotions one experiences when confronting something grotesque. Furthermore, his reactions in front of Ruth also indicate the dichotomy between what he actually thinks and feels versus his attempt to downplay the situation. In an effort to make Ruth feel better, Freddie assures her that "old folks swear by it" and that there "Used to be a lot of womenfolk nurse they kids a long time down South" (14). Nonetheless, Ruth knows Freddie's discovery is the end of her secret time with Macon, whom Freddie aptly nicknames Milkman.

This scene where Ruth is caught is also grotesque because readers can not help but feel sorry for Ruth, while also feeling disgusted by her actions, while simultaneously laughing. Ruth is a pitiful character whose only protector and, strangely, real lover, is her father who passes away. After Dr. Foster dies, Ruth needs some other “balm, a gentle touch or nuzzling of some sort” (13). Ruth seeks this balm from her son because as he suckles her breast, she feels “His restraint, his courtesy, his indifference, all of which pushed her into fantasy” (13). And extraordinarily, this fantasy seems to reference the incestuous relationship she has with her father, because Ruth always breastfeeds the young Macon in her father’s study. As the narrator says, part of the “pleasure it [breastfeeding] gave her came from the room in which she did it” (13). Thus, it is evident that Ruth still craves the sexual attention her father gave her. Even worse perhaps, is that Ruth is in many ways forcing Macon to perform a sexual act on her, and that she receives satisfaction from it. The funny part of this troubling scene is that Freddie catches Ruth, yet remains at the window voyeuristically watching for a little while. And then when Ruth sees Freddie, she dumps Macon onto the floor, pretending that nothing is going on. Of course Freddie tries to brush off the situation by nicknaming Macon, but the nickname, along with Freddie’s warning that the “womens” better look out for Macon, is equally funny (15). Ironically, Freddie’s statement turns out to be true as the adult Milkman is a womanizer who victimizes his cousin in an incestuous relationship with her.

As briefly mentioned earlier in the chapter, another perverse relationship occurs between Bill Cosey and his childbride Heed Johnson (a.k.a., Heed the Night).

Appropriately described by Stephanie Lee in “Hatred, War, and Sex: The Secrets of Toni Morrison’s *Love*,” as a “pervert,” Bill Cosey marries Heed when she is just eleven years old (187). Cosey is also described in oxymoronic terms by the narrator L, as a “good bad man, or a bad good man” (*Love* 200). Many might simply call him a pedophile. The suggestion is made that one of the main reasons—if not the main reason—for selecting the very young Heed is her potential predisposition as a loose young woman. The narrator reveals that the Johnson girls are generally considered to be “mighty quick in the skirt-raising department” (139). And since Cosey wants more children, Heed seems like a rational choice. Apparently Cosey does not waste any time making sexual advances toward Heed either. When they go on their three-day honeymoon, the two of them “wrestle” every morning (128). Given the fact that the word *wrestle* is italicized in the novel, it is very clear that Cosey engaged Heed in some sort of sex act every day. Obviously, it is Cosey who devises the euphemistic term “wrestle,” and the young Heed repeats its usage. Cosey’s use of the word demonstrates that he is fully aware that Heed is a child, or he would have described the act(s) differently. However, Cosey knows that Heed likely has little concept of physiology, not to mention sexual intercourse or other sexual acts. After all, she is eleven. And the fact that Heed uses the word as well is a testament to her lack of maturity and real-world experiences. What makes Heed’s maturity level and adolescent development even more apparent is that she brings coloring books, magazines, and paper dolls with her on the honeymoon to entertain herself while Cosey meets business associates in the evenings. And when Heed returns from the three-day honeymoon, she wants nothing more than to tell her friend Christine about

going shopping, going to the movies, and watching city folk from the hotel. Heed's excitement over the trip and the urgency with which she wants to share her experiences demonstrate her innocence, which, defiled by Cosey, makes him the bad man that, philanthropically speaking, others consider a good man.

One person who believes that Cosey is a good man is Junior Viviane, the teenager Heed hires to help her write a new will and thus finally secure Cosey's inheritance. Junior repeatedly refers to the deceased Cosey as her "Good Man." During her stay at One Monarch Street, Junior believes that Cosey is physically alive. When she is first hired, Junior claims that she and Cosey "recognized each other the very first night when he gazed at her from his portrait" that hangs above his and Heed's bed (118). Soon after, Junior claims that she and Cosey get better acquainted in her dreams. Eventually, Junior believes that Cosey is in the home in physical form. For instance, Junior believes that he is right beside her: "Sometimes he sat at the foot of her bed—happy to watch her sleep, and when she woke he winked before he smiled and stepped away" (116). Other times, Junior believes that Cosey is omnipresent. For example, near the close of the novel, Junior openly speaks to Cosey, telling him about her day, asking if he likes her boyfriend, asking the rhetorical question if he saw her having sex with her boyfriend earlier in the day. In essence, Junior views Cosey as God. And Junior's obsession for Cosey is so pervasive and disturbing that she not only desires his company and talks to him, but repeatedly imagines him watching her while she has sex with her boyfriend Romen, the next door neighbors' grandson. In Junior's mind, she believes that Cosey delights to "watch her and Romen wrestle naked in the backseat" of his car.

Junior's strange desire to be watched while having sex reveals her exhibitionist nature: she enjoys displaying herself and gets gratification from it. And Cosey's title, bestowed by Junior, as a voyeur, seems fitting given the fact that he is a pedophile. Moreover, given that Heed now enshrines his memory by having a huge portrait of him above their bed literally places Cosey in the perfect position to gaze at everyone in the bedroom, particularly those in the bed. Interestingly, the bed in which Heed and Cosey presumably had sex for years is deemed grotesque by the narrator. More specifically, the label is given when referencing Christine's attitude about essentially being Heed's caretaker. Since Heed mostly lives in her and Cosey's bedroom, Christine must travel there on a regular basis to help the arthritic Heed. At one particular point in the novel, Christine's feelings about traipsing to the bedroom in order to take care of Heed and looking at the portrait of Cosey in the process of completing her obligatory duties are described as follows: "Again, Christine felt the sheer bitterness of the past two decades tramping up and down the stairs carrying meals she was too proud to ruin, wading through layers of competing perfumes, trying not to shiver before the 'come on' eyes in the painting over that *grotesque* bed" (my emphasis 97).

The grotesqueness of the bed could be due to a number of reasons. Given the fact that the word is used while also describing Cosey's portrait hanging above the bed, there is a good likelihood that the thought of the voyeuristic Cosey with the watchful "come on" eyes makes the bed—and activities in it—grotesque since someone is watching. The "come on" could also refer to Cosey coaxing the young Heed into their bed to have sex; in this case, the bed becomes grotesque because of

the pedophilic actions of Cosey. In any event, the commemorative portrait of Cosey hanging above the bed where he raped a child (although legally since they were married) is very disturbing. Furthermore, the portrait is even more unsettling considering that Heed, Christine, and Junior are obsessed with looking at it, thereby giving Cosey a persistent presence despite the fact that he is really absent. And the women are not the only ones to feel Cosey's presence. At one point, Junior wants to have sex with Romen in the Coseys' bed, so that her "Good Man" can watch. However, Romen "didn't want to do it with that face hanging on the wall" because, as Romen declares, having sex with Cosey watching is "Like screwing in front of your father," so he pulls Junior in the bathroom instead (179).

The motifs of love and violence go hand in hand with the grotesque because the emotions involved with being in love and loving someone are complex, often contradictory, and can fluctuate and vary in intensity and thus provide ripe possibilities for grotesqueries. Consider Laura Miller's perception of the love which Morrison writes about: Morrison's love "is nearly classical; the emotion is as much affliction and delusion as joy." Miller's definition demonstrates that hurt, pain, and disappointment accompany love. And since pained, desperate, or hurt people sometimes resort to violence in the name of love or for love, the motifs of love and violence work well with the grotesque. To name a few, Eva sacrifices her leg so that her children are financially supported. As jilted lovers, Hagar repeatedly tries to kill Milkman, and Joe successfully kills Dorcas. In a dispute over Cosey's money, assets, and love, Heed and Christine fight with one another for decades (well after Cosey is dead). Violence also corresponds well with the grotesque because it is hard to fathom

people committing particular gruesome acts of violence. For instance, in *Beloved*, when referencing Sethe's act to commit infanticide, the narrator says in regard to community members' responses, "If they didn't get it right off—she could never explain" (163). One of the reasons violence goes well with the grotesque is that, in many cases, it seems crazy to commit such acts like the one Sethe does, which is why people have such a hard time immediately understanding—if they understand at all. Both love and violence also tie in well with the grotesque because as motifs they also offer the possibility of comic relief. When Hagar just cannot seem to kill Milkman even though she tries repeatedly, the situation becomes absurd and thus comical. When Violet slashes Dorcas's corpse, readers are appalled, but also smirk at the irony of killing someone who is already dead.

The major function of the grotesque is to assist in illuminating relative truths about our society. As Thomson says, "the grotesque world, however strange, is yet our world, real and immediate" (23). Certainly, grotesque people, circumstances, events, and situations are exaggerated. However, there is ultimately something insightful, revealing, and truthful about them as well. As Wolfgang Kayser says, "In the genuine grotesque the spectator becomes directly involved at some point where a specific meaning is attached to the events" (118). By Morrison creating extreme types of love, the meanings behind the violent acts that characters commit become easier to understand. In the course of reading about killer motherlove, obsessive love, and perverse love, it becomes clear that Morrison is commenting upon the effects of war on veterans, the horrific experiences African (American) slaves endured, racism, and the objectification of women made easier by patriarchy, poverty, and lack of

(educational) opportunities. These aforementioned themes, topics, and issues are not revolutionary—although some are not focused upon enough in literature. However, Morrison is able to really get readers to understand people's situations—historical or otherwise—by having characters commit acts of violence upon people they love.

Arguably more effective than reading a historical book about slavery is to be placed (as a reader) in Sethe's situation who experiences terrible circumstances as a slave and then heroically manages to escape slavery only to later face the predicament of being recaptured, along with her children, prompting her decision to commit infanticide. Similarly, grotesque scenes wherein people (try to) kill their lovers—as opposed to the more logical (re)actions of verbally stating frustrations, or committing petty acts to make the other lover mad or jealous—make readers more aware of killers' motives and thus perhaps more sympathetic. For example, Guitar and Milkman make Hagar out to be a crazy wench, but in reality, her pain is discernible and understandable. In a society where a woman is judged by her looks, marital status and number of dependent children, thirty-five-year-old, motherless, single Hagar is desperate to be married. Hagar knows she is getting past the age when women typically get married and have children. And since she has wasted fourteen years being devoted to Macon, she has no prospects. And when Macon breaks up with Hagar, she is devastated. She quickly disintegrates by losing control of herself, which is why, like an automaton, she ritualistically goes to kill Milkman every thirty days, despite the fact that she truly loves him and is beaten by her grandmother Pilate for the attempts. Unlike Violet, Hagar never kills the object "her": "she" remains obsessed with Milkman. In essence, then, the three types of grotesque love reveal the

lengths to which people will sacrifice themselves for others; the desperation that arises from women who are objectified and then discarded; and the prevalence of racism, poverty, and patriarchal attitudes, which influence, and to some extent determine characters' choices and experiences.

Endnotes

¹ The term “motherlove” comes from Jami Carlacio’s article, “What’s Love Got to Do with It? Betrayal and Patriarchy in *Love*” located in *The Fiction of Toni Morrison: Reading and Writing on Race, Culture, and Identity* edited by Carlacio. However, the term originally appears—but as two words—in *Beloved*. See footnote #3.

² Axel Nissen and Toni Morrison in “Toni Morrison’s ‘*Sula*’ and the Ethics of Narrative” are the ones who identify that Eva’s “confession” to her daughter Hannah is the only metanarrative in the novel.

³ In *Beloved*, Sethe reflects, “Unless carefree, mother love was a killer” (132). As Sethe points out, if mothers are not given the opportunity to properly care for their children, childrearing is troublesome for both the mother and her children. In the context of the novel, because Sethe is a slave, she is stripped of her ability to properly care for her children. As Karla Holloway points out in her untitled review, slavery “disallows its instinctive nurturing and caring,” (182). Similarly, Eva, who is an impoverished, single, black woman raising children feels pressures to react in certain ways regarding motherhood, causing her to take drastic measures. I have taken the liberty of combining the concepts of mother love and killer (i.e., killer motherlove) and have extended them to include not only mothers who attempt to kill/kill their children, but who intentionally harm their children for (un)selfish purposes.

⁴ It is important to note that Dieter Meindl would argue—and I would agree—that much of Morrison’s writing is actually postmodern. For instance, Meindl talks about how “lack of closure, slippage of sense, and the ever differentiating and meaning-deferring play of language” are distinguishing features of postmodern writing (176).

Morrison's writing also makes use of these features. As pointed out in Chapter 3 when talking about (post)modern grotesque and (post)modern writing, Morrison's style is quite difficult to categorize—if it should even be categorized.

⁵ Morrison is obviously very interested in the young woman who refused to name her lover and killer, because she uses this storyline in *Jazz*. Dorcas Manfred is killed by her fifty-year-old, married, lover Joe Trace with whom she has an affair for several months until she decides to date younger men. While Dorcas attends a party, Joe arrives and shoots her. When authorities arrive, Dorcas refuses to reveal Joe as her killer.

⁶ In addition to Philip Thomson, Wolfgang Kayser talks about marionettes, puppets, and wax dolls in regard to grotesque drama in his book, *The Grottesque in Art and Literature*.

⁷ L purposefully uses “my sweet Cosey child,” because her aim is to reconnect Heed and Christine as friends by giving them both the house on One Monarch Street.

⁸ Dorcas has just as much power dead as she does alive. Joe is enamored with Dorcas while they are dating and even afterward; he becomes obsessed with her upon finding out that she is hanging out with Acton. After her death, Joe becomes even more obsessed with Dorcas. The portrait of Dorcas on the mantelpiece is symbolic of the power that Dorcas has over Joe. Moreover, her portrait is symbolic of the power that she has over Violet as Violet tries to understand why her husband is obsessed with a dead girl. And once she recognizes how deeply in love Joe is with Dorcas, Violet becomes just as obsessive. It is interesting to note that in *Love*, Bill Cosey also arguably has as much power and influence dead as he does alive, and that his portrait

is displayed, like Dorcas's, where he can clearly be seen by the women who obsess over him. Many women in Cosey's life still obsess over him, their place in his life compared to one another, and his money and assets. In both novels, it seems that the portraits are indicative of the pervasiveness and power of love, death and obsession.

⁹ A major section on which Cannon bases her evidence of Violet's three stages takes place at the end of the novel when Violet has a discussion with her friend Felice.

Felice asks Violet how she managed to get rid of the desire to be like Dorcas. Violet responds, "Killed her. Then I killed the me that killed her" (209). Felice then asks, "Who's left?" to which Violet says, "Me" (209).

CHAPTER THREE: PARIAS AS LITERARY GROTESQUES

“I think long and carefully about what novels ought to do. They should clarify the roles that have become obscured; they ought to identify those things in the past that are useful and those things that are not; and they ought to give nourishment”

--Toni Morrison in an interview with Thomas LeClair (121)

“One of the tasks for a developing consciousness of disability issues is the attempt, then, to reverse the hegemony of the normal and to institute alternative ways of thinking about the abnormal”

--Lennard J. Davis in “Constructing Normalcy: The Bell Curve, the Novel, and the Invention of the Disabled Body in the Nineteenth Century” (26)

Toni Morrison’s novels reverse the predominance of the “normal,” because many of her characters are disabled rather than able-bodied. This is quite a remarkable development given that literature rarely contains disabled characters, especially as many as are present in Morrison’s works. One cannot fail to notice the sheer number of characters in her novels who are physically disabled, marked, or maimed in some manner. Given the quantity of characters that are disabled and their varying respective disabilities, this aspect of the novels begs to be analyzed. Certainly, Morrison’s disabled characters have not gone unnoticed. Rosemarie Garland Thomson has written several articles talking primarily about Morrison’s disabled female figures¹. It is important to analyze disabled characters in Morrison’s fiction, because, as Lennard J. Davis states in the aforementioned quote, it is imperative to “institute alternative ways of thinking about the abnormal.” The

characterization technique of creating disabled characters that command readers to think alternatively about disabled persons demands an analysis and can be situated into a discussion of the grotesque.

The Grotesque and Disabled Bodies

So how does one justify discussing the disabled in a conversation about the grotesque? Does it not stereotype²? Does not such a discussion equate disability with repulsiveness? In addition to these complicated questions, defining the term (physically) disabled is as problematic as categorizing it within the grotesque. The problem with defining the term is that it seems essential to juxtapose it to its opposites. Of course, creating these binaries makes it more challenging. The antonyms of physically disabled conjure ideas and images such as normal, whole, complete, able and so on, as if disabled people are inherently inferior, incapable, and completely dependent. Besides that, who decides what is normal or capable? The Americans with Disabilities Act determines “disability” on three factors: “(1) The impairment of a major life function, (2) an official diagnostic record that identifies a history of an individual’s impairment; and (3) a trait or characteristic that results in the stigmatization of the individual as limited or incapacitated” (qtd. in Mitchell and Snyder 2). The only characters in Morrison’s novels that arguably meet at least one of the three factors are Eva Peace with her missing leg; Shadrack with his history of mental instability; and Marie Therese Foucault, if we believe that she is literally blind. The rest of the characters and their inscribed bodies fall into other categories. Most refer to Morrison’s characters as having “marked” bodies. Rosemarie Garland Thomson, the only person whose work focuses on Morrison’s disabled characters

(women exclusively), refers to Morrison's characters as being "marked" or "pariahs" or "cyborgs." For the purposes of this discussion, physically disabled means someone who has a physical impairment or someone who cosmetically has something particularly aberrant about him or her.

In "Nude Venuses, Medusa's Body, and Phantom Limbs," Lennard Davis says that there is a "thin line between the grotesque and the disabled" (64). According to Davis, this "thin line" exists because the body has historically been associated with the grotesque—both positively (if using Bakhtin's theories) and negatively (64). Davis claims that while definitions have changed over time—leaning more toward negative images and associations—the grotesque has "failed to liberate. . .the notion of actual bodies as grotesque" (64). This is why it is quite common that discussions of the grotesque and the disabled body occur. Furthermore, colloquially speaking, the grotesque refers plainly to something that is ugly, hideous, deformed and so on. Due to the frequency of the colloquial usage of the "grotesque," the term is most often associated with nothing but a deformed body. In modern society, few people think of art, literature, gargoyles, or gothic matter as being connected to the grotesque; rather, they think of disabled bodies. And since, as David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder point out in *The Body and Physical Difference: Discourses of Disability*, people with physical disabilities are viewed as "exotic specimens," it is no surprise that the connections are made (17).

The immediate association of disabled bodies and the grotesque comes from the famed freak shows. In fact, most people's knowledge of the concept of the grotesque comes from seeing, reading or hearing about freak shows and the people

associated with them (e.g., bearded ladies, fat ladies, Siamese twins, dwarfs, lobster boys and wolf men). In “Cuteness and Commodity Aesthetics: Tom Thumb and Shirley Temple,³” Lori Merish reports that people have used disabled people as spectacles for entertainment purposes since Hellenistic time. However, it was not until the 1840s when P.T. Barnum paraded disabled people in exhibitions for profit (190). Since then, human (and animal) “freaks” have been displayed in circuses⁴. Due to the popularization of Barnum’s American Museum and the “freaks” on display, people automatically associate the term “disabled” with a body that can physically, and *easily*, be identified as “abnormal.” Only in recent years have people classified and diagnosed “invisible” disabilities such as mental disabilities, learning disabilities, and certain chronic illnesses and diseases.

One of the main characteristics of the grotesque—if not the primary—is the simultaneous experience of revulsion and fascination. These paradoxical feelings are another way disabilities and the grotesque are connected. When readers study disabled characters, particularly physically disabled ones, we are curious about their lives, their personalities, their disabilities and what they have to do as a result of them or in spite of them. But, at the same time, we are repulsed by the images of their disabled bodies, their prostheses, and their daily routines, such as getting ready for the day or bedtime, going to the bathroom, bathing and so on. This pairing of emotions is not surprising, because, as David T. Mitchell and Sharon Snyder point out, “pathos, pity, and abhorrence have proved to be an integral part of the historical baggage of our understandings of disability” (17). This combination of emotions has been occurring to readers and viewers since Greek tragedian plays. Furthermore, as

Mitchell and Snyder point out, the duality also occurs, as a reader is able to “leave the site of a fiction with our own membership in normalcy further consolidated and assured” (15). Our “distanced curiosity that simulates intimacy” is satisfied, because the encounter is not really taking place (15). Because readers are easily able to leave the site of the simulated environment and enter into their able-bodied understandings, repulsion is able to take place.

Disabled and Aberrant Characters in Toni Morrison's Novels

Morrison's fiction has no shortage of characters that might be considered grotesque and which evoke repulsion from readers. Conversely, these same figures might evoke sympathy, awe, compassion, wonder and delight from other readers—or even the same readers who are repulsed by them. It is important to take note of Morrison's creation of numerous physically disabled characters, because they frequently defy typical characterization representation. Davis maintains that

In literature, central characters of novels are imaged as normal unless specific instruction is given to alter that norm, and where a disability is present, the literary work will focus on the disability as a problem.

Rare indeed is a novel, play, or film that introduces a disabled character whose disability is not the central focus of the work. More often, the disability becomes part of a theme in which a ‘normal’ person becomes romantically involved with a person with a disability and proves that the disability is no obstacle to attractiveness. (68)

However, disability is not viewed “as a problem” in Morrison's novels; it is often viewed as the literal embodiment of a solution. Those with disabled bodies

frequently serve as resources for other characters in the novels. By creating characters that provide these roles, Morrison “reverse[s] the hegemony of the normal,” while simultaneously redefining what “abnormal” means. The “normal” characters in the novel are not the ones who provide knowledge, solace and wisdom—the ones who have “character.” Rather, the “abnormal” characters have these attributes. To illustrate, Eva Peace in *Sula* willingly sacrifices her leg (by allowing a train to run over it) in order to get insurance money to feed her children. In *Tar Baby*, the blind Marie T. Foucault leads Son to the blind horsemen of Isle de Chevaliers—and to his ancestral roots. And while disability is, perhaps, the “central focus” of Morrison’s works, it is not in the sense that Davis refers to. Some of Morrison’s disabled characters are not even main characters. Besides, readers do not concentrate on the characters’ disabilities anyway. Instead, readers recognize that Morrison’s disabled characters are created with clear purposes. Disability, abnormal markings, and “mutilation” such as Pecola’s in *The Bluest Eye*, signal much greater issues that Morrison wants readers to be aware of, consider, and perhaps attempt to understand. For instance, in *Sula*, Shadrach’s deformed hands show readers the mental and emotional effects of being a veteran who has experienced dreadful combat. In *Jazz*, Golden Gray’s “missing” arm reveals his struggle of being a mulatto. Also, the numerous marked bodies in *Beloved* tell the heart wrenching and horrifying tales of slavery.

The difference between Morrison’s works and others is that her characters are not grotesque in the everyday sense. Certainly, readers might initially find some of the disabled characters unusually ugly. However, upon reading further, they gain

respect for them and see them as victims, mythic figures and heroes. In fact, most of Morrison's characters that are disabled are the strongest characters—physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually. This is why it is important to situate Morrison's disabled characters within a discussion of the grotesque: she defies the typical function of a disabled character in literature. Historically, in literature, the disfigured character is a metaphor for evil and often the villainous antagonist in the story. Consider, for example, the infamous characters of Captain Hook in *Peter Pan* or Quasimodo in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. This is simply not the case in Morrison's novels. While all of Morrison's disabled characters are arguably outcasts, none are inherently evil, and none are created as opposition to the protagonists. Moreover, categorizing protagonists and antagonists is all but impossible in Morrison's novels.

Morrison's disabled characters seem to serve a multitude of purposes both within and outside of the texts. Danille Taylor-Guthrie asserts, "For her [Morrison] the issues and idea[s] she wants to explore within characterization become characters who are forced to the extremes of life, and this literary strategy leaves no space in her fiction for cumbersome self-explication" (xi). One of the ways Morrison eliminates the "cumbersome self-explication" is by creating disabled characters. In her interview with Anne Koenen, Morrison talks about the creation of disabled characters in her works. Morrison says she creates disabled characters so that they become "self-invented" (78); their disabilities attempt to explain who they are and what they do within the text of the story. So, to some extent, Morrison mirrors the techniques so regularly used by Flannery O'Connor, the master of the Southern grotesque.

Frequently, O'Connor uses disability to symbolize a character's religious deficiency (as perceived and influenced by O'Connor's Catholic beliefs). Similarly, Morrison uses disability to symbolize some sort of deficiency within a character. However, it is never in regard to a character's religious beliefs or practices. Furthermore, Morrison does not demonstrate an authorial voice of condemnation. And, as I discuss later in the chapter, the symbolization created by disability is overshadowed by the systems of oppression that cause the disability or is symbolic of the systems themselves.

The scrutinization of the symbolic body enables Morrison to offer a glimpse into African and African American cultures, the oppression of African Americans, and African American problems with identity ambivalence⁵. In her book, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disabilities in American Culture and Literature*, Rosemarie Garland Thomson asserts that black female authors "transform the marked women figures [in their fiction] into prodigies, whose bodies hold the secrets of an empowering identity" (130-131). She often cites Morrison's characters as examples and for good reason. The black, disabled women's bodies in Morrison's fiction are certainly wondrous and intriguing. Readers do not perceive their bodies in disdain, and neither do the characters themselves. Their identities are much stronger and more self-actualized than most of the other characters in the novels. Therefore, many women in the novels offer a positive perspective on disability and the construction of identity. It is interesting that it is primarily by means of the physically disabled females in Morrison's fiction that readers discover Morrison's message of the importance of black culture and its history, including slavery, as a/the vital element in order to combat identity ambivalence. Thus, the "empowered" black,

disabled women provide others (i.e., other characters and readers) the opportunity to become empowered as well.

The body has always been a site/sight of history, particularly for women and African Americans. Morrison focuses much of her energy on the black body in her works. In *Beloved*, Baby Suggs preaches to the black community to love themselves and their bodies. Unfortunately, it becomes evident that Morrison believes that modern-day African Americans do not love themselves as they should and that their identity ambivalence occurs because of their lack of black cultural knowledge and history and ties to family. Morrison wants African Americans readers (her intended audience) to return to their “ancient properties” (*Tar Baby* 305). There is a direct parallel between the characters in the novels and present-day African American attitudes toward culture, history, and ancestry. Karin Louise Badt states in “The Roots of the Body in Toni Morrison: A *Mater* of ‘Ancient Properties,’” that Morrison’s characters “lack a true sense of centeredness—a core self—and they are drawn to the body of the (m)other in order to restore the integrity of their own” (568). The need for the connection to the mother is confirmed by Morrison in “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation,” when she talks about the prevalence and relevance of elders in black literature. The elders’/ancestors’ roles are to teach, protect, and “provide a certain kind of wisdom” (343). Morrison’s writing is no exception: there are numerous elder/ancestor figures that instruct, and these figures are always women, most of whom are disabled. Two m(others’) bodies that are a site of cultural knowledge are Pilate Dead in *Song of Solomon* and Marie Therese Foucault in *Tar*

Baby. These two disabled women enable two young men to reconnect to their ancestors and ancestral knowledge.

The Disabled Body as Keeper of Knowledge: The Cases of Pilate Dead and Marie Therese Foucault

Macon Dead III, most often referred to as Milkman Dead, is the main character in *Song of Solomon*. After all, the story is about his journey home to his ancestors—and thus himself. But just as memorable is the character of Pilate Dead, Milkman’s aunt. Pilate is Milkman’s “pilot” to the South, to the Dead family, to himself; she is the “novel’s clearest representative of personal and racial heritage and continuity with the past” (Harris 75). As a griot, Pilate sings and tells remarkable and intriguing stories of the Dead family. These stories prompt Milkman to search for additional knowledge, even though the desire is originally based on greed (searching for gold that Pilate mentions in a story.) However, in the process, Milkman learns about his ancestors and follows in the footsteps of his male relations by becoming a sort of mythical flying African. (As a traditional dilemma tale, the ending of the novel is intentionally unclear, but scholars commonly suggest this reading.)

Sadly, at the beginning of the novel, the adolescent Milkman does not even know his aunt Pilate or where she lives because Milkman’s father, Macon II, forbids him to have any contact with her. Guitar Bains, a friend of Milkman’s, is the one who introduces Milkman to Pilate. Upon their first meeting, Guitar and Milkman ask Pilate about her physical disability—her navel-less body. Even though Pilate was born naturally, the navel-less body establishes her as a product of divine intervention or as a supernatural being. Using the work of Freud and Leslie Fiedler, Bernard

McElroy asserts in *Fiction of the Modern Grotesque* that severe deformities incurred at birth are particularly disturbing to people, because they are uncanny and “resurrect primitive fears about human identity, inexplicable influence, and the possibility of some malign principle” (9). Because Pilate’s disability is particularly unusual⁶, the townspeople are wary of her, including Guitar and Milkman. Upon his first visit, Milkman is so astonished by her that he cannot speak. Both boys are “spellbound” by the woman dressed in all black with the berry-stained lips and a peculiar “brass box dangling from her ear” (*Song of Solomon* 36).

When asked why she bestowed physical disabilities upon Eva Peace and Pilate, Morrison says she was interested in a “woman producing a woman producing a woman in a kind of non-male environment” (Koenen 78). This is the pattern of Pilate’s lineage: Pilate produces Reba who produces Hagar; none of the women bear sons. Furthermore, none of the women ever marry the fathers of their children. In fact, we know nothing about the fathers. Instead, all three women choose to live together without any male presence. This seeming absence of males in the creation of children is reminiscent of the archaic belief that males played no role in the production of children, which is why women were revered and even believed to hold mysterious powers. Part of Pilate’s mysteriousness develops from her independence from men. In addition to carving herself out of her mother’s womb, Pilate carves her way in the world. She wanders different parts of the United States for twenty years before she settles in “Blood Bank,” Michigan. And when she does settle down, she remains self-reliant. While Pilate, Reba, and Hagar do not have a surplus of money

and material possessions like Macon Dead II and his family, they are completely self-sufficient.

Much of Pilate's independence is possible because of her connection to the natural earth. In her interview with Koenen, Morrison says, "Pilate is earth" (*Song of Solomon* 76). Pilate as earth mother is confirmed through her birth and navel-less body. Pilate's mother dies in the process of giving birth, which is why Circe pronounces that Pilate "Borned herself" (*Song of Solomon* 244). The ability to give birth to oneself speaks to Pilate's independence, but also demonstrates her connection to the (super)natural world.

Because Pilate seemingly comes from *Mother Nature*, she is associated with it throughout the novel. Pilate's association with nature is established at birth. The illiterate Macon selects Pilate's name from the Bible because the group of letters appear like a "large figure that looked like a tree hanging in some princely but protective way over a row of smaller trees" (*Song of Solomon* 18). Pilate is able to be self-sufficient because she can work the land⁷. Pilate makes wine for a living, so is often picking, hauling, handling, and fermenting fruit. Furthermore, one of Pilate's favorite foods is apples. In "The Quest for Self: Triumph and Failure in the Works of Toni Morrison," Dorothy H. Lee contends that apples "suggest the fertilizing knowledge of the folk" (357). Given the two symbols of Pilate as a tree protecting others and as the keeper of natural and familial knowledge, it seems that Pilate is the tree of knowledge that bears the forbidden fruit, the fruit that is prohibited by Macon II to Milkman. Interestingly, but not surprisingly, Therese, a servant of the Street family in *Tar Baby*, is frequently associated with apples and she, like Pilate, is the one

who guides a male to his roots. She craves and talks about them persistently.

Another way Pilate demonstrates her knowledge of nature is that she can only tell time by the positioning of the sun. Similarly, she is also quite knowledgeable about animals, gardening, and cooking. She is persistently seen chewing on twigs, seeds, hay, and so on. Furthermore, Pilate is described in terms of nature: she has berry-stained lips, a gravelly-sounding voice, and looks like a “tall black tree” (*Song of Solomon* 39).

Pilate’s knowledge of the earth extends into mythological knowledge: Pilate’s knowledge of nature is not just for sustenance and profit. She uses nature to heal others. Like so many Caribbean writers’ characters (and some African American writers’ characters), Pilate is an herbal healer, a mud mother, a root worker⁸. Her knowledge is rare, mysterious, and as Morrison says, is unfortunately, “discredited in almost every corner of the civilized, progressive world” (Koenen 81). Macon and Ruth Dead do not discredit Pilate’s powers, though. Pilate is the one who “creates” Milkman Dead. After Macon perceives that his wife, Ruth, had a willing incestuous relationship with her father for years, Macon refuses to be intimate with her. Eventually, Ruth gets help from Pilate who “gave [her] funny things to do. And some greenish-gray grassy-looking stuff to put in his food” (*Song of Solomon* 125). Pilate’s root working succeeds because Milkman is born. Pilate is also able to cure other problems, such as poor eyesight. Pilate tells Ruth that in order to get rid of the “little windows” (i.e., her eyeglasses), she should eat lots of cherries. Lastly, throughout the novel, Pilate is often associated with ginger, a common spice in root working, and palm oil “flowed in her veins” (*Song of Solomon* 149).

In addition to being a root worker, Pilate is an obeah, someone who practices African folk magic. In “Civilizations Underneath: African Heritage as Cultural Discourse in Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*,” Gay Wilentz speculates that Pilate might have known that Milkman was going to be the re-creation of his great-grandfather Solomon; thus she acts as a “liaison between the ancestors and the unborn” (70). This is quite plausible because Pilate talks to the ghosts of her deceased relatives throughout the novel. Perhaps Pilate obtains the uncanny ability to prophesy and read people’s minds via help from the ghosts. Throughout the novel, while Pilate tells Milkman tidbits of family history, there are a lot of things she could not know, and yet she does. Moreover, when Pilate first comes to Michigan and visits the Macon Dead household, Ruth says, “soon as she saw me she knew what my trouble was” (*Song of Solomon* 125); without saying a word, Pilate knows that Ruth is miserable in her loveless marriage to Macon, and that she desperately wants Macon to be intimate with her. Furthermore, when Ruth comes to Pilate for additional help with saving her fetus, Pilate feeds Ruth cornstarch, cracked ice, nuts and small pieces of gravel⁹. Pilate tells Ruth, “When you expectin, you have to eat what the baby craves” (*Song of Solomon* 132). Though Ruth originally thinks the foods are strange, she does find herself craving them. After eating the foods, Ruth tells Pilate that Macon is forcing her to abort the baby. Pilate then uses her knowledge of voodoo as a scare tactic. To get Macon to quit the beatings of Ruth and her fetus, Pilate places a “small [male doll with a] painted chicken bone stuck between its legs and a round red circle painted in its belly” on his office chair (*Song of Solomon* 132). After nine

burnings (by Macon's hands), the doll disappears, and so too, does Macon's harassment and abuse of Ruth and her fetus.

Pilate fulfills her name's promise by her ability to "pilot" others; she is the majestic tree protecting the other trees. With or without a navel, Morrison would have had Pilate live up to her namesake, though. However, Pilate's navel-less body adds to her mystique. And much like the character of Beloved in *Beloved*, Pilate seems to be of this world and another, a main characteristic of the grotesque. On the one hand, Pilate is grounded in the realities and hardships of this world. She is a poor, ignorant (by Western standards), oppressed, black woman. Because of these attributes, she wanders for decades and eventually settles in the worst part of the black community. Her child, Reba, and granddaughter, Hagar, are lovelorn women, one squandering money on men and the other trying to kill her lover/cousin, Milkman. Pilate has no connection to her brother, because he loathes her poverty and ignorance. Nonetheless, she is part of another world, a world of ghosts, magic, and extrasensory abilities. And while her navel-less body has no substantiated connection to African mythology or folkways—at least none that have been verified—the physical disability certainly creates a mysterious aura about her.

Perhaps, then, there are additional reasons for Morrison creating Pilate without a navel. Pilate is fifteen until she realizes that having a navel is normal. The realization is made apparent to Pilate by a series of migrant workers. An adolescent relative of one of the workers has sex with Pilate. When he tells some of the other workers he did not realize some people have navels and others do not, the witch-hunt begins. Pilate is accosted by several women and inspected by one in particular. The

inspection is suggestive of the ones that took place in Salem, Massachusetts: Women were often inspected for a witch's mark or teat, and if abnormalities were found, they were deemed to be in league with the devil and thus burned. In Pilate's case, she is shunned from the group of workers and forced to work and live elsewhere. And while the workers claim to like Pilate, they believe her to be an evil conjure woman, which is why they send her away with plenty of money: they do not want any harm to come to them. The act of identifying "normal" features is quite interesting and revealing. As mentioned, up until the inspection, Pilate has no idea she is atypical. In fact, she does not even know the word "navel." When the one who performs the strip search is shocked to see a flat stomach and gasps as a result, Pilate assumes there is a deadly snake or spider near them. Pilate does not understand what the excitement is about; she does not comprehend that she is the object of excitement. Likewise, the boy she has sex with does not either. Perhaps Morrison is drawing our attention to the fact that children do not notice—or perhaps even care—if someone is different. They accept the difference(s) and person for himself or herself. Not noticing, knowing, or caring, is why Pilate does not understand the importance of having a navel. After all, she points out, "He [Macon] peed standing up. She squatting down. He had a penis like a horse did. She had a vagina like a mare. He had a flat chest with two nipples. She had teats like the cow" (*Song of Solomon* 143). Pilate simply figures her difference is an additional one between males and females. It is the adults who attempt to categorize normal and abnormal bodies and then react "accordingly" by treating the "abnormal" person differently.

Of further interest is how Pilate acts and reacts to her body despite knowing she is physically different. Soon after Pilate is shunned, she joins another group of migrants and sleeps with one of them and thus does not seem to be self-conscious about her body. Eventually the same situation happens, and she is kicked out. After repeatedly being rejected, Pilate does become self-conscious, however. She avoids light shining on her stomach, particularly while having sex. She does not marry the father of Reba for fear he will notice her stomach. Eventually, Pilate is offended, because she realizes “what her situation in the world was and would probably always be” (*Song of Solomon* 149). At this realization, Pilate decides what truly makes her happy—helping others. So while she apparently becomes disinterested in personal appearances, she “acquired a deep concern for and about human relationships” (*Song of Solomon* 149). She takes a personal interest in others’ happiness, because she does not want them to feel ostracized as she does. Unfortunately, her navel-less body is a double-edged sword: while she uses her abilities for good, people are too afraid to come to her because of her disability. This apprehension further shows society’s fearfulness of the eccentric and of physically disabled persons.

Because of how Pilate is treated, she uses her powers and knowledge to help others. Therefore, Pilate’s disability is not a metaphor for evil, as Davis suggests typically occurs. Rather, as a result of experiencing the societal effects of being a disabled person, she opts to help others. Thus, it seems that Morrison’s “self-invention” strategy serves multiple purposes. Early in the novel, before readers are informed much of anything about Pilate, we learn that her front is like her back—smooth; she has no navel. This knowledge of the impossible piques readers’ interest

in Pilate. We immediately take note of this extraordinary woman. And while one cannot be born navel-less, this physical flaw, other physical characteristics, and Pilate's knowledge of African folkways and root working, establish her as a connection to Africa. It is important to note that in her interview with Nellie McKay, Morrison talks about the two sets of knowledge Milkman receives—one from Guitar and one from Pilate. It is quite obvious that Pilate's knowledge, knowledge derived from an African worldview and cosmology, is the more rewarding to Milkman. Thus, Morrison demonstrates the importance of knowing one's ancestors and ancestral myths and recognizing other ways of perceiving and understanding, even though they may go against Western "logical" thinking. Because, as Morrison relays in her interview with Judith Wilson, "If you kill the ancestors, you've just killed everything" (131). Morrison does not want African Americans to be the Jadies (character from *Tar Baby*) of the world, that is, having no knowledge of, or even respect for, one's ancestors and their knowledge. By creating a character like Pilate, Morrison reconceptualizes the disabled, because the best knowledge, the knowledge enabling the (re)connection to ancestry, comes from an old, disabled woman.

Another disabled woman who affords a (re)connection to ancestry to a younger male is Marie Therese Foucault. In *Tar Baby*, Son is a stowaway on Seabird II who lands in Isle de Chevaliers in Dominique. He becomes involved with Jadine Childs, the niece of Ondine and Sydney Childs, servants in L'Arbe de la Croix, the home of Valerian and Margaret Street. The relationship between Jadine and Son is a tumultuous one. To a large extent, both represent what the other despises. Jadine is concerned with wealth, physical appearances, and material possessions. She is highly

educated (in Western culture) with a degree in art history and is also a model. She lives primarily throughout Europe and the United States and associates with more white people than black. Son is not formally educated and has no permanent job or major aspirations. He has fond memories of family in Florida and wants familial connections. Son and Jadine's appearances also indicate their roles in the novel. Jadine represents the light-skinned black that has assimilated and has no meaningful connection to her family, including Ondine and Sydney, and Son is the dark skinned black with "living hair" (*Tar Baby* 81) that has a connection to home. Because the couple cannot compromise their different lifestyles, attitudes, and attributes, their relationship ends because Son desires a place of belonging.

Marie Therese Foucault is the mysterious figure that provides the familial connection for Son. Like Pilate, Therese is a superstitious and mystifying figure. Early in the novel, Therese demonstrates her superstitious nature when she burns Son's freshly cut hair. Therese's mysterious side is evidenced by three extraordinary physical attributes. Like Pilate, Therese seems to be able to transform herself. The Streets repeatedly hire Therese; they do not recognize they are hiring and firing the same person. Gideon (another employee of the Streets and friend to Therese) explains to Son that, "When they say to let Therese go, I say okay. But I bring her right back and tell them it's a brand new woman" (153). The Streets never know. Similarly, Pilate seemingly alters herself physically in an attempt to get Milkman and Guitar out of jail. In an altered voice, Pilate explains that Milkman and Guitar have the bones of her long-dead husband whom she could not afford to bury in a bag, instead of a recently murdered boy the police are looking for and whom they suspect

is in it. Moreover, as Milkman relays the story, he says, “She didn’t even look the same. She looked short” (*Song of Solomon* 205). This description is in stark contrast to Pilate’s stature of over six feet tall.

Certainly, there are rational explanations for both of these transformations. The Streets are so oblivious about their employees that they do not recognize Therese reappearing. Gideon even says, “They don’t pay her any attention” (*Tar Baby* 153). Similarly, Pilate might appear to be short, because she completely defers to the police, putting on a sort-of Aunt Jemima act. Nonetheless, the similarities and descriptions do not seem to be happenstance. After Guitar, Milkman, Macon and Pilate leave the jail and get into the car, the narrator says that Pilate resumes her physical likeness: “And again there was a change. Pilate was tall again” (*Song of Solomon* 207). Guitar certainly believes that Pilate’s ability to change herself is real: “I told you she was a snake. Drop her skin in a split second” (*Song of Solomon* 205). Both Pilate and Therese seem to be able to “drop” their skin, and in this regard represent shape shifters or trickster figures.

Another physical wonder of Therese’s is her magical breasts. Therese spends her entire life servicing white people. Before the introduction of formula, she serves as a wet nurse to countless white children. Amazingly, even though Therese is in her sixties, she declares, “I got milk to this day” (*Tar Baby* 154)! Jadine considers Therese as one of the “diaspora mothers with pumping breasts” who want to “impugn” her “character” (*Tar Baby* 288). The diaspora women represent African and African American culture and history. Because Jadine ignores any sort of connection to African American culture, she blames the “diaspora mothers” for

haunting her. These women serve as reminders to Jadine of her rootlessness. In “The Roots of the Body in Toni Morrison: A *Mater* of ‘Ancient Properties,’” Karin Luisa Badt claims that “The body becomes a place—if not *the* place—to root oneself” (569). Morrison bestows magical breasts upon Therese to establish her as a mother figure. And, much like the milk in her breasts, Therese has an abundance of knowledge about the myths of the mud mothers and blind horsemen of Isle de Chevalier.

Therese’s actual physical disability is blindness. Her blindness roots her to the mythic blind race of Isle de Chevaliers. Like the slaves blinded by the sight of Dominique, Therese sees with the “eye of the mind” (*Tar Baby* 152). The concept of the “eye of the mind” insinuates extrasensory knowledge, which could mean that because Therese and her ancestors are blind, their other senses are heightened. However, it could also mean that Therese¹⁰ and the rest of the blind race have psychic ability, like Pilate. After all, even though Therese is blind, she is aware of Son’s unwelcome presence as a stowaway at L’Arbe de la Croix long before anyone else. Furthermore, when Son spends his first day with Therese and Gideon, Therese says, “We thought you was one” of the blind race (*Tar Baby* 153). Gideon soon corrects Therese, saying, “She thought” (*Tar Baby* 153). However, Son, with the help of Therese, apparently becomes one of the blind race at the end of *Tar Baby*, hinting that perhaps Therese’s original mistaken identity is not so mistaken after all.

“Self-Invention” Strategy: Modern or Postmodern Grotesque

When speaking of the grotesque, particularly in regard to disability, a lot of scholars and critics use phrases such as “literary grotesque,” “modern grotesque” and

“postmodern grotesque.” Literary grotesques are the “physical and cognitive anomalies, malformations and deformities placed in the service of symbolic social and artistical meanings” within fictional works (Mitchell, “Modernist Freaks and Postmodernist Geeks” 348). The existence of literary grotesque prompts scholars to classify the presences, functions, seeming purposes and authorial deliverances of the grotesque into two categories: modern grotesque and postmodern grotesque. Because modern and postmodern grotesque are not defined or determined by whether a fictional work is written in the modern or postmodern time periods, my purpose in this section is not to investigate whether Morrison’s novels are modernistic or postmodernistic stylistically but rather if they are in terms of the utilization of the grotesque, particularly in relation to Morrison’s treatment of the literary grotesque.

In an effort to determine whether Morrison’s “self-invention” strategy is modern or postmodern grotesque, it is first necessary to discuss the differences between the categories and in what ways the two are and are not connected to literary time periods. While a (post)modern text does not imply that literary grotesques are (post)modern grotesques, there are links between the principles of the literary movements and the qualities of the (post)modern grotesque, respectively. The modernist period ranges from approximately 1914 to 1965. In general, modernist literature disregards verisimilitude and subjectivity and thus the frame of reference is from within. The subject matter and structures reflect historical discontinuity, alienation, fragmentation and loss. In many respects, this movement is a backlash to industrialism and bourgeois living. More specifically, as William Van O’Connor points out in “The Grotesque in Modern American Fiction,” modernist literature is

the people's response to science asking us to view ourselves as "merely a thing in an all-embracing mechanical order," that subsequently causes fragmentation, alienation and loss (342). To illustrate this alienation and loss, modernist writers often employ the use of the grotesque. Joseph Millichap's article, "Distorted Matter and Disjunctive Forms: The Grotesque as Modernist Genre," written in 1977, is the first that takes a significant look at the grotesque used by writers of the modern period. In fact, Millichap is the one who coined the phrase "modernist grotesque." Millichap says that writers of the modern period often use the grotesque because the goals of the modern period and the grotesque as a mode are the same. Many modernists use grotesque subject matter and new forms of writing to accomplish the same goals of representing the subjects of "fragmentation and alienation of the world" (339). Thus, Millichap argues, "Modernist writers discovered inherent in the distorted matter of the Grotesque the disjunctive forms which came to characterize Modernist literature," therefore creating a new mode, the "Modernist Grotesque" (340). This new mode, according to Millichap, encompasses multiple areas in subject matter—"abnormal characters, bizarre events, [and] wasteland settings" (347). The "disjunctive forms" include "multiple narrators, isolated chapters, disjoined levels and sequences of narration" (347).

Beginning with modernism, more and more works of fiction contain what Millichap refers to as "abnormal characters." The use and function of "abnormal characters," which translates as "disabled" characters, is a key difference between modern grotesque and postmodern grotesque. For many writers, the creation of disabled characters in literature during the modern period is meant to be symbolic.

During the modern period, disabled bodies are often the vehicles of representations of the chaotic and alienated modern world. In “Modernist Freaks and Postmodern Geeks,” David Mitchell emphasizes this point: “Because canonical modernism openly embraced definitions of twentieth century culture as inherently alienated and fragmented, its narrative method forthrightly sought out working symbols of this degraded malaise” (351). Such symbolism is illustrative of what Millichap writes about. These modernist writers use the grotesque—in this case, disabled figures—to achieve the symbolism of a fragmented and alienated world, the world characteristic of modernist literature.

In his article, Millichap provides specific examples of the subject matter and disjunctive forms that often characterize modern grotesque. He does so using three novels and their authors: Sherwood Anderson’s *Winesburg, Ohio*, William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*, and Carson McCullers’s *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*. These same authors and texts are also repeatedly mentioned and discussed in other scholarly works as modern grotesque writers. Other modern grotesque authors regularly mentioned are Nathanael West, Gunter Grass, Flannery O’Connor, Franz Kafka and Gabriel Garcia Marquez. It is important to take note of Marquez because he writes in the postmodern time period, but is often associated with modernism, showing that there is no definitive connection between the time periods in which a piece is written and the type of grotesque utilized¹¹.

It is not surprising that the aforementioned authors have frequently been compared to Morrison’s body of work and could be within this text. Certainly, Anderson’s, Faulkner’s, McCullers’s and Morrison’s work could be compared in a

number of ways. However, I want to intermittently and briefly concentrate on Anderson's seminal work, *Winesburg, Ohio*, because it is considered *the* example of modern grotesque, and it is the perfect work to juxtapose to *The Bluest Eye*. Structurally, *Winesburg, Ohio* is a prime model of the modern grotesque. Separated into individual character sketches, the form, as Millichap says, is distinctly "disjunctive." The sketches are illustrative of the isolation and fragmentation of the characters. In addition, as I have pointed out in Chapter One, the main similarity between the novels is what Mitchell calls creating the grotesque "through a process of sublimation" ("Modernist Freaks and Postmodern Geeks" 350). What Mitchell refers to is the ability to objectify the truth. And by being able to objectify the truth, characters in *Winesburg, Ohio* and *The Bluest Eye* are able to "contort an inner reality into a restrictive mold that imprisons them within the corrupt world of an inelastic identity"¹² (350).

Looking at the purposes behind creating disabled characters is what disability scholars study and analyze. In the past, the use of disabled bodies to serve as symbols has been precarious and therefore has warranted skepticism, investigation and commentary, and is the primary reason why disability scholars attempt to differentiate between modern and postmodern grotesque. Mitchell reveals that disability scholars are cautionary while reading literature containing disabled characters. Speaking on behalf of disability scholars, he says, "Even as the literary grotesque is interpreted as denoting a host of social 'outcasts' made allegorical and apparent through their physical 'deviance,' traditional interpretations of the grotesque in literature end up reinscribing biology, rather than social institutions, as the causal agent of physical

aberrancy” (348). Whether intentionally or unintentionally, modern grotesque reinscribes biology. In other words, the symbolization frequently becomes lost, because readers reduce characters’ lives because of their physical anomalies (often a single anomaly). Thus, the focus is on the disabled body rather than the institutional forces that may have caused that disability (directly or indirectly) or what the allegory is supposed to reveal. Ultimately, the abject matter does not become transcendent. As Mitchell says, “Ironically, the radicality of modernist experimentation left the symbolic order reeling while further reifying a tendency to pathologize cultural institutions through metaphorical perversions of the body itself” (351). Simply put, the metaphor fails—whether intentionally or unintentionally—because too much emphasis is placed upon the actual body rather than its symbolic cultural purposes.

Like modern grotesque, literary grotesque in postmodern literature is also symbolic. However, there are crucial differences, and these differences clearly separate the two categories. The postmodern period is generally believed to have begun around 1965 and is often considered to be part of present-day contemporary literature. Postmodern grotesque has much in common with modern grotesque, except in the treatment of disability. Both modern grotesque and postmodern grotesque contain disabled figures. However, the quantities, functions and purposes of these characters differ. Marginalized figures, such as disabled persons, remain marginalized in modern grotesque. Rosemarie Garland Thomson explains this in *Extraordinary Bodies*: “Disabled literary characters usually remain on the margins of fiction as uncomplicated figures or exotic aliens whose bodily configurations operate as spectacles” (9). Thus, disabled persons remain on the outskirts as mere backdrop

characters or freaks. This is not the case in postmodern grotesque. Because the margin constitutes the center in postmodernism, the opposite is true. First of all, as opposed to modern grotesque, main characters have disabilities. Furthermore, disabled characters might lead multifaceted lives. Lastly, disabled characters are not viewed strictly as antagonists. However, Thomson warns that if the aforementioned situations are created, that does not mean the text employs postmodern grotesque. In relation to disability, the key difference between modern and postmodern grotesque are the complex symbolic functions the disabilities serve within the text. Namely, in postmodern grotesque, characters are not created with haphazard disabilities to mark them as antagonists or to merely symbolize characters' flaws or to be politically correct. Instead, the disabled body in postmodern grotesque demands an extensive symbolic investigation of cultural processes and systems. Mitchell makes such investigation clear in "Freaks and Geeks": "Instead of seeking to transcend an abject matter explicitly associated with the body, postmodern texts investigate the site of the metaphorical operations themselves" (349-350). Therefore, physical differences are seen as a "cultural process rather than a static biological condition" (Mitchell 349). In essence, then, as Garland Thomson points out, the postmodern grotesque shifts the attention from pathology to identity (*Disabled Women as Powerful Women* 137).

Classifying Morrison's Literary Grotesques as Postmodern Grotesque

In the process of investigating Morrison's disabled characters and their functions within her works, it seems imperative to examine whether Morrison, as an author-critic, accomplishes critiquing social institutions through the vehicle of disabled persons or if she merely ends up "reinscribing biology." Since few of

Morrison's characters fit the designation of disabled, one must ask why there are so many in her work. The creation of these characters is certainly for many reasons, but the primary one seems to be Morrison's desire to critique corrupt systems, attitudes, and behaviors and how they affect people—namely black people. Therefore, it appears that Morrison employs postmodern grotesque. As I have already argued in Chapter One, the physical grotesqueness of Pauline and Pecola is transcendent. Even though they have inelastic identities, a characteristic of modern grotesque, readers do not see Pecola's or Pauline's physical conditions as "static biological conditions." Rather, their conditions beg for investigations of the "metaphorical operations themselves." So while Anderson creates Winesburg, Ohio to reveal that even small-town people are perverse, bizarre, and abnormal and, thus, become fixated on "truths," the characters of Cholly, Pauline, and Pecola Breedlove are created to reveal the stigmatization of blacks in America. Institutional injustices cause the ruination of the Breedloves. Written in the late 1960s during the Black Arts and Black Power Movements, respectively, and published in 1970, *The Bluest Eye* is a commentary on black self-hatred caused by Western ideologies of beauty. In "Teaching Controversy: *The Bluest Eye* in the Multicultural Classroom," Kathryn Earle says, "One of *The Bluest Eye's* principal themes—that black women's absorption of white standards of beauty perpetuates a destructive value system—is crucial to framing any discussion of the novel" (27). It is easy to frame a discussion around this "theme," because Pecola's and Pauline's--and Cholly's to a much lesser degree--bodies tell the stories of their lives. And their lives, to a large degree, are a reflection of the pain that many African Americans, particularly women, were feeling at that point in history (and

arguably today). Thus, Morrison does not “reinscribe biology,” because the women’s bodies are transcendent. Readers recognize the source of the pain. Transcendence is further evidenced by the fact that readers experience multiple—and opposite—emotions simultaneously in reaction to the characters. Therefore, as I discuss in Chapter One, readers hate Pauline at the same time we feel bad for her—all the while occasionally laughing at her. We don’t feel bad for her because she has a bad foot. We feel bad for her because we understand what that foot symbolizes—being immobile as a poor, black woman stuck in a position that is difficult, if not impossible, to escape.

The premise of *The Bluest Eye* and how it is accomplished through grotesque bodies is a fine example of how Morrison’s characters’ bodies tell their respective life stories within novels, while also revealing the collective hardships of African Americans. Another example occurs in *Jazz*. The conception and birth of Golden Gray reveals the consequences and impacts of taboo sexual relationships between blacks and whites during slavery. However, Golden Gray is not the product of a white slave master who has raped a female slave or a black concubine; rather, Miss Vera Louise Gray, the daughter of a white slave owner, has a relationship with a black slave named Henry Lestroy/Lestroy. After telling her parents about the relationship and her pregnancy, Miss Vera Louise is given a trunk full of money and told to leave, taking True Belle, a slave, with her. Miss Vera Louise keeps Golden Gray, named for his golden skin and hair, only because of his light complexion and golden hair. Because she has shamed the Gray household, Miss Vera Louise takes permanent residence in Baltimore. Together, True Belle—who is separated from her

husband and two children--and Miss Vera Louise raise Golden Gray. Not until he is eighteen does Golden Gray know his parentage and, thus, that he is a mulatto. The realization discomforts him: "It had rocked him when he heard who and what his father was. Made him loose, lost. He had first fingered then torn some of his mother's clothes and sat in the grass looking at the things scattered on the lawn as well as in his mind" (*Jazz* 159). After True Belle gives him directions to his father's house, Golden Gray permanently leaves his mother's home in search of his father, his home, and his "missing" arm. Golden Gray's "missing" arm is symbolic of his inner struggles of being a mulatto. When Golden Gray gets to his father's home, Henry Lestroy/Lestory is not home. Golden Gray spends time looking around the house, drinking alcohol, contemplating, and avoiding Wild—a woman he "rescues" along his journey—because he is repulsed by her blackness and wildness.

What is particularly notable about Golden Gray's "missing" arm is its relationship to the grotesque. In her article, "The Roots of the Body in Toni Morrison: A *Mater* of 'Ancient Properties,'" Badt makes a great argument concerning the uprootedness of Morrison's characters in relationship to their mothers—and occasionally fathers. Badt connects almost all of Morrison's characters to this concept: Jadine and Son (*Tar Baby*); Denver, Beloved, and Sethe (*Beloved*); and Joe, Dorcas, and Golden Gray (*Jazz*). Using the psychoanalytical approach, Badt uses several psychologists' and scholars' work in which to make her arguments. One source that she does not use is Sigmund Freud and his concept of the uncanny. In 1919, Sigmund Freud wrote "Das Unheimliche," which, in English, simply translates as The Uncanny. Not necessarily synonymous with the term "grotesque," the

uncanny is a related concept. Rarely is a work about the grotesque written that does not mention the uncanny, Freud, and E.T.A. Hoffmann's story, "The Sandman."¹³ In his essay, Freud attempts to enlighten readers on the subject of the uncanny by defining the term, listing examples, and talking about how the uncanny ultimately is linked to "that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar" (220), but has become unknown due to repression. Much of what Freud does in the essay is trace definitions of words, including "heimlich" and "unheimlich." "Heimlich" basically means "homely" and therefore is associated with the home and familiarity. The "unheimlich" is what at one point was homelike prior to repression or surmountation. In "Nude Venuses, Medusa's Body, and Phantom Limbs," Davis says the disabled body is viewed as unheimlich because "it is the familiar become estranged" (62). According to Davis, the disabled body is particularly uncanny due to people's "repression of the primal fragmentariness of the body" (62). Davis, using Freud's essay, further asserts that the disabled body is uncanny because the uncanny "is found precisely in its ambivalent relation to the familiar and yet its deviance from that standard" (62). In other words, the disabled body is always juxtaposed to the normal. Therefore, the disabled body is unheimlich, and the able-bodied is heimlich, but one cannot be classified without the juxtaposition occurring. As Davis points out, dismemberment is uncanny because it "seems to be the familiarity of the body part that is then made *unheimlich* by its severing" (62).

In many ways, Golden Gray experiences the uncanny, which is symbolically displayed on his person by having a so-called severed arm. Golden Gray's phantom limb is symbolic of his estrangement from his father, his race, and thus, himself. This

estrangement is quite unnerving to Golden Gray. Beginning with the revelation of his father—and thus the identification of himself as half black and half white—Golden Gray’s reactions expose his confusion about his race. Prior to finding out about his parentage, Golden Gray thinks “there was only one kind [of black]—True Belle’s kind. Black and nothing. Like Henry LesTroy. Like the filthy woman [Wild] snoring on the cot. But there was another kind—like himself” (*Jazz* 149). Feeling slighted of an all-white ancestry, Golden Gray loses his connection to heimlich. In essence, everything Golden Gray knows—or thought he knew and understood about himself and the world around him—has become unfamiliar. Golden Gray suffers from what WEB Dubois terms double-consciousness. Appropriately, in terms of illustrating what DuBois is referring to, but also confirming Davis’s standpoint in regard to the disabled body as unheimliche, Patricia Hill Collins calls the concept of double-consciousness the “*outsider within* status” (my emphasis 526). He is essentially an outsider in his own body. Prior to learning about Henry Lestory/LesTroy, Golden Gray sees himself in opposition to True Belle: she is black; he white. After the revelation, he has to look at himself through the eyes of others, which is why he cannot stand looking at Wild’s eyes. After rescuing Wild from her fall, Golden Gray scoops her up and takes her with him, but not without noticing her eyes: “The deer eyes are closed, and thank God will not open easily, for they are sealed with blood” (153-154). Golden Gray is thankful that she cannot see him, because then he does not have to entirely see himself as being similar to her.

Golden Gray, not wanting to be seen through the eyes of others, particularly at this point in the story, demonstrates his ambivalence about the trip and his

reluctance to be black. Seemingly, based on the narrator's telling, Golden Gray originally goes to visit his father to commit patricide—his solution to becoming whole again, to rid himself of the unfamiliar part of himself. However, throughout the course of Golden Gray's journey home to his father, it becomes evident that Golden Gray's emotions and thoughts waiver. Golden Gray does not really know what he wants to happen or expects to happen from the visitation: "This arm that never held itself out, extended from my body, to give me balance as I walked thin rails or logs, round and slippery with. When I find it, will it wave to me? Gesture, beckon to me to come along? Or will it even know who or what I am?" (159). What is particularly noteworthy about this passage is that the arm in question is never identified. More than likely readers assume that Golden Gray is referring to his father's arm that was never there to guide him—but perhaps will be. The arm could also be Golden Gray's phantom limb that has always been "missing," but might appear. In essence, Golden Gray's arm and his father's are one arm. This is confirmed when Golden Gray says, "When I see him [Henry], or what is left of him, I will tell him all about the missing part of me and listen for his crying shame. I will exchange then; let him have mine and take his as my own and we will both be free, arm-tangled and whole" (159). However, Golden Gray does not view being arm-tangled and whole as healing. In fact, he says, "I am not going to be healed, or to find the arm that was removed from me. I am going to freshen the pain, point it, so we both know what it is for. And no, I am not angry, I don't need the arm. But I do need to know what it could have been like to have had it. It's a phantom to behold and be held by..." (158). While Golden Gray claims not to be angry, it is obvious he is

angry and confused, which is why he says “*what I am*” (my emphasis); upon finding out that he is white and black, he has reduced himself to a thing. Yet, Golden Gray’s story in *Jazz* seems to end optimistically. Even though Golden Gray never sees his father, by making the journey, being in his father’s home, contemplating his situation, being near Wild, and meeting a black neighbor boy, Golden Gray is “ready for those [Wild’s] deer eyes to open” (162). Golden Gray apparently accepts being a mulatto—or at least is willing to try to see himself differently. As it turns out, True Belle’s advice—“It don’t matter if you do find him or not; it’s the going that counts”—is right (159). Thus, going home helps Golden Gray to reconcile his ancestry and thus his feelings of the uncanny.

Another clear example of the presence of the historicized body and usage of postmodern grotesque occurs in *Beloved*. Receiving the Pulitzer Prize in 1988 and inspiring a movie, many critics have focused energies on discussing this novel. Inspired by the real-life story of Margaret Garner, a woman who attempted to kill—and succeeded with one—her children so that they were not sold into slavery, *Beloved* has a lot of aspects of the grotesque in it. For instance, there is certainly no lack of evidence of brutality and, thus, maimed bodies in *Beloved*. Rapes, batterings, and lynchings, as well as other malicious acts of degradation perpetrated by whites, are commonplace. All of these acts leave their marks emotionally, mentally, and physically on the characters in the novel. The focus on the corporeal is the ideal approach to telling the collective story of the sixty million or more black people that are estimated to have died as slaves, those to whom the book is dedicated. Therefore, the disabled bodies of characters in the novel are representative of many slaves’

bodies. The disabled body (I am still including marked and maimed bodies in my definition) serves as a link to the injustices perpetrated by whites. Thus, Morrison does not reinscribe pathology; the bodies are transcendent because readers recognize that the deformed bodies of characters represent the institutional injustice of slavery. Consequently, Morrison is using postmodern grotesque. Susan Corey confirms this by declaring, “In *Beloved*, the grotesque aids Morrison in representing the complex social world of slavery and exposing the moral failure of the society which sustained and defended that institution” (“Toward the Limits of Mystery” 32).

Grotesque bodies enable Morrison to expose institutions. Garland Thomson asserts this by saying that Morrison “develop[s] a postmodern perspective of particularity in which physical differences...are seen as politicized marks of variation that must be recognized.... The rhetorical framing of bodily difference thus moves from a politics of sympathetic advocacy to a politics of affirmative identity” (“Disabled Women as Powerful Women in Petry, Morrison, and Lorde: Revising Black Female Subjectivity” 242). Given the dedication of the novel, Morrison’s hope seems to be that she can tell slaves’ collective story of loss, pain, loneliness, desperation and torture, and in doing so, as Garland Thomson says, affirms identity. Just as it was in history, the body tells the story. Sethe’s body tells a story. Nan’s body tells a story. Paul D’s body tells a story. Beloved’s body tells a story. Baby Suggs’ body tells a story. In the Clearing, Baby Suggs attempts to get other blacks to be proud of their bodies. She preaches to everyone to love their skin: “in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard” (*Beloved* 88). Suggs’ sermons counteract popular belief by

neighboring white folks who find the black body contemptible and therefore prefer it to be used and abused. And used and abused bodies are what we read about in *Beloved*. Suggs herself walks with a very noticeable limp. From years of work as a slave, her hip is worn down, causing her to limp. Her freedom purchased by her son Halle, Baby Suggs spends her days preaching to others to treasure their bodies. Because many of Suggs' friends' and relations' bodies are horribly scarred and maimed, Baby Suggs has everyone acknowledge each body part; every part that the white man "uses[s], tie[s], bind[s], chop[s] off and leave[s] empty" (88).

Many characters' bodies in *Beloved* bear witness to the horrible physical acts perpetrated by white slave owners and their families on their slaves. Sethe's mother Ma'am has a circle and a cross branded on the one side of her body. Nan, like many female slaves, is a wet nurse. She is also missing half of an arm, which is why she is suitable for nursing as opposed to fieldwork. Paul D's scars are quite visible. His "neck jewelry" reveals that he has been "collared like a beast" (273). Aside from *Beloved*, Sethe's body is the most grotesque and discomfiting. As a marker of her slave past, Sethe has a tree-shaped scar on her back. Corey maintains that the tree-shaped scar is the epitome of the grotesque as "it is a clear example of the qualities of deformity, degradation, paradox, and ambiguity" ("Toward the Limits of Mystery" 34). Described by Amy Denver—an indentured servant who delivers Denver—as a chokecherry tree, the tree provides a clear picture of a severe beating that Sethe endured as a slave. Imagery, like the chokecherry tree, is very important to Morrison's aesthetic. In several interviews Morrison has gone on record saying that some of her biggest influences are painters, and that she paints pictures in her novels.

More specifically, Morrison uses physical markings, her images, to serve as symbols and metaphors. These markings provide credence to the fact that Morrison employs postmodern grotesque, because the markings represent something bigger than the pathological surface. In fact, in an interview with Mel Watkins, Morrison says that images help her get the “visual, visceral response I want” (47). Through physical deformities, Morrison is successful in *Beloved* with providing readers images of the deformities themselves, but also the images from whence the deformities derive. Along with Paul D’s neck jewelry and the scene his scars refer to, Sethe’s tree tells the story of a vindictive and degrading act in which Schoolteacher’s nephews forcefully take the pregnant Sethe’s milk from her. Because she tells on the boys, Schoolteacher “made one open up my back” (17). Thus, Sethe is treated like an animal, first being milked as one would a cow and then beaten with cowhide for not being complacent. The gruesomeness of the scars, and by implication the beating, even appalls Amy Denver who was the first to see Sethe when she escaped with her back all torn. Upon first seeing the tree, Amy Denver gasps, “Come here, Jesus” (79), showing her complete amazement and abhorrence of the ripped flesh. She proclaims that she has been beaten many times and seen others beaten, but nothing to the extent of the open flesh, secreting blood and pus, that Sethe’s body bears. She reports to Sethe what she sees: “A chokecherry tree. See, here’s the trunk—it’s red and split wide open, full of sap, and this here’s the parting for the branches. You got a mighty lot of branches. Leaves, too, look like...” (79).

Beloved’s body is undoubtedly the most grotesque in the novel, because it is the epitome of contradictions and paradoxes. For example, *Beloved* appears in

spiritual form as well as physical form. The ghostly existence of Beloved, and the paranormal situations that occur because of her or directly by her, situate this novel as a gothic and magic realism work, two concepts related to the grotesque. Originally, Morrison rejected the idea of her work being called magic realism. She did so because the categorization denounced African cosmologies and also what she believed to be the political nature of her works. This rejection provides weight to the fact that Morrison uses postmodern grotesque, because Morrison believes that the designation of magic realism pigeonholes a text because it “negate[s] the ability of art to reflect other ontologies, to be political, and to possess aesthetic qualities, thereby trivializing the fiction” (Taylor-Guthrie xii). Furthermore, because there is a fine line between fantasy and magic realism, Morrison used to be apprehensive that the label would diminish her work’s purposes, particularly the realism of the stories and the political aspects present in them. Morrison’s concern about the ability of the label to reduce the political nature of her work, that is, her social commentary, demonstrates that this is one of the areas of utmost importance to her. Knowing that the body is a historical marker, Morrison creates disabled characters to serve as intermediaries between her and readers¹⁴.

At the beginning of the novel, Beloved is a ghostly figure that haunts Sethe’s house at 124 Bluestone Road. She then appears in flesh in the body of a young woman, but with the mind of Sethe’s real daughter whom Sethe killed at the age of two. Thus, Beloved is of this world and another and inhabits a body older than the spirit’s mind. Furthermore, in fleshly form, she is simultaneously young and old and attractive and repulsive. When Beloved appears in corporeal form, she is described

as having “new skin, lineless and smooth, including the knuckles on her hands,” (50) but her voice is abrasive and harsh. Also, she appears to be a young, slender woman about twenty years old, but moves “like a heavier one or an older one” (56).

Finally, near the end of the novel, before the townswomen exorcise Beloved, she appears impregnated with wild hair and eyes—much different than the beginning of the novel when her eyes could barely stay open. The difference is due to the fact that Beloved has literally eaten all of the food in the house and metaphorically speaking, Sethe as well. After staying at 124 for some time, all Beloved does is eat. Because Beloved’s love for Sethe becomes suffocating, and Sethe feels so much guilt, knowing who Beloved is, Sethe does whatever Beloved wants. As a result, Sethe loses her job and the means to feed them. Nevertheless, Beloved gets bigger. She metaphorically eats Sethe who fulfills the child role rather than the mother: “The bigger Beloved got, the smaller Sethe became; the brighter Beloved’s eyes, the more those eyes that used never to look away becomes slits of sleeplessness” (250). Not understanding the choice that Sethe made to kill her, Beloved viciously “ate up her [Sethe] life, took it, swelled up with it, grew taller on it” (250). Thus, while Beloved originally has a symbiotic relationship with Sethe, the relationship becomes parasitic with Beloved eating her host.

Beloved is also grotesque because she embodies, as Corey and others have pointed out, both the negative and “positive” grotesque. In “The Religious Dimensions of the Grotesque in Literature: Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*” and “Toward the Limits of Mystery: The Grotesque in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*,” Susan Corey argues that Morrison employs Mikhail Bakhtin’s and Wolfgang Kayser’s definitions

of the grotesque in the novel. Considered by many to be the “positive” version of the grotesque, Bahktin believes that the grotesque is characterized by redemption and renewal, through, as Corey says, “contact with the non-rational, the body, the unconscious, or the imagination” (“The Religious Dimensions of the Grotesque in Literature: Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* 232). Furthermore, as Philip Thomson addresses in his book, *The Grotesque*, for Bahktin, the contact that occurs is “essentially physical, referring always to the body and bodily excesses and celebrating these in an uninhibited, outrageous but essentially joyous fashion” (56). In her articles, Corey discusses an example of celebration when she cites the carnival that Sethe, Paul D, and Denver attend. Like the carnivals of the Middle Ages (from which Bahktin draws his ideas), carnivals renew the spirit and mind. At carnivals, people have the opportunity to eat, play, sing, socialize and laugh, among many other things. By being able to participate in these things, carnival goers forget their fears and worries. In the case of Denver, Sethe, and Paul D, they can forget, if only for a little while, their oppressive pasts and current problems due to discrimination by whites and ostracism from much of the black community because of Sethe’s actions. Much spiritual renewal also occurs because the three characters have the opportunity to laugh. Bahktin believes that laughter provides a “means of overcoming fear and celebrating a common humanity” (“Toward the Limits of Mystery: The Grotesque in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* 38).

As Corey points out, it is no mistake that *Beloved* first appears right after Sethe, Paul D, and Denver come home from the carnival. Feeling freer than they ever have, the three are open to the stranger and the new possibilities she invites. Corey

states, “Their contact with Beloved raises questions they have avoided and sets in motion the recovery of repressed memories, a connection that is painful but crucial for the process” (“Toward the Limits of Mystery” 37). And for some time, Beloved’s presence at 124 is rejuvenating. In fact, a carnival of sorts takes place in Sethe’s house, with Sethe, Denver, and Beloved eating sweets, dancing, laughing, playing games, fixing one another’s hair and wearing bright-colored “carnival” (as it is repeatedly called in the novel) clothing. It seems that Beloved’s return is a renewal for Denver and Sethe. However, while the presence of Beloved forces Sethe and Paul D to remember their pasts and deal with repressed emotions, Beloved takes control near the end, creating an oppressive lifestyle for Sethe and Denver. Her power over Sethe seems to squash any hope for Sethe or Denver, which is why Denver actually leaves 124 to go to town in search of work. Thus, the bodily form of Beloved is particularly grotesque, because it “contributes to the dialectical tension between the positive and negative grotesque” (Corey, “Toward the Limits of Mystery” 37).

As has been mentioned, both the positive and negative grotesque involves laughter. So whether it is laughter to renew a deadened spirit or laughter juxtaposed with something terrible, fearful, disgusting or horrendous with the purpose of lessening the emotional affects of horrific circumstances, laughter is at the core of the grotesque. Without a doubt, Morrison recognizes the power of laughter. When I asked her about the grotesque in her novels, I did not specifically mention any particular critic, because I was curious to see how she would respond. She immediately said that the grotesque provides a sense of agency. I knew from this response that Morrison was probably thinking of Bakhtin’s work. Morrison cited the

ability of art and music to elevate one's mood. She also specifically talked about laughter. She referred to the part in *Beloved* when Stamp Paid and Paul D poke fun at Sethe's attempted murder of Mr. Bodwin, who ironically keeps her from the gallows when she kills her children. More specifically, the two first talk about how in her delusional state, Sethe attempts to kill Bodwin, because she believes him to be Schoolteacher. Paul D jokes that Sethe is crazy, and Stamp Paid retorts with, "Yeah, well, ain't we all?" (265). The two begin to laugh in agreement because the joke's "seriousness and embarrassment made them shake with laughter" (265). They then hyperbolize Sethe's fearfulness and previous actions by surmising that every time a white man comes to the door, she will kill him, and therefore it is a good thing that the postman does not deliver mail that far out in the country. While seemingly cruel, the jokes between the men help them to cope with Sethe's actions, all of their situations, and the guilt they feel for not helping Sethe as they should have. Morrison believes that comments, such as Stamp Paid's, permit readers to digest horrific and tragic occurrences (Baker-Putt). Creating some scenarios, like the aforementioned one, that spark some laughter makes perfect sense, because people's minds often use humor to deal with pain. By inserting humor in *Beloved*, readers are able, as Morrison says, to "absorb" the totality of Sethe's fear, pain, mental state, and suffering (Baker-Putt).

Classifying Morrison's Literary Grotesques as Modern Grotesque

Thus far, I have argued that Morrison's disabled characters can be categorized into the postmodern grotesque. However, this might not always be the case. There seem to be cases where Morrison fails in her efforts not to transcend pathology.

Thus, the pertinent question is: Does Morrison, despite having the intent of focusing on the institutional, cultural, educational, and societal machines that “cause” such disabilities, ever reinscribe biology? I believe she does. Undoubtedly, Morrison self-invents grotesque characters in an effort to reveal the stigmatization of blacks in America. However, Morrison could have accomplished the exposure of racism, sexism, and classicism and how these intersect and are exacerbated by one another and by capitalism, without the use of disabled bodies. By choosing to use disabilities as a “self-invention” strategy, Morrison is taking advantage of long-held perceptions and attitudes toward disabled persons. In this vein, she takes advantage, but with a seeming purpose: She knows readers will instantly react upon reading about disabled bodies, so she creates characters with disabilities for the purposes of disabling readers. However, using disabled figures to advocate a cause is technically postmodern grotesque. Sheri Hoem in “Disabling Postmodernism: Wideman, Morrison and the Prosthetic Critique” says that authors using postmodern grotesque must seemingly take advantage of disabled persons in order to expose other ills. More specifically, Hoem states, “...postmodernism self-consciously critiques (and it is a political gesture) signifying systems and the limitations of representation, including its own inescapable collusion in the very process it attempts to dis/embody, or dis/able” (196). To illustrate the collusion of which Hoem speaks, Mitchell analyzes Katherine Dunn’s postmodern novel, *Geek Love*. He says that novels such as *Geek Love* do not “transcend an abject matter” (348), because they involve themselves “in the very ‘art’ and language of the grotesque” (349). This is exactly

what Morrison does: she uses the disabled to embody historical struggles of African Americans.

Still, I argue that some characters' biological deficiencies remain the focus. More specifically, I think of Heed Cosey in *Love*. Her crippled hands are repeatedly mentioned throughout the novel. Because her hands are so arthritic, she can do very little for herself and therefore requires the services of Bill Cosey's granddaughter, Christine Cosey, who takes care of the cooking, cleaning and other duties. There is no doubt that Heed's hands are symbolic. As the child-bride and second wife to Bill Cosey, Heed's childhood was stripped from her. Heed's hands are emblematic of how Cosey crippled her life, taking away her childhood and destroying her relationship with Christine, who was her best friend before the marriage. However, the symbolism loses its effect very quickly, because too much emphasis is placed on Heed's inability to do things around the house. Because of the repeated focus on her disability, reinscribing occurs, because readers tend to view Heed's hands as simply crippled, therefore requiring the services of others. In fact, much of the plot centers on Heed's arthritic hands and therefore they are used as a narratological strategy. If Heed didn't have arthritic hands, then much of plot could not take place. Three important characters—and some other characters that have connections to the three—either primarily exist or only exist to assist Heed. If it were not for Christine Cosey, Junior Viviane, or Romen Gibbons, all aides to Heed, segments of the plot would be eliminated.

Another character whose disability is reinscribed is that of Beloved as she appears in the movie version played by Thandie Newton. It is safe to say that

hundreds of thousands, if not millions of people, anticipated the movie version of *Beloved*. In the preface on her book, Oprah Winfrey says that she was so touched by *Beloved* that she “wanted people to be able to feel deeply on a very personal level what it meant to be a slave, what slavery did to a people, and also to be liberated by that knowledge” and for these reasons she immediately contacted Toni Morrison to ask permission to make the novel into a movie for the public to see.

I went to see the movie. However, I felt little about what it must have meant to be a slave. I am somewhat ashamed to admit it but I did not read the book prior to viewing the movie. I clearly remember my responses during the movie to include sheer confusion and disgust. As I left the movie theater, I kept questioning, What I am missing? I figured my confusion of the plot and disgust with the characterization had to be due to the fact that I had not read the novel and more than likely a lot had been cut from the novel in order to put it on the screen. I would come to find out that many others who had actually read the book did not like the movie either. I eventually did read the novel. After having read the novel, I understood what went wrong. While Winfrey’s motives were altruistic and heartfelt, there is a huge disconnect in the movie compared to the novel. In the novel, readers make connections with the characters, because we recognize the confusion and pain they must have felt as slaves. There is a clear connection between characters’ bodies and the injustices perpetrated upon them. And while readers may find Sethe’s action of attempting to kill her children grotesque, most find it understandable. In other words, there is a clear picture of what slaves endured and therefore, Sethe’s actions, as well

as the actions of others, make sense. In the movie version the connection is not clear and is sometimes completely off of the mark.

For instance, a major reason the movie fails is because of an addition at the beginning of the novel. Since the addition sets the tone for the movie and puts much emphasis on Beloved as a wild, malicious, supernatural being, the scene is confusing and gruesome. At the beginning of the movie, the family dog Here Boy is shown flying through the air and landing bloodied and broken, with his eye popped out. Sethe, played by Oprah Winfrey, then commences restoring the eye to the socket and setting the broken bones. No such scene occurs in the novel. Given that this is the first scene in the film version, it sets the scene for a haunted house but even more so than in the novel. In her article, “Freak Shows, Spectacles, and Carnivals: Reading Jonathan Demme’s *Beloved*,” Anissa Janine Wardi recounts her experiences of viewing the movie and in particular the first scene. She reports that she heard others proclaim, “‘This chick’s [Toni Morrison] fucked up; This is like the Exorcist’” (“Freak Shows, Spectacles, and Carnivals: Reading Jonathan Demme’s *Beloved*” 513). Comparing *The Exorcist* to *Beloved*, the novel makes Wardi (and others) want to scream with frustration—or perhaps cry at the disillusionment. The theatrical escapades of the haunting in the movie are outlandish, making it impossible to see that Beloved is “rememory” (Wardi; “Freak Shows, Spectacles, and Carnivals: Reading Jonathan Demme’s *Beloved*” 513). There is no clear connection—at least initially, since it is the beginning of the movie—between Beloved, the daughter Sethe kills to protect from slavery, and the ghost that haunts the house. Thus, the connection between the realities of slavery and the haunting is non-existent. The

addition of Here Boy's attack is pure sensationalism. In the novel, Buglar's last straw is a shattered mirror; for Howard, it is two small handprints in a cake. For neither, is it a dog that flies through the air and is smashed into the wall before falling to the ground or the red flickering lights that Paul D sees when he enters the room for the first time. The sensationalizing of Here Boy invites viewers to fixate on the horrendous and peculiar event that they have seen, especially since Sethe literally handles Here Boy's protruding eye. Basically the addition of Here Boy is the epitome of the colloquial definition of the grotesque—bizarre and disgusting.

The main reason the movie is troublesome is that the characterization of Beloved is wide of the mark. Once—or if—viewers comprehend the relationship between Beloved in physical form, the ghost in spiritual form, and Sethe's daughter who is dead and technically unnamed, Beloved's body is not transcendent. The hoarse and raspy voice is overdone throughout the movie. At the end of the movie, Beloved's hair is the stereotypical wild African Medusa-type hair. And the impregnated belly protrudes so much, particularly in the final scene before Beloved disappears, that it is hard to take the character seriously. Wardi agrees, saying that the film is "bereft of the novel's metaphoric power" and that the character of Beloved is a "filmic spectacle" ("Freak Shows, Spectacles, and Carnivals: Reading Jonathan Demme's *Beloved*" 514). Given the fact that Beloved is the main character, it becomes very difficult to understand the gravity of her situation to that of Sethe's. In her book detailing the experiences of making the movie, Winfrey says that the novel "doesn't intellectually *show* you the picture. It puts a human face on it and makes it so personal you feel the pain" (19). Unfortunately, because the movie is a spectacle, a

human face is not shown in the character of *Beloved* and thus, the movie does not do justice to her character or the novel as a whole.

An even better example of reinscription occurs in *Sula*. In *Sula*, the title character Sula Peace has a large and unique birthmark above her eye. Sula's marking is unique in that it is perceived differently by different people, and herein lies a reasoning behind the birthmark fitting into the modern grotesque. Throughout the novel, Sula's birthmark is interpreted as a rose, a tadpole, a copperhead, and ashes. Because characters interpret Sula's disability differently, the birthmark is merely viewed as a body part rather than one major symbol that can clearly be linked to oppressive institutions. Similar to Heed's arthritis advancing and contributing to the plot in *Love*, the different interpretations are part of the narratological strategy of the novel. In essence, characters and the narrator "read" Sula's birthmark differently based on their relationship with her. At the beginning of the novel, there is an epigraph from Tennessee Williams's play *The Rose Tattoo*. Presumably, Sula is the speaker of the epigraph (or at the very least represents her character): "Nobody knew my rose of the world but me.... I had too much glory. They don't want glory like that in nobody's heart." Immediately, upon Sula's return to the Bottom in Medallion, Ohio, the townspeople began trying to define her—hence the interpretations. However, she is the only one to understand herself, and the community does not like Sula's philosophies and beliefs.

Originally, the narrator refers to the birthmark as a rose: "a birthmark that spread from the middle of the lid toward the eyebrow, shaped something like a stemmed rose" (52). Later, when the backstory is told of Sula as an adolescent

watching her mother literally burning alive, the birthmark is described in terms of ashes: “it was not a stemmed rose... it was Hannah’s ashes marking her from the very beginning” (114). Upon meeting her for the first time, Jude, Sula’s best friend Nel’s husband, comments that Sula is not “exactly plain, but not fine either, with a copperhead over her eye” (103). Finally, Shadrack, the shell-shocked war veteran defines the birthmark as a fish: “She had a tadpole over her eye” (156). Each character’s interpretation of the birthmark is significant to the characters and to the plot of the novel. The rose interpretation positions Sula as a misunderstood woman, because as the epigraph insinuates, “They don’t want glory like that.” Shadrack’s rendition, as well as the narrator’s, of the birthmark is symbolic of Sula constantly learning, experimenting, and growing as an individual. Rosemarie Garland Thomson also believes that the categorization of a rose situates Sula as representing grace and love (“Speaking about the Unspeakable” 244). The ashes demonstrate the townspeople’s belief that Sula was responsible for her mother’s death, and therefore the birthmark serves as a reminder of that act. Jude’s interpretation provides foreshadowing, as well as posits Sula as an evil sinner. As a snake, she is a temptress to Jude. While he describes her as a decent looking person, she still is able to seduce him, causing a huge rift among Nel, Jude, and herself. After describing her looks, Jude says, “she looked like a woman roaming the country trying to find some man to burden down with a lot of lip...” (103). Accordingly, Jude’s interpretation of Sula as a snake implies that she is essentially a wild woman because she does not adhere to traditional female roles and, as a result, will not be tamed.

Written by Cindy LaCom, the essay, “It is More than Lame: Female Disability, Sexuality, and the Maternal in the Nineteenth Century Novel,” explores reasons why authors during the 19th century included disabled women in their fiction. The major conclusion is that disabled women’s bodies were symbolic of women who were sexually deviant. While Morrison’s novel is obviously not a 19th century text, given Jude’s interpretation of the birthmark and Sula’s sexual prowess and attitudes toward sexual relations and marriage, much of what Cindy LaCom says holds true for the character of Sula. A deformed female body, according to LaCom, “plays up the connection between ‘deformed’ body and deformed principles” (193). Sula comes back to her hometown childless and husbandless, having gone to college in a city. Upon returning to the Bottom, Sula remains childless and husbandless, having slept with plenty of men, but never committing to any of them. The four Cs—college, city life, casual sex, and childless—make Sula an anomaly compared to the dutiful mothers and wives who inhabit the Bottom. Sula’s lifestyle is a threat to the others, and therefore she is viewed as the *other*:

Their evidence against Sula was contrived, but their conclusions about her were not. Sula was distinctly different. Eva’s arrogance and Hannah’s self-indulgence merged in her and...she lived her days exploring her own thoughts and emotions, giving them full reign, feeling no obligation to please anybody unless their pleasure pleased her. (118)

Such self-indulgence and exploratory learning do not mesh with the sentiment of the townswomen. While Sula is on her deathbed, Nel tells her, “You *can’t* do it all. You

a woman and a colored woman at that. You can't act like a man. You can't be walking all independent-like, doing whatever you like, taking what you want..." (142). Sula's independence, intelligence, free will, and philosophies about life are infuriating and mysterious to others, which is one reason why they all analyze her birthmark differently.

LaCom also mentions another basis for linking a disabled woman's body to sexual deviance. Using D.A. Miller as her source, LaCom speaks of female characters that must be eliminated from their respective stories in order for the stories to have happy endings. In particular, LaCom analyzes Madame Neroni from Anthony Trollope's *Barchester Towers*. Like Sula, Madame Neroni challenges the norm, and in order to maintain the status quo, she must assimilate or be expelled. In the cases of Madame Neroni and Sula Peace, they both exit the story. Sula exits, because she dies, and her death is a celebration. In fact, most of the townspeople go to her funeral just to ensure that she is dead. Very similar to the results of Madame Neroni's expulsion, the town of Bottom has a happy ending immediately after Sula's death: "just *after* she was dead a brighter day was dawning. There were signs" (151). The signs come in the form of jobs opening up for the black folks of the Bottom and for a new a old-folks home that would permit black folks as occupants. Thus, in order for "a strong sense of hope" (151), characters like Sula who challenge traditional notions of womanhood must depart the narrative.

Even though Sula's birthmark—at least to some extent—and her story reveal oppressive patriarchal notions, she remains an elusive character who is ultimately viewed as evil. Because many interpret her as an evil character, her disability

therefore is not transcendent. As discussed, physical aberrancies have often been used in literature as metaphors for evil. Interestingly, the mark of ashes and the mark of the copperhead seem to not only negate, but take precedence in the minds of readers and critics. Almost all scholarly discussion regarding *Sula* has to do with whether to classify her as an evil character. In *Conversations with Toni Morrison* edited by Danille Taylor-Guthrie, there are a number of interviews which address *Sula* and in which Toni Morrison is asked if *Sula* is evil. And Morrison's responses are somewhat ambivalent. In her 1976 interview with Robert Stepto, Morrison says that *Sula* is a "classic type of evil force" (12). Yet, in her interview with Anne Koenen in 1980, Morrison declares that *Sula* is not "evil as a single person, but she was used as though she were" (68). While these responses seem to be polar opposites, Morrison is implying that she created a character that is not innately evil; rather, the townspeople view her as evil, because she acts in manners so differently from their own. Furthermore, notions of evil are different for Morrison's characters—and for many black people who practice African cosmologies. Morrison discusses the differences in her interview with Betty Jean Parker. Morrison says that she has always known people who "may or may not be superstitious but look at the world differently" (61). While exploring superstitious concepts, Morrison keeps these individuals in mind as she considers how they view evil and what they would do with it (62). Morrison says that black people believe that "evil has a natural place in the universe," and therefore they do not "avoid," "defend," or "annihilate" it (62).

Arguments could be made that creating *Sula* as a disabled character places her as a postmodern grotesque. However, by and large, the fact that *Sula*'s disability is

seemingly in flux makes it difficult to link the disability with a causal agent. Thus, Sula's marking is not transcendent. Furthermore, because there is so much emphasis on Sula as an evil character, particularly from a Western perspective, she is a modern grotesque. Like so many characters in literature with atypical physical characteristics, her character cannot escape traditional characterizations wherein a physical anomaly is representative of an intrinsically evil being.

Toni Morrison's novels promote and elucidate the importance of knowing one's heritage and culture and having a connection to one's family and home. These are some of the "useful" "things" to which Morrison refers in her statement that opens this chapter. Moreover, Morrison is able to provide "nourishment" in her novels through the characterization technique of creating physically disabled characters that help others characters in the novels—and by extension, black readers (the audience Morrison identifies). More specifically, Morrison's disabled characters are primarily women because women have historically been repositories of cultural knowledge, and as such, act as the sources of rootedness for other characters. As mentioned, Pilate Dead pilots Milkman to his roots; similarly, Marie Therese Foucault leads Son to the blind horsemen of Isle de Chevaliers, his new home. Thus, to provide nourishment through useful aspects of heritage, culture and rootedness, Morrison creates disabled women who teach characters and readers these lessons. Badt emphasizes these points perfectly when she says that the "return to the mother [who, we must not forget, is disabled] to repair the self should be understood as a political project to repair the black mother—to restore her dignity and value in the 'hostile white environment' in which she would have no value" (568-569)

While situating a conversation about disabled bodies into a discussion of the grotesque might seem to reinforce stereotypes, it is, nonetheless, a valuable dialogue to have given Morrison's treatment of disabled people. As Lennard Davis points out in the opening quote, it is important to "reverse the hegemony of the normal and to institute alternative ways of thinking about the abnormal." By constructing characters with disabilities who are the protectors, leaders, and teachers of other characters, alternate ways of thinking about the abnormal are accomplished. Furthermore, the postmodern grotesque urges writers to collude in the very acts which might seem to counteract their purposes: using disabled characters to resituate the status of disabled people is an example of this. More specifically, Morrison constructs characters with disabilities to expose social ills and systems of oppressions (the 'hostile white environments' to which Badt refers) and the stigmatization of blacks in America. Morrison takes advantage in the sense that she knows that readers will react to bodies that are aberrant or technically disabled (according to the Americans with Disabilities Act). Such bodies historically have been viewed as anomalies and thus simultaneously evoke repulsion and intrigue for those who see them (or in this case, read about them). And while these bodies are symbolic—and thus being taken advantage of—the point is to expose the institutions that "cause" such disabilities, thereby making characters' bodies transcendent of the disabilities themselves. For instance, Pecola "mutilating" herself and Pauline's grotesque rotten teeth demonstrate the effects that Western standards of beauty have had on black, female adolescents and women who compare themselves to their "ideal-looking," white counterparts. Eva Peace's amputated leg reveals her limitations as a poor, black woman living in a

racist, capitalistic world. Golden Gray's "missing" arm symbolizes his predicament of being a mulatto, living in a world where he does not really belong to either race. The multiple characters' bodies in *Beloved* expose the atrocities committed by white supremacists against the sixty million or more slaves to whom the novel is dedicated.

Endnotes

¹ See “Disabled Women as Powerful Women in Petry, Morrison, and Lorde: Revising Black Female Subjectivity” in *The Body and Physical Difference: Discourses of Disability* edited by David T. Mitchell and Sharon Snyder; “Speaking about the Unspeakable: The Representation of Disability as Stigma in Toni Morrison’s Novels”; and *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disabilities in American Literature and Culture*.

² In the chapter, “Disabled Women as Powerful Women in Petry, Morrison, and Lorde: Revising Black Female Subjectivity,” Rosemarie Garland Thomson highlights additional reasons why positing disabled persons into discussions of the grotesque is problematic. Because of reasons Garland Thomson cites, she uses the term, “marked,” instead of “disabled” and “pariah” instead of “grotesque figure.” It should be noted that Morrison uses the term “pariah” as well.

³ Merish’s article makes a strong connection between the concept of “cuteness” to historical practice of using little people in freak shows, to Shirley Temple and, finally, to Pecola Breedlove in *The Bluest Eye*.

⁴ Additional information about freak shows and their impact can be found in the works of disability scholars such as Lennard Davis, Rosemarie Garland Thomson, and David Mitchell.

⁵ It is interesting to note that in her book *The Feminist Difference: Literature, Psychoanalysis, Race, and Gender*, Barbara Johnson contends that Morrison’s idea of the rootedness of home and place is achieved “precisely by writing under the sign of uprootedness” (75). This theory could easily apply to Morrison’s ideas of love and

mothering as well. It is, therefore, I argue, no stretch that Morrison creates “normal” people who are under the guise of being self-actualized and vice versa. Readers are then tricked to believe, at least for a while or perhaps for a long while or indefinitely (depending on the reader), that the disabled characters are the ones who are lacking self-confidence, knowledge, and awareness. However, this is not the case: the disabled persons are purposely undermined by their physical disabilities in order to highlight their strength and power within the novels.

⁶ Bernard McElroy uses this term in reference to disabilities that are too troublesome to view and that are linked to divine intervention or supernatural causes.

⁷ There is a further connection between one’s ancestry and appreciation of and ability to work the land. Toward the end of Milkman’s journey for knowledge about his family, he learns about his family’s agricultural skills and hunting. Milkman’s selfhood is symbolized through the hunting initiation. Thus, by the end of the novel, Milkman’s knowledge of self, family and nature is similar to Pilate’s.

⁸ Ajax’s mother, in *Sula*, is also a rootworker and obeah.

⁹ Milkman craves small stones while a fetus. Interestingly, upon first meeting Pilate, he says that she made him “think of pebbles. Little round pebbles . . .” (40).

¹⁰ In “Disabled Women as Powerful Women in Petry, Morrison, and Lorde: Revising Black Female Subjectivity,” Rosemarie Garland Thomson compares Marie Therese Foucault to Tiresias, the blind seer in Greek mythology.

¹¹ Not being able to easily connect (post)modern grotesque to (post)modern time periods is illustrated well in David Mitchell’s discussion of Katherine Dunn’s novel, *Geek Love*. Written in the postmodern period, this novel employs modern grotesque.

¹² The number of similarities that can be drawn between monomaniacal characters in *Winesburg, Ohio* and monomaniacal characters in Morrison's novels is notable. Two characters from *Winesburg, Ohio* seem to be prototypes: Wing Biddlebaum and Alice Hindman. Wing and Pecola are comparable, as are Alice and Hagar. Wing prefers to hide because of a distinguishing characteristic—his active hands, which also make him a productive and effective worker, but strangely he does not acknowledge this. Pecola prefers to hide, feeling inferior because of her blackness and even when she “receives” blue eyes, she strangely still hides, despite the newly received “beauty.” Thus, even though their features are positive in some ways, Wing and Pecola remain on the outskirts of their respective communities, largely due to the fact that they are obsessed with their eyes and hands, respectively. And interestingly, Wing is named for the same actions Pecola performs in the novel: his hands—due to their constant activity—are like the “beating of the wings of an imprisoned bird” (the same bird images of Pecola folding into herself like an imprisoned bird). Alice Hindman's story parallels that of Hagar. Both women are obsessed with men who have jilted them. Like Hagar, sixteen-year-old Alice has a relationship with a man. When he leaves to go to work in the city, he promises he will come back for her, but he never does. In the meantime, Alice naively believes he will come back and saves herself for him. As years pass by, Alice, like Hagar, begins to panic because she is aging and has no prospects. Eventually, by the time she is twenty-seven, Alice breaks down and at one point runs naked through the town. Clearly, both women suffer from the societal pressure to be the object of a man's desires by marrying before they are so-called old

maids. And because neither woman is able to attain this goal, she becomes obsessed with her former lover and goes insane.

¹³ The story of “The Sand-Man” is not an easy one to summarize. The story revolves around the main character Nathaniel as he ages from childhood into adulthood.

Knowing his father occasionally works with the “Sand-Man” in the evenings, Nathaniel is curious about the visitor. Nathaniel’s nurse tells him that the Sand-Man is a horrible man who throws sand into children’s eyes and then carries off the eyes in a sack to feed to his children. Not readily believing the story, Nathaniel spies on his father and the Sand-Man one evening to discover that the Sand-Man seems to be a lawyer by the name of Coppelius. Coppelius attempts to throw coal from the fire into his eyes, but Nathaniel’s father saves him while Nathaniel passes out. One year later, Nathaniel’s father mysteriously dies in an explosion in his study while the Sand-Man is present, but he quickly disappears for a long time until Nathaniel is a student at university. While a college student, Nathaniel meets Giuseppe Coppola, an optician, who offers Nathaniel a pair of spy glasses. While looking through the glasses, Nathaniel spies Olympia, a wooden doll, who he believes is a real woman and with whom he falls in love from a distance. One day, though, he visits Olympia to discover that her owner Spalanzani made her and that Coppola created her eyes. Coppola and Spalanzani argue over the doll, with Coppola taking the eyeless doll and Spalanzani picking up the bleeding eyes and throwing them at Nathaniel, who falls into a fit of madness, remembering his father’s mysterious death when the Sand-Man was present. After suffering from an extended illness for some time, Nathaniel once again meets the Sand-Man, also known as Coppelius, also known as Coppola, only

this time back in the persona of Coppelius. Their final meeting ends with Nathaniel committing suicide by throwing himself off of a tower because he spots Coppelius below, talking about eyes, and thus remembers all of his past experiences. The overall idea of the story is the gruesome thought of being robbed of one's eyes. Alix Strachey offers a more detailed summary in his translation of Freud's "The Uncanny."

¹⁴Morrison's 1986 interview with Christina Davis provides much detail as to why Morrison went from rejecting the label of magic realism to being indifferent to it. Refer specifically to pages 225-226.

CONCLUSION

Since the original usage, the grotesque in art and literature has been loosely, as well as specifically defined by different critics. Additionally, aspects of extended definitions of the concept have some similar traits but also contain traits that seem contradictory. Most, like Geoffrey Harpham, agree that the concept of the grotesque has changed over time. In his article, Harpham briefly talks about how homosexuality was portrayed to be associated with necrophilia and how black people were almost always reduced to caricatures because people more or less felt threatened by these groups of individuals. Harpham declares that each “age redefines the grotesque in terms of what threatens its sense of essential humanity” (463), and in modern-day society, what threatens humanity is rarely the devil, demons, or God; rather, it is “man himself” and therefore grotesqueries in literature often reveal the inner struggles characters face as a result of their fears, fantasies, guilt, or confusion (McElroy 21). Morrison’s uses and roles of the grotesque certainly fit the modern-day application.

In the Introduction, I offered a fairly comprehensive list of Morrison’s seeming purposes of writing. I offer the list again: educating readers about African and African American cultures (primarily folklore and religion); telling stories that have never been told or have been neglected (primarily those related to the female slave experience); emphasizing the importance of the oral tradition; stressing the importance of one’s roots in the formation of self; and exposing interlocking systems of race, class, and gender that negatively affect black persons. Morrison is in part

able to achieve many of these goals because of the functions and purposes of the grotesque. In his book, Philip Thomson specifically identifies five functions and purposes of the grotesque—the unintentional grotesque, aggressiveness and alienation, the psychological effect, tension and unresolvability, and playfulness—some of which are interrelated. Arguably, many of the purposes and functions are part of Morrison’s objectives of using the grotesque in her works.

As Thomson explains, sometimes the grotesque is accidental because writing is often subconscious rather than calculated. One could dispute that some of the grotesque actions, scenes, and characters I have identified are merely unintentional grotesques, that Morrison had no planned purpose. However, I think that people would be hard-pressed to do so—at least in most cases. Rather, I believe that Morrison uses the grotesque as part of her social and political aesthetic. Similarly, one could argue that the grotesque characters, scenes, and events are a by-product of Morrison’s inventiveness (i.e., playfulness, as Thomson calls it) with form and structure. However, it seems to me that at least in some cases, Morrison’s use of stream-of-consciousness, non-linear plots and narrations, and so on, aid in establishing her goals, particularly that of revealing estrangement. For example, as discussed in Chapter One, in *The Bluest Eye*, the structure of the novel into particular seasons helps to demonstrate Pecola’s gradual self-destruction over time. The same is true with using the writing from a primer: as Pecola’s state of mind and circumstances continue to deteriorate, the more the writing becomes nonsensical and unidentifiable.

Estrangement from oneself includes lack of self-awareness and self-love which is evident in many of Morrison's characters, including the Breedloves, Hagar Dead, and Joe and Violet Trace, to name a few. As detailed in Chapter One, Pauline and Pecola Breedlove have no love of self and thus fall into the trap of idolizing famous white actresses who epitomize Western standards of beauty. As such, the mother-daughter duo suffer from monomania: each becomes fixated on the truth that she is ugly and cannot and will not be loved unless Western standards of beauty are attained. In addition to creating monomaniacal characters, Morrison creates grotesque scenes involving them. Several of those scenes occur because of comical elements (i.e., psychological effects). For example, the comical, yet sad scene involving Pauline in the movie theater really emphasizes her fixation and the power that Western ideologies can have over people. Hagar Dead and Violet and Joe Trace demonstrate their lack of self-esteem by becoming obsessed with their "lovers". As discussed in Chapter Two, Hagar Dead is obsessed with her cousin Milkman Dead. Similar to Pauline and Pecola, she becomes monomaniacal in two ways—desperately wanting to become physically like another woman Milkman dates, and stalking and attempting to kill Milkman, because he rejects her. Also discussed in Chapter Two is the love triangle between Violet and Joe Trace and Dorcas Manfred. Interestingly, Joe and Violet are obsessed with Dorcas—Joe because he and Dorcas once had a fling and Violet, because she wants to understand why Joe would leave her to be with Dorcas.

In modern day, estrangement also includes a falling off from myth or god (McElroy 131). Not surprisingly, one of Morrison's goals is to stress to African

American readers the importance of one's roots to the African culture. The grotesque provides opportunities for Morrison to show the importance of being rooted. As discussed in Chapter Three, in many of Morrison's novels, black women are the source of cultural knowledge. These women use their foremothers' and fathers' knowledge (showing the importance of the oral tradition) to get the wayward (almost always young people) on track and to serve as foils to those like Jadine who reject their heritage. Not surprisingly, the women's repository of knowledge is grounded in myth. The connection of folklore and mythology to the African American community is particularly germane to any discussion of *Song of Solomon*, *Tar Baby* and *Beloved*. In *Song of Solomon* and *Tar Baby* respectively, root workers like Pilate Dead and Marie Therese Foucault lead the male characters to their destinies—Son with the Blind horsemen and Milkman Dead with other flying Africans. In *Beloved*, characters like Beloved become plausible—thereby setting the entire plot in motion—because of African cosmologies, something which Morrison vehemently supports.

Another identified goal of Morrison's is to tell stories that have been neglected. The story that Morrison is most associated with—and therefore is the most discussed—is that of Sethe and her immediate family in *Beloved*. As discussed in Chapter Three, by creating a story that is situated in this world and another and that has both elements of the positive and negative grotesque, Morrison is able to discuss slavery from an angle that few others have rivaled—if at all. And while slavery has not been a neglected story, it is often presented and received dispassionately. This is not the case with *Beloved*. Using the grotesque, Morrison is able to create characters and events that seem real, while at the same time, shock and confuse readers. The

grotesque visual images that Morrison paints with her words cannot be erased from the mind's eye. And finally, the killer motherlove, a love so selfish, yet humane, all act as "aggressive weapon[s]" through alienation, that is, taking something familiar and making it unfamiliar, thereby providing a new perspective (Thomson 58).

Morrison takes something that is a fairly familiar topic to most people and presents it in a much different way. The new perspective-taking is possible because of the psychological effects of comical elements and other incompatibles in, as Thomson says, "work and effect," causing people, in this case readers, to consider Morrison's possible underlying aims (61). And while the book is dedicated to the sixty million or more former African and African American slaves, one of Morrison's aims seems to be focusing on the female and children slave experiences, an area that seems to be more neglected than the overall slave experience.

In addition to the indisputable demoralizing system of slavery, Morrison also addresses other oppressive systems in her writing that have negatively impacted black persons and does so using the grotesque. Primarily by creating disabled characters, Morrison is able to reveal corrupt systems. As discussed in length in Chapter Three, Morrison uses corporeality as a means to expose sexist, racist, and inadequate social, cultural, and educational systems. As opposed to the use of modernist grotesque, which Morrison also makes use of, the postmodern grotesque bodies are transcendent. We clearly recognize the use of characters' bodies as symbols and not as a character flaws. For example, as listed and discussed in Chapter One and Three respectively, Pecola and Pauline Breedlove's conditions implore readers to investigate the "causes" of their desires to be and look like other people, as well as their behaviors to achieve

those desires. Chapter One also beseeches readers to consider characters like Claudia, who, unlike Pecola and Pauline, act as voices of resistance. In Chapter Three, Golden Gray's "missing" arm is symbolic of his estrangement from his father, his race, and thus himself. And lastly, the bodies of the slave characters in *Beloved* are examples of the postmodern grotesque, because readers do not see the markings and deformations as a reflection of the characters' personalities or shortcomings, but rather as reflections upon a system that advocated the abuse, lynching and degradation—sexual or otherwise¹—of black people. Thus, the physical embodiment of *Beloved*, and Sethe's tree and Paul D's necklace, for example, show the tragedies of slavery. Similarly, the modern grotesque makes use of bodies as a means to depict corrupt systems, but does not do so without reinscribing pathology. As discussed in Chapter Three, examples of the modern grotesque could include *Beloved* (only as portrayed in the movie version), *Heed Cosey*, and *Sula*. Moreover, even Pilate Dead could classify as a modern grotesque. Even still, all of these characters serve important roles, many as examples of voices of resistance. Pilate, for example, would arguably not have the same power and aura in the novel if not for her navel-less body. The navel-less body establishes her as part of nature and consequently as having otherworldly, mythic knowledge. And *Sula*'s birthmark helps to establish her as a voice of resistance: she is, after all, the progressive woman who other characters cannot figure out or appreciate, hence the differing interpretations of her mark.

In his book, Thomson includes the concept of the grotesque as a literary term whose application has become loose (10-11). In this dissertation, I use the term loosely when referring to it colloquially. However, more often than not, I use the

term as other scholars have defined and applied it. Among others, I talk about Mary Russo's concept of the female grotesque, Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the positive grotesque, Sherwood Anderson's display of the monomaniacal as an example, John Ruskin's application of the grotesque to art, which has been extended to literature. Moreover, I mention and discuss other authors' and scholars' approaches and contributions to the grotesque and how they apply it. For example, I talk about Sigmund Freud's concept of the uncanny. But even though there are many usages of the grotesque, the term still retains its connection to the murals on wall in so far as the grotesque is considered such because of paradoxical/incompatible ideas, items, and appearances, thereby going against conventional ways of perceiving. And often times, the incompatibles are comical in nature, thereby prompting further confusion and perverse fascination.

Even though the grotesque can be constructed and used in many specific sorts of ways, there are generic designations and definitions. I prefer Geoffrey Harpham's simplistic designation and Michael Steig's definition. Harpham declares that the grotesque can be "latent in an idea or a situation as well as in a physical condition" (462). Because the grotesque can be concealed—whether intentionally and unintentionally—in an idea, situation or physical condition, there are more opportunities to accomplish purposes and functions. In "Defining the Grotesque: An Attempt at Synthesis," Steig defines the grotesque as the "managing of the uncanny by the comic" which he then further clarifies by saying "When the infantile material is primarily threatening, comic techniques, including caricature, diminish the threat through degradation or ridicule" (259). Essentially, Steig's definition shows the

functions and purposes of the grotesque. To illustrate, the uncanny in combination with the comic reveals unresolvability, thereby creating tension. The tension is created because of the psychological effect of not knowing how to react to something that is horrific, but also slightly funny. Not knowing how to respond is due to estrangement of the familiar, which is purposely constructed so that people can see a new perspective. Toni Morrison's body of work makes use of the grotesque in idea, situation and people, and does so by means of the purposes and functions identified by Thomson. In doing so, Morrison is able to accomplish her goals of writing by revealing: the value and importance of African myths, folklore and cosmology; the horrors of slavery and its lasting impact; the stigmatization and marginalization of blacks as result of oppressive cultural, educational, and social systems; and the detrimental effects of valuing Western ways of knowing and looking.

In *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and Literary Imagination*, Morrison declares that writers are “among the most sensitive, the most intellectually anarchic, most representative, most probing of artists” (15). By using the grotesque as part of her social and political aesthetic, Morrison shows readers her sensitive side as an artist. For example, readers are sympathetic toward even the seemingly vilest of characters like Cholly, because Morrison provides us with details about their lives—pointing out how racist attitudes and oppressive systems have affected them—that make us reconsider their actions. When Cholly rapes Pecola, the narrative reveals, as I discuss in Chapter One, that Cholly does so primarily out of love—as perverse as that may sound. Morrison is probing in the sense that she asks critical questions in her novels and wants readers to also be probative, instead of providing us with

“answers” or “solutions”. For instance, in Chapter Two, I discuss different types of love: obsessive love, perverse love, and excessive motherlove. In her fiction, Morrison presents us with the grotesqueries of real life such as violent acts and investigates potential causes of these, as well as poses questions in regard to whether such acts and actions are perhaps (in)excusable, (in)appropriate, or (in)sane. And Morrison never tells readers the “answers,” she is exploring situations herself: For example, in several instances I reveal Morrison’s contradictory statements regarding questions concerning infanticide. Morrison displays her anarchic side to readers by discussing taboo and unpopular subjects (mostly because people prefer to pretend they did not and do not take place) and topics like sex, menstruation, rape, abuse, and infanticide, to name a few. Moreover, she is anarchic in the sense that her work primarily classifies as postmodern grotesque because she uses the body as a vehicle to investigate racism and sexism. Lastly, Morrison is anarchic because she calls for African Americans to return to their roots, and much of that process involves rejecting Western ideologies.

Endnote

¹ For explicit details and commentary regarding sexual abuse and other abuses of African and African American slaves, refer to bell hooks' *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* and Angela Davis's *Women, Race, and Class*.

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