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"BEING" AND "BECOMING" IN EDEN:  
A PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH  
TO TONI MORRISON'S  
PARADISE

THESIS

BY

MICHON ANITA BENSON

1999



TEXAS SOUTHERN UNIVERSITY



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“BEING” AND “BECOMING” IN EDEN:

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH TO TONI MORRISON’S PARADISE

THESIS

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

the Degree Master of Arts in the Graduate School

of Texas Southern University


By

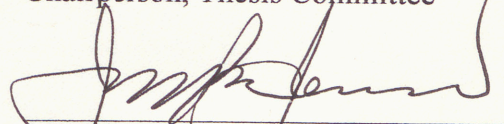
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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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I am in constant awe of God's power and grateful to the comforting presence of His Holy Spirit. I am likewise appreciative that He placed several women in my life who embody His grace and love; without them, I would neither have been able to conceive nor complete my thesis. I am forever indebted to Dr. Patricia Williams whose patience, wisdom and overwhelming sense of responsibility to my intellectual growth have taught me discipline, yet have encouraged me to surpass my self-imposed epistemological boundaries. I would like to acknowledge Fatima Kandji and Tonya M. Scott whose combined commitment to academic excellence has set a standard for my own scholarship and whose friendship continues to inspire me. I must thank my mother, Michelle Anita Barnes, and my maternal grandmother, Anita Bess Swain, for their unconditional love and incessant support. And I am particularly grateful to my daughter, Zinsule Sisay Nompilo, who always settled for one game of Candyland instead of four and who, likewise, understood that Mommy could only read two books, not three, before bedtime.



**“BEING” AND “BECOMING” IN EDEN:  
A PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH TO TONI MORRISON’S PARADISE**

**By**

**Michon Anita Benson, M.A.**

**Texas Southern University, 1999**

**Dr. Patricia R. Williams, Advisor**

Resisting the negative stereotypes society has forced upon the minds and spirits of African-American women, post-modern novelist, Toni Morrison, has assumed the responsibility of demystifying those characteristics which have shaped her so-called “black experience” in this country. Morrison’s primary preoccupation, however, unlike many of those authors who precede her, lies in the ways in which philosophy facilitates her purpose. Creating and recreating the contextual and conceptual frameworks within which her theses exist and countering those images with the antithetical perspectives of subsequent texts and characters has enabled the author to formulate viable, often metaphysical, syntheses to the political, spiritual, communal, and familial phenomena she observes.

Paradise, Morrison’s most recent novel, is rich with literary techniques which lend themselves to multiple interpretations. Gates’s deconstructionist vocabulary, Freud’s psychoanalytic methodologies, Eagleton’s Marxist notions, and Brooks’s New Historicist



approaches: each holds a key to unlocking the enigmatic dialectic of the narrative. Interestingly, many precepts of the aforementioned hermeneutical devices lend themselves to phenomenological translations, particularly the tenets of leading phenomenologists Georg Hegel, Albrecht Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

For the purpose of disclosing the various aesthetic properties and presenting conclusions about perspectives which may have influenced the development of Paradise, this study employs a discourse analysis method and examines the hypothesis: Toni Morrison's presentation of the spirit and psyche of the women in Paradise is a signification of historical intertextuality. Extrapolation of the female psyche necessitates a discussion of Victor Turner's notion of *communitas* and liminality as well as an explanation and application of Gates's theory of (S)ignification. Such investigation elucidates a phenomenological evolution, the "becoming" of womankind, and, likewise, posits the liminal heroine in Paradise as a transcendental (S)ignification for the female "Self," or "Being."

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## CHAPTER 1

### BACKGROUND MATERIAL AND ANALYSIS OF THE PROBLEM

Recent critical approaches suggest that twentieth-century literary hermeneutics traverses major concepts from the classical period. Since the classical period, scholars have been arguing about the relationship between the audience and the hermeneutic process. The ideas of Plato, Aristotle, Horace, and Longinus, for example, reflect a shift of importance in the role of the audience, or "reader." Whereas the writings of Plato and Horace de-emphasize the audience, placing more attention on the work itself, Longinus lauds the talent of the artist as the element which most critically impacts the reader's interpretive process. Though many of the subsequent critical theories have evolved from these classical points-of-view, prominent latter twentieth-century theoretical perspectives have developed from a fundamentally Aristotelian notion that the "reader" is the ultimate determiner of meaning in a work of literature. One of these theories is the Reader-Response approach, and, as one of the more recent additions to the body of hermeneutic techniques, it has been the focus of a considerable amount of debate.

Proponents of the Reader-Response method contend that there are two classifications for readers who, from their vantage points, assign interpretations to any given text. The "virtual reader," scholars suggest, is the one to whom the author addresses the textual discourse, and the "ideal reader" is the one who gains insight from



the textual matter. Interestingly, these two readers may be the same operative reader, the person who engages in the reading process. While the Reader-Response approach acknowledges the reader as a key factor in the hermeneutic process, it does not answer questions about how the operative reader is able to assume a simultaneous role as “perceiver” of textual phenomena and “interpreter” of textual meaning. Further, some scholars of the theoretical perspective contend that there exists yet a third role, the reader as “collaborator,” which establishes the semantics of the textual discourse. In an effort to discuss the complexities of the tripartite role of the reader, scholars defer to philosophical investigations.

A modern philosophical tendency which explains the reader as “perceiver,” “interpreter,” and “collaborator” of a text is phenomenology. Focusing on the phenomena developed in the conscience of the perceiver, this philosophy is the basis upon which the discourse of most hermeneutic discovery is predicated. Because of its methodological construct which purports that the human mind is the centre and origin of all meaning, the fundamental precepts of phenomenology form a heuristic for analyzing Toni Morrison’s Paradise. Several foundational concepts are significant to an establishment of the value of phenomenological methods to the proposed endeavor; thus, before disclosing them, two prefacing remarks about the text should be noted.

First, it is worth mentioning that Paradise was published in 1997, and, as of yet, no critical papers have been published which address the content of the text. Aside from the negative reviews it has received from a handful of syndicated columnists and book reviewers, the brief attention it gained on the Oprah Winfrey Show, and the superficial



treatment it received from public issue magazines, such as Time, Paradise has remained on the periphery of literary discussions. Though each of the aforementioned forums has disclosed the general premise of the narrative, none has endeavored to assume the role of scholar and explore the theoretical framework the text constructs or its philosophical implications. Perhaps the fear-invoking intimidation often associated with interpreting Morrison's novels has also arrested many scholars' desire to address the thematization of Paradise. Consequently, they have neither substantiated nor invalidated any of the popularly-held criticism.

Second, it is also important to note that a theoretical exegesis of Paradise is in no way a definitive explanation of authorial intent nor is it the only way of "seeing" the phenomena presented within the narrative. However, because there is no established authoritative approach for understanding the text, this study contends that the phenomenological system is not only a valid means of interpreting Paradise, but it is also a sound methodology with which to arrive at a point of departure for any ensuing hermeneutic investigation of it.

Assuming that Paradise, or any text for that matter, is an act of discourse, one that replaces speech, the task of reading, qua interpretation, is to fulfill the reference about which the author is speaking. The notion of interpretation as a means of understanding is fairly straightforward; however, the mental process which the reader employs is an incessant system of perception, analysis, and translation of signs and signifiers whose translations may or may not constitute objective explanations.<sup>1</sup> Further, should two or more people decide upon any one interpretation, there cannot be any certitude that their



objective explanations convey authorial intent. Interpretation, then, is an essentially subjective activity and depends upon the reader's prior knowledge. Acquiring knowledge, immediate or prior, is the act of consciously connecting perceived phenomena into a system of "truth;" this process is often problematic because no two humans experience the exact same objects or events using the same cognitive systems. Consequently, absolute knowledge occurs when someone is able to consider all perspectives of conceivable phenomena and connect them. Just as an interpreter of worldly phenomena considers God to be absolute knowledge, a reader interpreting a text presumes that the author, as creator of the textual heterocosm, represents absolute knowledge. Thus, it is arguable that textual phenomena are mimetic or reflective of a greater Truth that exists in the cosmology of the universe, and that man has devoted much of his time attempting to accurately delineate the interrelatedness of all experiential phenomena -- temporal and textual.

Many scholars assume that their individual disciplines -- science, politics, art, religion, philosophy, etc. -- enable them to develop definitive explanations and interpretations of experiential and cognitive phenomena; each believes that his perspective is the portal to absolute knowledge or ultimate Truth. One of the only points upon which most scholars collectively agree is the fact that there are observable phenomena and that perceiving them from one's own point-of-view constitutes one's personal reality. If the only constant, or given, in any philosophical discussion about the nature and acquisition of Truth is the presence of objects or events, how does one arrive at an acceptable interpretation of a text? And if there are so many possible meanings of



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any one idea, why should anyone seek a seemingly evasive “truth” about any text? The answer to the latter question is best answered by Dilthey. First, “the aim of hermeneutics is to understand the author better than [s]he understands [her]self,” and second, “the function of hermeneutics is to establish, theoretically, . . . the universal validity of interpretation upon which all certitude in history rests” (Dilthey 248). In essence, obtaining understanding or truth about a text provides insight into absolute Truth of consciousness or Being, and, in order to render textual “truth,” one must treat hermeneutics as a process of means, not as an answer. Conclusively, interpreting any text is a phenomenological process.

There are as many definitions for phenomenology as there are philosophers to conceive the idea. The word “phenomenology” is derived from the Greek words “phaenomenon,” meaning “appearance,” and “logos,” which means “reason” or “discourse.”<sup>2</sup> Considering this denotation, one could label phenomenology as a discourse about appearance which seeks to discover the nature of anything about which one can be conscious. To accomplish the aforementioned aim of establishing a heuristic for analyzing Paradise, therefore, this particular study subscribes to the precepts of three phenomenologists -- Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Edmund Gustav Albrecht Husserl, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Conclusively, the ideas of these thinkers contribute to interpreting Paradise and extend rudiments of the ideology which are predicated in Plato’s The Republic and Cartesian investigations of truth and consciousness.

According to Plato, ideas are immutable, indestructible -- they are eternal. Further, all ideas are comprised of immediate perceptions, reflections of past actions,



and/or future projections of observable phenomena. Plato's "Allegory of the Cave" is an illustration which puts these ideas into perspective. The prisoner in the cave is subjected to various phenomena. Because he is not initially aware that the objects he observes and that his imprisoned condition do not constitute the only reality, he treats his existence as the absolute truth. It is only when he realizes that there is another possible realm of consciousness that he seeks to expand his reality to include the new as well as the old phenomena. In the course of his Socratic dialogue, Plato suggests to Glaucon that, because the old reality, the old ideas, have not been destroyed, and because the prisoner is ever-cognizant of any and all experienced phenomena, he has free will to traverse the realms of cognition at any time. Advising against such meandering between truth and nontruth, Plato warns that once man attains a certain level of understanding, he cannot return to his former consciousness. The central interest in Plato's discussion is the Good, which can here be translated as Truth. The evolution of man's consciousness toward ultimate Good is a critical premise of phenomenology and unfolds aspects of the evolving female psyche within Morrison's texts.

Plato's basic principles of the "Self" establish a means for understanding Rene Descartes' notion of the unified mind and body as separate, yet encapsulated, perceiving and perceivable objects. Similar to Plato, Descartes addresses the inability of the mind and the body to perceive and define their individual realities. Using the hypothesis "cogito ergo sum," the philosopher attempts to join the mind and the body; however, he never arrives at the idea that the human body is a conscious Being comprised of "a mind, a soul, an intellect, a reason" (qtd. in Philosophical Writings 274).



I am not present in my body merely as a pilot is present in a ship; I am most tightly bound to it, and as it were, mixed up with it so that I and it form a unit ("Sixth Meditation" 117).

Descartes' approach of mixing the physiological and the psychological, while leaving both fundamentally intact, is demonstrative of the inadequacies of traditional explanations of human experiential phenomena. Neither Descartes nor Plato equate consciousness with Being. With reference to Plato's myth, if the prisoner were to revert to the cave from which he began his journey, his mind and body would be intact; however, because his mind is aware of the reality beyond the realm of his physical existence, his mind and body are the sum total, a synthesis, of his consciousness. Ultimately, one of the primary functions of the phenomenological process is to explain what happens to the unified mind and body as it aspires toward, and inevitably becomes, the Good or Truth of universal existence.

Phenomenologists like Hegel, Husserl, and Merleau-Ponty have attempted to identify where and how human existence rests between the physical and the psychical perceptions of reality. Phenomenologically speaking, what both Descartes and Plato fail to do is acknowledge a subjectivized "Self." For example, Descartes' positioning of the conscious self within its body does not constitute the Self or Being. Likewise, Plato's prisoner gains consciousness but remains unaware of the part of his Self which first perceived him as imprisoned. Perhaps the complexity of these ideas warrants further illustration. A tree is an object in nature, an observable phenomenon. If someone were to see the tree, perceive it, then he would perhaps assume two things: that the tree is a



real object because it is perceived and that he himself is a subject capable of perceiving. Neither Descartes nor Plato extend their philosophies to include the answer to the question the phenomenologist raises: if the observer's perceiving the tree makes the tree a "real" object, then who or what makes the observer an object capable of being "real" and, thus, able to perceive the tree in the first place? Descartes attempted the answer, but, again, he does not equate consciousness with corporeal being; hence Being, which is synonymous with perfect knowledge, is not a possibility.

Phenomenology situates human existence between these ideas that the physical person is an object in the world, and he, in turn, must be able to be observed by a subject. That subject is consciousness itself, thus the ultimate quest for the observing object is to discover that he is a subjectivized Self, not only capable of understanding Being, but also of transcending his physicality and preserving all cognitive phenomena. As such, the philosophical systems devised by Hegel, Husserl, and Merleau-Ponty are each necessary in filling the ideological gap the classical thinkers created.

The German Philosopher, Georg Friedrich Hegel, coined the term "phenomenology" in the early nineteenth century and is considered the father of the ideology. For Hegel, the philosophy of phenomenology describes the coming or becoming of absolute self-awareness of mind or spirit. Adopting and modifying Plato's Socratic methodologies, Hegel formulated a dialectical process which traces the historical development of the mind from sensory consciousness (thesis) through reflection (antithesis) to ultimate awareness (synthesis). The synthesized perception is never the end of the dialectic process; it is, rather, the beginning of another which now



treats the new synthesis as a new consciousness. The cycle of the dialectic is infinite, and, similar to Plato's quest for the Good, conceptually spirals upward toward a transcendental subject who has and, likewise, is ultimate Truth.

Expanding on Hegelian perspectives, Edward Husserl contributed to the concept of transcendental phenomenology. Husserl's notions are mimetic of Cartesian perceptions of God as a perceiver who transcendently objectifies all phenomena. Essentially, Husserl espouses that man's immediate perception of his Self is a "phenomenological reduction" traced from God or absolute Truth. Man is perceived and, therefore, perceives himself as a body or object rather than a subject that is constituted, conceived and perceived by an "ich selbst" or "I myself," which is the pure transcendental subject. Moreover, any understanding man seeks is to be found in the "Lebenswelt" or "life-world" the subject creates.

Both Hegel's dialectic and Husserl's transcendental ego comprise Merleau-Ponty's idea of the Self. Originally an existentialist philosopher, Merleau-Ponty subscribes to Descartes' "cogito ergo sum;" however, he radicalizes the philosophy by stating that what man considers immediate experience is really a "vast world of wide-ranging scope." For instance, if the same prisoner in Plato's myth were to believe that his awareness of his imprisonment defined his situation ("I think; therefore, I am."), then his immediate experience would be of a cave. According to Merleau-Ponty, the prisoner should not, however, rely on his immediate experience because he may not be in a cave at all but, instead, positioned within an intricate system of caves, of worlds, from which he will never fully corporeally emerge. Merleau-Ponty's later writings



develop into a theory of the body which reconciles man's inability to transcend his reality. As was mentioned, he establishes phenomenology as a hermeneutic system capable of unifying mind and body. For the philosopher, Merleau-Ponty's theory of the body is one of perception ("Second Meditation" 69). His phenomenological description of the body elucidates the need to break with the dogmatism of traditional Platonic and Cartesian philosophy and acknowledges the body itself as "inherently expressive of existence as a whole" (Langer 121). Ultimately, the body is capable of simultaneously being both a perceived object as well as a transcendental Being.

It is not difficult to draw parallels between the phenomenological process of man's progressive consciousness of his existence and that of interpreting a text. The link is Husserl's concept of the *Lebenswelt*. The hermeneutics of phenomenology enables the reader to perceive the textual heterocosm as a universe that the author constructs for himself by imitating the paradigmatic creation of God. Realistically, God remains the Ideal (as Plato would say), and though the subordinating premise for reading the narrative is to understand the author's references, the primary purpose for reading is to gain additional insight into that Ideal -- Being, ultimate Truth, absolute knowledge -- of the subject matter.

Toni Morrison's novels may be viewed as subjectivized expressions of the phenomenological ideology. Many of her narratives, because they position women as the centre of the textual life-world, provide readers the opportunity to perceive the evolution of the female psyche and establish "truth" about her Self. Morrison's previous novels represent the thetical and antithetical perceptions of the female, and Paradise unveils the



newly synthesized vision of the female's transcendental, subjectivized Self. As a foundation for this discussion, chapter two traces the evolutionary presence of women by investigating the phenomenological manifestations in the female communities through The Bluest Eye, Sula, Tar Baby, and Beloved to Paradise.

The presence of female communities in literature is not a new phenomenon. Commencing with the Greek mythological tradition, griots and rhapsodies have told tales about women who banded together to affront their lack of social power and their collective victimization by the patriarchy. Beginning with the Graic, the old, decrepit sisters who had to share a glass eye; the Amazons, who mutilated their bodies in order to compete with their male counterparts; the Muses, Zeus' daughters, and the Fates, who controlled both human and divine destiny, storytellers and mythographers have traced the spirit and psyche of the female as evolving from a state of crippled impotence to one of all-powerful divination and immortality. Interestingly, just as cultural perspectives continue to change, so too do the images of the female communities. Throughout history, cultural and literary imagination fuse with historical reality; ironically, the same women who are initially depicted in literature as anti-structural or anti-societal phenomena become mimetic of the time period in which they are scrutinized and from which they are eventually outcast. This changing conception of "womanhood" forms the foundation for historical intertextuality within the novels of Toni Morrison. It further lends impetus to the hypothesis for this study: the collective psyche of the female communitas in Paradise is a signification of historical intertextuality.



In her book, *Communities of Women: An Idea in Fiction*, Nina Baym

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In her book, Communities of Women: An Idea in Fiction, Nina Auerbach analyzes several British and American novels which illustrate the evolution of communities of women. Auerbach says that literature boldly does what history hesitates to do. It not only “accomplishes the aspirations of women, but literary history also “has moved through a series of emancipations and expand[ed] fields of conquest” (Auerbach 17).

Communities of women growing in time constitute a drama of widening cultural consciousness, finally taking shape as an evolving literary myth that sweeps across official cultural images of female submission, subservience, and fulfillment in a bounded world. As the myth takes shape . . . , so does the fictional reality of women’s autonomy; for though the communities gain substance and stature . . . their isolation has had from the first the self-sustaining power to repel or incorporate the male-defined reality that excludes them (Auerbach 28).

Focusing on the traditional canon of American literature, Auerbach does not cite novels which explore the evolving African or African-American female presence. Nevertheless, Black women have historically created their own communities and have empowered themselves to “repel” and “incorporate” the exclusionary patriarchal society. Prior to the twentieth-century, African-American women had not occupied positions of prominence within society; consequently, literature reflects their absence. Although African-American males endured a similar condition of invisibility, there is a literary



record of the black males who were able to tell their stories of injustice and racial hatred. Olaudah Equiano, for example, mastered the English language and wrote the story of his struggle as a captured slave. Likewise, Frederick Douglas transcended his oppressive epistemological boundaries and wrote eloquently about his life. These men's spirits emanate from the textual content of their respective narratives, and readers are able to trace more clearly the evolutionary presence of the Black males' psychical beings as opposed to those of their female counterparts. In retrospect, because they have produced such a large amount of literature<sup>3</sup>, it seems as if African-American males were always conscious -- as if they never lost their sense of Self. Contrastingly, African-American females have been the ones to bear the burden of the double-consciousness. For so long Black women have been forced to, or, for the sake of family, have chosen to suppress their true sensibilities about mankind, religion, and their individual and collective Self. Consequently, spiritual, psychical, communal, and maternal truths are so deeply embedded in their subconscious that they cannot, without assistance, re-store or remember their Being.

Within each of her novels, post-modernist Toni Morrison engages in a Socratic dialogue with the reader as she searches for the definition of universal black womanhood. Rather than psychoanalyzing the African-American female, however, Morrison presents various phenomenon from her collective past, activating her memory and allowing her to develop and/or re-store her own truths about her existence and consciousness. Very similar to the transformation women have undergone throughout the course of literary history, each of Morrison's female communities assists the African-American female



consciousness to progress from a crippled condition to one of omniscience and immortality. The evolving presence of the female communities and the physical and psychological empowerment of the unit positions the female Being as a simultaneous object and corporate subject in each of Morrison's narratives. Each of the hermeneutic devices of phenomenology mentioned in the previous chapter -- Hegel's tripartite paradigm, Husserl's notions of the "ich selbst" and "lebenswelt", and Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on the relationship between multitudinous perspectives and the transcendental Being -- facilitates the process of evolution towards consciousness. All three phenomenologists seek to explain how one derives the truth about one's self and, thus, the absolute truth about the universe. Although one of Toni Morrison's intentions may be to disclose the mysteries of the relationship between womankind and the cosmos, her primary focus is to dispel myths about origins, influences, and the evolutionary path of the collective African-American female psyche.

In order to perceive the interrelatedness of Morrison's novels, one must dissect the communities of women in terms of Victor Turner's notions of liminality and *communitas*. Liminality is the "middle phase in the pattern of the rite of passage (Waigwa 1-4). According to Turner, there are three phases of this process: one, separation; two, limen or "threshold"; and three reincorporation. This idea is very similar to the Hegelian construct. In the first stage, the initiate is stripped of his/her "property, status, rank, and role or position in a kinship system." While in the second stage, once the individual or group has been separated from a "fixed point in the social structure," he or she bears few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state. In



essence, he or she is invisible or dead, “temporarily buried, as it were, between two fixed points” -- those of being and becoming. During this period of invisibility, a “special relationship born of solidarity and shared experience” develops among those undergoing the initiation. This bond manifests itself in *communitas* -- a special fellowship of members who are “initiation comrades” (Waigwa 94-95). In the final stage, the initiate is reincorporated into the social order and acquires a specific role and status within its structure. Bearing this information in mind, it can be said that Morrison’s texts create a series of liminal novels, or those which allow their characters to mentally and physically “come of age.”

Other Using the models of liminality and *communitas*, Morrison illustrates the African-American female as a liminal heroine whose passage to a new status or progressing consciousness does not conclude with the end of each novel. Instead, each community’s fate serves as a perpetual beginning; each subsequent representation becomes more comprehensive, hence more of a signification of the transcendent qualities of the African-American female Being. Within each of her seven novels, Morrison provides roadmaps upon which the course of female Self discovery can be traced; however, several of her texts more concretely elucidate the premise of this study. Therefore, Song of Solomon and Jazz, though both an integral part of the textual and thematic continuum, will not be discussed. This examination will focus on the communities of women and chart the evolving presence of the liminal heroine in the Bluest Eye, Sula, Tar Baby, and Beloved.

The same way in which Pecola is victimized by her lack of self, these other protagonists are powerless against the society which allows



Toni Morrison's first novel, The Bluest Eye (1970), reflects the social context of a black community struggling with the idea of race and selfhood in white America. Symbols of beauty such as fair skin; long, silky hair; and blue eyes are those of which Pecola, the central character of the novel, has been phenotypically dispossessed. Suffering an identity crisis, Pecola desires to possess those traits; moreover, without them, various people within the black community, including herself, perceive her as a pariah.

This novel is a fitting point of origin for any discussion about the evolution of the female Self. Historically, Western culture has viewed the African-American as "the Other." Likewise, because Western culture is male oriented, African-American females are perceived as the other "Other." Pecola Breedlove is representative of the objectified black female Self; she is a manifestation of what happens to the psyche of the African-American female as a result of her lack of whiteness and her lack of maleness. Morrison's placing a pre-adolescent at the beginning of the evolutionary process poignantly displays the writer's sensibilities about the parallelisms between a child's societal impotence and victimization and that of a mature African-American female.

Concomitant to the point of this investigation, it would be appropriate to discuss Pecola in Heglian terms and label her the thesis of the tripartite formula. If, then, she is the thesis, the people around her - those who reinforce her feelings of selflessness, or "negative sense of self" such as Maureen Peal, Geraldine, and Pecola's parents - also comprise part of the thesis (Johnson 22). The same way in which Pecola is victimized by her lack of self, these other protagonists are powerless against the society which allows



them to feel as if they are superior to Pecola. In the text, Claudia, the story's narrator, attempts to discern why Maureen, for example, is so insistent on demoralizing Pecola. She, Claudia, eventually concludes that "Maureen Peal was not the Enemy and not worthy of such intense hate. The Thing to fear was the Thing that made her beautiful and not us" (62). The character's sentiment makes it clear that perception and interpretation of the phenomena which society values or deems invaluable determine self worth. Hence, the other protagonists, like Pecola, are objects who raise the status of society to a subjectivized self that defines the "acceptable" black female's physical and psychical Self.

Pursuant to establishing the thesis, it is important to give attention to the anti-thetical figures in the novel. In The Bluest Eye, two key characters emerge to counter Pecola's lack of identity. First, Cholly Breedlove, Pecola's father, is one of the characters who most dramatically impacts Pecola's persona. Though he has endured the abandonment of his parents as Pecola has, and though his being black has made him the victim of social and psychological disenfranchisement, he does not suffer the same identity crisis as his daughter. Cholly represents what Houston Baker has alluded to as the freedom to define and/or recreate the self.

Cholly was free . . . Free to feel whatever he felt -- fear, guilt, shame, love, grief, pity. Free to be tender or violent . . . He could go to jail and not feel imprisoned, for he had already seen the furtiveness in the eyes of his jailer, free to say "No, suh," and smile . . . He was alone with his own perceptions and appetites, and they alone



caring for one interested him (Baker 147). Weems 21). Because Pecola had neither grown

Mirroring the African-American male's sense of Self that was mentioned previously, Cholly's presence in the novel grants the reader insight into the difference between the Black male's psyche and that of the African-American female. It is the anti-thetical structure of the three communities of women within the narrative which fosters the evolutionary process of the black female's psychical Being.

Diametrically opposed to Pecola's false sense of Self, the identities of the communities of women pose alternative perspectives of what it means to *be* whole and female. Clenora Hudson-Weems and William Samuel discuss the community of prostitutes -- China, Poland and Miss Marie -- who are "independent and self-reliant" (Samuels and Weems 10-30). Though they appear to lead lives which are "free" of society's moral codes, their love of self grows and is as fervent as the "hate" they harbor for men. While Weems and Samuels suggest that this hatred is directed toward men themselves, it can be argued that, instead, the women hate the fact that males place more emphasis on women's physical beauty, and women, therefore, are forced to use their bodies as means of prospering in a patriarchal society. To modify Claudia's notion, "[men] were not the Enemy; the Thing to fear was the Thing that made the [prostitutes], [or any woman], beautiful." Fortunately, these women were able to use their hate and fear as a catalyst for "creative forces" (Samuels and Weems 20). Contrasting Pecola's life, "these women's present lives of venture and adventure" suggest that they possess tremendous moral, societal, and physical freedom. Most importantly, they are able to "form a unit akin to a neighborhood" -- a *communitas*, in which "the crucial element is



caring for one's neighbors" (Samuels and Weems 21). Because Pecola had neither grown up in an environment which cared for her nor had she cultivated a need to care for herself, the prostitutes show her a positive alternative, or anti-thetical perspective, of life.

The second group of women is comprised of those who congregate to prepare Aunt Jimmy for her funeral. They were the older women in the town who had experienced societal oppression. All of them had witnessed the ways that each of the other women had acquiesced to the pressure of re-defining herself according to male's perspectives, and they had endured the same hard lessons as the prostitutes had. However, unlike Pecola, these women were older; moreover, they understood that they could remake themselves for themselves. An example of these women's claiming their power to define who they were is evident in the ritual of preparing Aunt Jimmy. Dressing her in a white wedding dress, "to wear when she met Jesus," (111) the women cast aside worldly perceptions of the deceased and re-created a pure, holy acceptable one. Though Aunt Jimmy most assuredly struggled with her identity in life, the community of old women ensured that she would be her true Self in death.

The third enclave of women which contrasts Pecola's persona is that of her peers, Claudia and Frieda McTeer. Though the girls are young, they have already developed enough of a sense of Self to know, unlike Pecola, that having blue eyes and blonde hair will not give them the "wholeness" they desire. A large part of their self-awareness can be attributed to their stable familial background; however, more significantly, they have the opportunity to observe Pecola, and they are able to determine that her level of



consciousness is anti-thetical to their perceptions of life. One of the most important aspects of this group of young women is the fact that Claudia is the only one within the group to persevere. She is able to successfully thwart Pecola's notions about beauty and self-worth and develop a self-affirming posture. Additionally, because Claudia is the narrator, she presents an interesting phenomenological perspective. Though she is the narrating subject, she occupies the position of object for the reader of the novel. Consequently, because the information presented in the story about race, perception, community, love and Self affects the reader's sensibilities, he or she becomes a simultaneous perceiving subject and perceived object. What is being perceived are the various psychological perspectives of the African-American female reader. Just as Claudia gains insight about her own existence by studying Pecola's story, the reader learns about her Self by reading Claudia's account of the story. Essentially, were it mapped out in a Platonic context, Pecola's, Maureen's, Pecola's parents and Geraldine's character's consciousness would comprise the center of the cave, perceiving shadows and imprisoned. Claudia and her sister, the community of prostitutes and that of the older women would occupy the next level of consciousness, thus the reader would be on the subsequent level peering down on the previous two. Applying Heglian notions to the structures within the narrative enables the reader to understand that these perspectives, though spiraling upward toward infinity, or God, which is absolute truth, and the textual content within The Bluest Eye provides only one dimension about African-American womanhood. At the end of the novel, Claudia emerges as the liminal heroine; however, the evolutionary process does not conclude. The evolved Claudia, bearing a new sense of



self, becomes a thesis for the subject matter of Morrison's subsequent novel. The Bluest Eye is replete with racial issues; nevertheless, it obliquely explores the black feminine difference from the Black Aesthetic. This difference occupies the centre of Morrison's second novel (Peach 70). Whereas Morrison's first novel could be viewed as a novel of separation in the conceptualized rites of passage ritual, Sula is more a novel of "threshold," pressing epistemological boundaries of black feminism. Claudia's spirit and sense of black female Self transcends the textual matter of The Bluest Eye, and though she is not a character in Sula, her spirit and quest for selfhood are reincarnated in the psyche of those black women who do live "up in the Bottom."

Literary critics such as Barbara Jean Vargas Coley and Jerry Bryant contend that while The Bluest Eye explores the ways in which the issue of race has impacted the black female's psychological rite of passage, Sula emphasizes black female sexuality. Additionally, these same critics argue that Morrison creates a diverse community of women in order to confront pervading social issues of the late 1960's and early 1970s such as black nationalism and the black women's role in the feminist movement. Starkly contrasting Pecola's persona, Sula is, according to Roseann Bell, an affirmation of the black, female nationalist. "Sula rejects the old image of blacks as victims and reaches for an identity free of the past of racial oppression" (Rice 124). Demonstrating the presence of historical intertextuality, Sula's rejection by the larger black community is mimetic of the response black nationalists received during that volatile period.

There are two female communities in Sula. The first is composed of a family of self-sufficient characters: Eva Peace, the family's matriarch; her daughter, Hannah; and



Eva's granddaughter, Sula Peace. Together these women form an anti-thetical structure to the second *communitas* -- the family of Helene and Nel Wright. Nel, much akin to Plato's prisoner, is forced to live an existence of falsehoods which her mother Helene perpetrates. Though Nel knows her background -- she is the daughter of a prostitute -- her mother encourages her to pose as an upstanding member of her community. Consequently, Nel must deny that part of herself which desires to break from society's oppressive, puritanical class struggles. At one point in the narrative, she ventures outside the Bottom and her consciousness is awakened. For the first time in her life, Nel realizes how alienated she has been from the "Truth" about her Self. Despite Helene's attempts to shelter her, Nel becomes friends with Sula and is thrust into an anti-thetical world of chaos and discontinuity. Critics perceive the girls' relationship as one which creates another, more complete persona that cannot exist when the girls are separate. Naana Banyiwa-Horne suggests that Sula and Nel "experience total harmony . . . together;" therefore, "neither feels the need to assert her separate identity" (Banyiwa-Horne 28-31). Further, Robert Stepto posits that Morrison has put a new twist on the concept of good and evil by allowing Nel to represent the "good" in her acquiescence to patriarchal expectations while Sula, the "evil" one, remains an enigmatic presence. Interestingly, Sula is not, in literary terms, as round a character as Nel. Morrison gives the reader the most insight about Sula through Hannah, Eva, and Helene. There are several examples which illustrate Morrison's technique of alluding to Sula's character in terms that are anti-"good": early in the narrative, Hannah says that she loves her daughter, but "[she] [just] [doesn't] like her;" later, when Hannah burns to death, Eva believes Sula watches



“with interest;” and the reader discovers that Helene likes Sula because she is not at all like Hannah. Each of these comments may appear insignificant; however, one must bear in mind the elements that Morrison presented in The Bluest Eye. Just as Claudia’s spirit is reincarnated -- Nel most closely resembles Claudia’s character -- so too is the “Thing,” the “Enemy,” that women must acknowledge in order to achieve a sense of self. Consequently, Sula is a signifying object for the “Enemy.”

Sula leaves at the end of part one of the novel, and when she and Nel are reacquainted in part two, their new relationship becomes one which is communally antithetical. Sula has an affair with Jude, Nel’s husband. Not only does the affair betray Nel’s friendship, but it also contradicts society’s moral code. Severing the tie between herself and Nel, Sula, for Nel, embodies the extremist posture that a life of wild imagination creates. No longer in opposition to the way Helene raised her, Nel re-envisions her old desire to be one with Sula. At the end of the novel, she is able to see that both extremes - the puritanical perspective about life as well as one that is more liberal - must be considered in order to define one’s Self. Much like Claudia’s revelation about the presence of Pecola in the community, Nel realizes that Sula’s persona was a necessary presence, allowing her to further explore the possibilities for her life (Bjork 82). Nel and Sula and the community create the dialectic necessary for Nel’s self-discovery. Morrison’s female persona, however, does not yet evolve into a conclusive synthetical representation of the black female Self because she continues to perform the liminal function of Morrison’s collective *communitas* -- to illustrate the transcendental nature of “human diversity and potential” (Bjork 82).



The theme of *communitas* is recurrent in Toni Morrison's fourth novel. Tar Baby (1981), like Sula, is a "threshold" novel in that Morrison continues to reincarnate the characters' spirits or consciousness into scenarios which obliquely give insight into female invisibility or lack of Being. In this new novel, the female character remains disconnected from her community and her memory. The only tie she has with the past is relayed through dreams (Bjork 112). Dreams are phenomena which are neither present nor absent. The prevalence of dreams in Tar Baby is another indication that the novel occupies the threshold phase of the liminality. The first two personae, Claudia and Nel, resurrect in the protagonist, Jadine. While Jadine could not be perceived as an after shot of Pecola - had Pecola received her blue eyes and blonde hair while maintaining her sanity - she does provide the reader with insight into what the black female psyche endures when society's more popular or palatable views of the Black Aesthetic<sup>4</sup> prevail. Jadine has obtained a formal education, is "attractive," and ambitious, yet, like the other members of the Street household, is alienated from society because she does not share a common tradition or past. Orphaned when she was twelve, Jadine, also known as "Jade," does not know her "place," and, therefore, does not know what it means to be a black female. Consequently, her psyche is disconnected from her cultural heritage. As was previously mentioned, the only clues the protagonist has about her past are conveyed through her dreams. Jadine is often visited by a group of women who stand over her and her lover Son's bed:

Cheyenne got in, and then the rest; Rosa and Therese and Son's  
 their attempt to  
 context within which Tar Baby was written; one could argue that Morrison is addressing



the emerging dead mother and Sally Sarah Sadie Brown and Ondine and Soldier's adopt Western culture wife Ellen and Francine from the mental institution and her own heritage. Eventually, the dead mother and even the woman in yellow. All there crowding in Morrison never disclosed the room . . . spoiling her lovemaking, taking away her sex like sit, Jadine's struggle with succubi, but not his. He fell asleep and didn't see the women in preserved and resurrected the room and she didn't either but they were there crowding each other and watching her. Pushing each other -- nudging for space, collective African-American they poured out of the dark like ants out of a hive. (258) self-hate and lack of self-hood

Though the protagonist believes that these women are out to destroy her and, likewise, the identity she has tried so hard to establish, critics suggest that the "night women" represent that part of her blackness, of her black female Self, which is sacred and needs to be preserved. The night women represent that past that must be re-discovered if Jade is to be successful in her rites of passage process. Weems and Samuels assert that "each of the [night] women represents an authentic existence" and that none has "lost her contact with her culture." Further, because of their consciousness, "the night women have condemned her [Jadine] and so has the narrator of the story" (Samuels and Weems 144). At one point in the narrative, the narrator asks rhetorically, "culture bearing black woman, whose culture are you bearing?" (269) imagined, visible not

invisible Having adopted Parisian culture, Jadine presents an antithetical perspective to the night women's sense of African cultural heritage, and she, therefore, does not recognize their attempt to "nurture" her back to her "authentic" sensibilities. Considering the social context within which Tar Baby was written, one could argue that Morrison is addressing



the emerging bourgeois or Black Urban Professionals ("Buppies") who chose to adopt Western culture while suppressing or severing conscious ties to their cultural heritage. Eventually, though Jadine flees Jamaica, the home of her benefactors, and Morrison never discloses exactly how she has been affected by the night women's visit, Jadine's struggle with culture and the past as it determines her sense of wholeness is preserved and resurrected in Morrison's fifth novel, Beloved (1986).

Prior to Beloved, Morrison did not address elements in the collective African-American female past which contributed to their developing self-hate and lack of selfhood. While the author addresses those notions women adopted as a means of surviving in a male-dominated, racially oppressive, and class-oriented society, not much attention is placed on the role that slavery played in the suppression of the African-American female Being. In her essay entitled "Unspeakable Things Unspoken," Morrison refers to the pain and the unspeakable suffering that Black females have endured and acknowledges the repression of those unpleasant phenomena in their subconscious. Each of the aforementioned novels is set in the twentieth century; however, Beloved is anachronistically placed in 1873. Morrison chose to reincarnate the spirit of the black female in a time which is the historical present; therefore, the characters within the narrative are neither past nor present, real nor imagined, visible nor invisible; they are on the threshold of being. Beloved is the last in the series of "coming of age" novels.

Remembering and reconstructing the past are tools that Morrison uses to "give birth" to Sethe's murdered daughter Beloved. Just as memory is the black female



reader's surrogate mother for Sethe's persona, re-memory is Beloved's womb into Sethe's temporal world. In the previous novels, each representative of the liminal heroine -- Claudia, Nel, and Jadine -- had a mid-wife or mid-wives, so to speak, who assisted them in giving birth to their consciousness. Claudia, as the heroine, has the female prostitutes and the old women, and each of them had Pecola. Nel had perspectives of her family, the opposing views of Sula's family, and she had Sula. Finally, though Jadine is deprived of her biological family, Valerian and Margaret Street, as well as the night women, form a dialectic which facilitates a birthing process for Jadine's psyche.

Unfortunately, Sethe has no one to help her develop what Weems and Samuels refer to as a "cultural code." There are those who may argue that Sethe is a member of three female communities who helped her in her evolution. Nevertheless, though each of these groups could provide her with insight about her Self, Sethe is too young, too naive, and, perhaps, too damaged to personally benefit from her relationship with them. Ironically, throughout the course of Beloved, Sethe gives birth to herself as a liminal hero. Such a process begins early on in her development when she learns that, as a slave girl, she is nothing more than property. Sethe overhears schoolteacher telling his nephews to "put [Sethe's] human characteristics on the left; her animal ones on the right" (100). Later, Sethe discovers that the word "characteristics" is schoolteacher's way of distinguishing Sethe from her children, and that he intended to sell her children at some point. Upon learning of her master's plans, Sethe resolves to run away to Ohio. Her subsequent flight is the centre of Sethe's liminality, and though she is spatially and



temporally removed from the other heroines, Sethe's running away allows her to achieve what the others within her conceptualized rites of passage initiation have done -- she becomes invisible or dead, "temporarily buried," as it were, between two fixed points -- those of being and becoming. As was mentioned earlier in this discussion, it is during this period of invisibility that a "special relationship born of solidarity and shared experience" develops among those undergoing the initiation. This bond manifests itself in "communitas" -- a special fellowship of members who were "initiation comrades."

Returning to the focus on the communities of women in Beloved, Sethe's early life experiences make her similar to Jadine in that she (Sethe) is a biological and cultural orphan. Though slave narratives and other accounts attest to the fact that strong female communitas did exist, Sethe was taken away from her mother at a young age and did not remember anything she had learned from the strong women in her family. This is another aspect of the cultural code Weems and Samuels mention. Much like Claudia, Sethe is forced to establish her sense of self through a vicarious interaction with three distinguishable groups of women.

The relationship that Sethe forms with Amy impacts the runaway's sense of self. Because Amy does share some of the same characteristics with Sethe -- she is a runaway, teen-aged orphan and daughter of indentured servants -- the acquaintance of the two young girls could be considered a communitas. Undeniably, Amy endures pain which parallels Sethe's, and similar to the relationship forged by Nel and Sula, Sethe and Amy are anti-thetical characters. Interestingly, though Amy appears to be a part of the same class system as Sethe, Morrison keeps the twentieth-century reader ever mindful of



contemporary racial and feminist issues. Whereas Amy, though more raggedy-looking than Sethe, identifies herself as "Miss Amy Denver," Sethe, who perceives herself and is perceived as a "nigger woman," has to lie about her identity for fear of being found. Through these characters' introduction, Morrison makes some powerful assertions about the feminist movement and the Black women's participation in it. One of the most significant of those is that though Black and white women have endured similar battles with patriarchal oppression and the cult of ideal womanhood, Black women continue to objectivize themselves as the more unworthy of the two. If the Black women cannot realize that they are of equal status with the white woman, how can she (the Black woman) ally herself with the feminist movement which is essentially the white female's cause? Within this small *communitas*, Amy serves as the racial, social, and cultural anti-thesis for Sethe. Ironically, however, the young white female nurtures Sethe and aids in her healing. It is not a coincidence that, later, Denver, Sethe's daughter, bears Amy's name and, eventually, expands upon Amy's duties to become the Black female heroine. eyes Pocola sought, the wholeness Nel looked to Sula to provide, and the

culture. The next chronological *communitas* that Sethe becomes a part of is that of her mother-in-law, Baby Suggs. Matriarch and spiritual leader of the black community, Baby Suggs has encountered the same problems Sethe has, but, very similar to the community of old women in The Bluest Eye, her age and her faith have allowed her to prevail. The physical nurturing and psychical cleansing the matriarch renders promote Sethe's catharsis and establish a process which facilitates her forming a consciousness. Baby



Suggs preaches about happiness, the importance of family and community, and, most importantly, she teaches her daughter-in-law about self-love.

All of Sethe's new-found hope for the future and that of her family is destroyed when schoolteacher catches up with her and threatens to take her back to Sweet Home. Not wanting her children to be subjected to the same fate for which she feels destined, Sethe attempts to murder her two boys and successfully murders Beloved, whom she affectionately calls "her best thing." This "savage" act terminates the relationship Sethe has created with Baby Suggs, causes friction in the bond she makes with Denver and the resurrected Beloved, and estranges her from the larger community of women.

A larger community, consisting of about thirty women, accepts Sethe when she flees Kentucky; however, once the horrible act is committed, and Sethe seems to display no remorse, they abandon her. "Nobody, but nobody visited the house" (184). Also resembling the women who gather around Aunt Jimmy's funeral in The Bluest Eye, this *communitas* seeks to make a way for Beloved's journey to the beyond. Reminiscent of the blue eyes Pecola sought, the wholeness Nel looked to Sula to provide, and the cultural amnesia or repression Jadine suffered, Beloved is Sethe's "thing" or "enemy" which defines her Being. Because Beloved is a physical manifestation of Sethe's troubled past, the primary function of the outside female community is to perform the act of mid-wife for Sethe, helping her give birth to her pain. As long as Sethe's liminal consciousness is trapped at the threshold of becoming whole, she can not relay a strong sense of self to her daughter Denver. Interestingly, this same group of women who reject

painful obstacles the Black woman has repressed or refuses to accept as a part of her



Sethe adopt Denver, and each becomes a surrogate mother for her, affirming her womanhood and facilitating her need to actualize her Self.

Though she is the central character within the novel, Sethe is not who emerges at the end of the narrative. Denver is, in fact, the one who is able to reap the benefits of her mother's impassioned psychological struggle for selfhood. Using the dynamics of the mother-daughter relationship, Morrison makes it clear to the reader that Black matriarchs have sustained psychological damage as they have fought to break free of their pasts and become themselves. Though some of the maternal ancestors were not able to fully reconcile with the past and move on to claim their identities, their efforts are vindicated in the lives of the daughters who emerge conscious of their Being. It is evident that Denver's alienation from the community and her strange familial relationships have impacted her psyche; nevertheless, she, much like Claudia, Nel, and Jadine, is able to work within the dialectic that her anti-thetical existence creates, and she emerges the evolved female presence.

Parallel to tales of Greek and Roman, or European, female personae within literary history, Morrison has recorded the history of the African-American female's evolutionary process and presence. Though each of her novels, The Bluest Eye, Sula, Tar Baby, and Beloved, can be read and appreciated as separate narratives, they form a concise, poetic, mythological unit about the racial, sexual, political, religious, and communal struggles the Black woman has endured since her arrival in this country. The author traverses cyclical, as opposed to linear, time and discusses those most intimate, painful obstacles the Black woman has repressed or refuses to accept as a part of her



Self. Having endured a crippled initiation stage and having confronted the painful process of threshold or birthing itself, the liminal heroine emerges in Toni Morrison's last novel as a battered, embattled, yet triumphant, transcendental Being. Morrison continues her exploration of the liminal heroine in her seventh novel Paradise. The incorporate heroine, no longer suspended in liminality and possessing varying perspectives of the female persona, becomes the simultaneous perceived object and perceiving subject. Ultimately, the Black female, likewise, recognizes that she is a victim of, yet responsible for, the fate of all mankind.

the ways in which phenomenology facilitates an understanding of the text requires application of the hermeneutic precepts discussed in the first chapter of this examination. Further, tracing the evolutionary female presence in Morrison's novels reveals how phenomenological structure creates the thematic architecture within which the female *communitas* in Paradise exists. Figures 1 and 2 illustrate the dialectic structure which the thetical and anti-thetical female characters in Morrison's previous novels create. Moreover, such diagramming clarifies the discussion about Plato's quest for the Good, or, in this case, the "Paradise consciousness." Therefore, a realistic hermeneutic process of Paradise necessitates the continued investigation of the textual discourse. Such an exercise will provide substantial evidence that Gates' theory of (S)ignification and the notion of historical intertextuality significantly contribute to the phenomenological dialectic presented in the novel. Ultimately, the findings presented in this chapter comprise an examination of the interrelatedness of the concepts presented in the previous chapters and grant credence to the hypothesis of this investigation: Paradise is a simultaneous symbol for and transcen-



Figure 1 – Top View of Female Character Dialectic

### CHAPTER 3

#### A DISCOURSE ANALYSIS: EXTRAPOLATION OF THE FEMALE PSYCHE IN PARADISE

The method of discourse analysis effectively discloses the various aesthetic properties and presents conclusions about the varying perspectives which may have influenced the development of Paradise. Illustrating the ways in which phenomenology facilitates an understanding of the text requires application of the hermeneutic precepts discussed in the first chapter of this examination. Further, tracing the evolutionary female presence in Morrison's novels reveals how phenomenological structure creates the thematic architecture within which the female communitas in Paradise exists. Figures 1 and 2 illustrate the dialectic structure which the thetical and anti-thetical female characters in Morrison's previous novels create. Moreover, such diagramming clarifies the discussion about Plato's quest for the Good, or, in this case, the "Paradise consciousness." Therefore, a realistic hermeneutic process of Paradise necessitates the continued investigation of the textual discourse. Such an exercise will provide substantial evidence that Gates' theory of (S)ignification and the notion of historical intertextuality significantly contribute to the phenomenological dialectic presented in the novel. Ultimately, the findings presented in this chapter comprise an examination of the interrelatedness of the concepts presented in the previous chapters and grant credence to the hypothesis of this investigation: Paradise is a simultaneous symbol for and transcen-



Figure 1 -- Top View of Female Character Dialectic

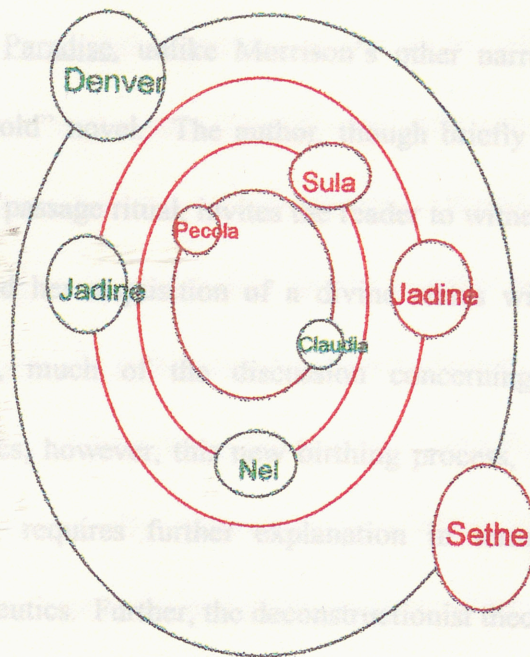
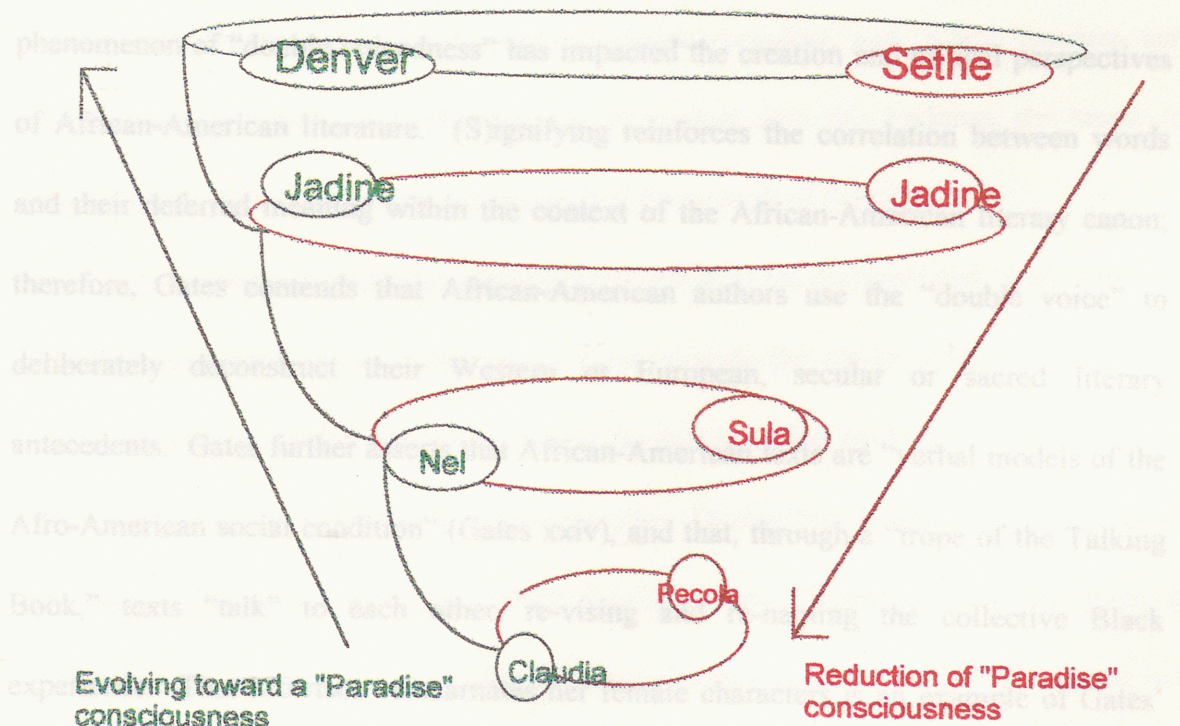


Figure 2 -- Side View of Female Character Dialectic





dental (S)ignification of the African-American female "Self."

Paradise, unlike Morrison's other narratives, does not qualify as a limen or "threshold" novel. The author, though briefly illustrating the other two phases of the rites of passage ritual, invites the reader to witness the "birth" of the transcendent female Self and her acquisition of a divine status within the social order. In the previous chapter, much of the discussion concerning phenomenology focuses on Hegel's dialectics; however, this new birthing process, while it can be dissected using Heglian notions, requires further explanation in terms of Husserlian and Merleau-Pontian hermeneutics. Further, the deconstructionist theory of (S)ignification, proposed by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., provides critical insight into authorial intent.

Punning the term "signification," coined by Jacques Derrida, Gates' "(S)ignification" identifies the function of black vernacular and the ways in which its phenomenon of "double-voicedness" has impacted the creation and critical perspectives of African-American literature. (S)ignifying reinforces the correlation between words and their deferred meaning within the context of the African-American literary canon; therefore, Gates contends that African-American authors use the "double voice" to deliberately deconstruct their Western or European, secular or sacred literary antecedents. Gates further asserts that African-American texts are "verbal models of the Afro-American social condition" (Gates xxiv), and that, through a "trope of the Talking Book," texts "talk" to each other, re-vising and re-naming the collective Black experience. That Morrison reincarnates her female characters is an example of Gates' (S)ignification in the form of tropological revision. However, though Morrison does



“speak” to her own narratives in Paradise and, likewise, uses the vernacular of the church and of patriarchal oppression of women to “talk” to Biblical and other historical texts, the author ingeniously (S)ignifies her informative discourse with a directive disquisition for African-American female readers. Weaving a complex system of analogies and disanalogies for the female psyche together with the theme of migration, the author constructs an architecturally sound device which exposes the “Self”-destructive propensity of the African-American woman’s Being.

Historically, America has symbolized a haven for people seeking freedom from religious, economic, and political persecution; consequently, migration and exodus are common themes within the American literary tradition. While innumerable immigrants have flocked to this “land of milk and honey” to begin life anew, many of the country’s inhabitants, particularly females and the descendants of African slaves, have come to realize that America is a paradoxical, illusionary paradise, and, often, freedom and equality are anti-paradisical phenomena. In tandem with this tradition, the theme of flight within “Eden” constructs the conceptual framework of Paradise.

Two instances of exodus constitute the centre of the narrative and, thus, construct the aforementioned device. Moreover, these provide the reader with an informative discourse through which Morrison reveals the tenets of the evolving female presence. The first migration is that of the townspeople. During the period of Reconstruction, Zechariah Morgan leads fifteen Black families from Mississippi and Louisiana to Oklahoma in search of a town in which they can begin a good life. In 1890, stopping in a small town called Fairly, an all-black town occupied by fair-skinned African-Americans,



all of Zechariah's descendants are turned away because they are "too dark." This event remains forever etched in the families' minds as the "Disallowing" and, thereafter, serves as the citizens' rationale for not marrying outsiders or communicating with anyone who might contaminate, or "lighten," the family collective.

This time the clarity was clear: for ten generations they had believed the division they fought to close was free against slave and rich against poor. Usually, but not always, white against black. Now they saw a new separation: light-skinned against black.

Oh, they knew there was a difference in the minds of whites, but it had not struck them before that it was of consequence, of serious consequence, to Negroes themselves . . . . The sign of racial purity they had taken for granted had become a stain (194).

Shortly after the Disallowing "from fair-skinned colored men" and "blue-eyed, grey-eyed yellowmen in good suits" (195), each of the families settles in a town they endearingly call "Haven." They establish a church, Zion, and Zechariah builds a community Oven, a place around which the town's members congregate to eat and "to report on what done or what needed; on illness, births, deaths, comings and goings" (111). After Zechariah dies, Haven falls apart, and the families travel to another, or newer "Paradise," a town they appropriately name "New Haven." Seventeen miles north of this settlement is a house which shelters five women of questionable background; the individual journeys of these "convent women" constitute the second occurrence of migration within the narrative.

Examining the "flights" of the convent women is critical to the discourse analysis



in that it reveals additional similarities and dissimilarities the women create among themselves and with the town. Furthermore, briefly dissecting the outsiders' lives substantiates the notion that they are evolved, reincarnated presences of those in Morrison's previous novels. Originally from New Jersey, Mavis Albright is the first of the five women presented in the narrative. Her character is ironically reminiscent of Sethe's character in that she murders her twin babies, Merle and Pearl, when she leaves them in the back seat of her car on a hot summer's day. Because she believes her other children are trying to kill her, Mavis steals the Cadillac and runs away, convincing herself that California will be Paradise. Through the author's presentation of Mavis, the reader perceives an analogy between this woman's exodus and that of the town. Mavis is from "The Garden" state; the notion that she can run from "Eden" in order to find a paradisaical existence is one of the ironies of action which plagues the townspeople and initiates the phenomenological cycle.

When Mavis discovers the convent, the second female, Consolata (Connie), has created a "paradise" of her own. Remarkably similar to the slave traders' kidnapping Africans, Connie's migration is induced in 1927 by a group of female missionaries, desiring to convert her "savage" ways. Ironically, Mavis, the former mother of five, becomes one of Connie's daughters, and together with the other female initiates, all five become daughters of the goddess Piedade, the mother of humankind. The dialectic of the evolving female psyche, then, exists not only as an intertextual phenomenon, but also subsists in the shifting dichotomies, or perceptions thereof, of the mother/daughter relationship.



Some time after Mavis arrives at the mansion, a third migrator, Grace, gets off the bus in Ruby. A runaway from Mississippi, Grace's (Gigi's) father's molesting her results in her promiscuity; consequently, she has never experienced "true" love from others or of her "Self." Curiously, Gigi's sexual indiscretions and blatant disregard for other people's feelings liken her persona to that of Sula. This is quite revealing because in the course of the evolving female psyche, the "Self" is a product of the perception of the mind and body, or Being. Moreover, just as Sula depended on the symbiotic relationship with her anti-thetical consciousness, Nel, Grace's "Being" depends on her inclusion into the "body" of the communuitas. A traveler on one of the legs of Gigi's "migration" tells her an erotic myth, and, altering her traveling plans, she heads for the place in Oklahoma she believes to be Paradise. Gigi hitches a ride to the convent, and when she sees how large the mansion is and its provocative decor, she decides to remain there.

...she discovered the traces of the sisters' failed industry. The female-torso candleholders . . . . The nursing cherubim emerging from layers of paint in the foyer. The nipple-tipped doorknobs. Layabouts half naked in old-timey clothes, drinking and fondling each other in prints stacked in closets. A Venus or two among several pieces of nude statuary beneath the cellar stairs. She even found the brass male genitalia that had been ripped from sinks and tubs, packed away in a chest of sawdust as if, however repelled by the hardware's demands, the sisters valued nevertheless its metal. Gigi toyed with the fixtures, turning the testicles designed to



release water from the penis. She sucked the last bit of joint . . . and

laid the roach on one of the alabaster vaginas in the game room.

She imagined men contentedly knocking their cigars against

those ashtrays. Or perhaps just resting them there, knowing

without looking that the glowing tip was slowly building a

delicate head (72).

Seneca is the fourth female to join the *communitas*. Abandoned by her mother, who Seneca believes is her sister, in a housing project in Preston, Indiana, Seneca embodies some of the same characteristics as Pecola, Denver, and Beloved, as she seeks her mother's love --

The third day, she began to understand why Jean was gone and how to get her back. She cleaned her teeth and washed her ears carefully. She also flushed the toilet right away . . . and folded her socks inside her shoes . . . if she did everything right without being told . . . Jean would walk in . . . [s]miling and holding out her arms . . . (128) --

and values the acceptance of others, yet she desires liberation from her feelings of inadequacy and stifled potential. These feelings illuminate the journey to psychological imminence by suggesting that the reconciliation of the phenomenological dialectic is dependent on, and simultaneously analogous to, the liberation of the "Self."

The last female initiate, Pallas Truelove, leaves California with her lover to visit her mother Divine (DeeDee) who lives in an artist commune in Mehita, New Mexico.



Not running away from her father; not eloping with the coolest most gorgeous man in the world . . . . With Carlos' help it was as easy as it was exciting; the lies told to her girlfriends had to be cemented; the items left behind had to signal return, not escape (166).

Similar to the other convent women, Pallas, whose qualities are reminiscent of Jadine, experiences physical and psychological trauma. This fact is important to the development of the liberation and subsequent migratory transcendence of the female psyche. The same way in which each of the other initiates "runs away" *from* that part of her "Self" which bounds her psyche, or ego, is relative to the manner in which they each "run away" *to* the convent and, there, "become" a collective representation of the psyche of a transcendental ego, or Being, in Paradise. After her boyfriend betrays her with DeeDee, Pallas jumps into her truck and drives east. Once in Oklahoma, she is taken to a clinic by a man who believes that she has been raped. Feeling badly for Pallas, Billie, a nurse, drives her to the convent because she knows Pallas will be nurtured to health. Ironically, each of the events in Pallas' migratory sequence mirror the narrative structure. Moreover, Pallas' being betrayed by a male and female, and inevitably "saved" by a woman whose name, Billie Delia, implies that she is both male and female, reinforces Morrison's premise that the female is the incorporate, or synthesized, transcendental (S)ignification of "Being" in Eden. Morrison informs the discourse through liminal narration which points to migratory transcendence and the subsequent "birthing" of the transcendental female psyche. Unmasking a complex series of analogies regarding



Morrison's female psyche, constructing the architecture of the narrative, disclosing significant, but disanalogous, occurrences in the birthing of the psyche, and interpreting related phenomena which illuminate signification in the historicity unraveled in the narrative grant the reader a complete comprehension of the notion of "Being" and "becoming" in Eden.

Typically, the word "flight" connotes a movement away from something, yet both groups of people flee inward. For example, after the "Disallowing," the families do not flee Oklahoma, rather they move "deeper" into the state, into its "heart," so to speak. Similarly, each of the migrated convent women moves inward from the north (Mavis), south (Grace), east (Seneca), and west (Pallas) to Consolata's "Paradise" and reside in the rooms in the cellar. Once these people reach their respective destinations, they represent two distinct anti-thetical phenomena which serve as the conceptual genesis for the findings of this examination. It is evident that Morrison creates an analogy between the subsequent liminal heroines within her previous narratives -- The Bluest Eye, Sula, Tar Baby, and Beloved -- and those women in Paradise. Through their observations of other characters and with the assistance of the respective communities of women, Claudia, Nel, Jadine, and Denver endure the separation and threshold phases of the initiation ritual and become a re-defined, re-visioned signification of Black womanhood. However, according to Victor Turner, their evolved [female] consciousness or Being is never fully realized because they do not withstand the final stage of the rites of passage exercise, "the reincorporation into the social order and acquisition of a specific role and status within its structure" (Waigwa 1-4). As was mentioned, each novel discussed



previously in this study concludes while the female character occupies the middle or “liminal” phase of the process. Morrison’s artistry only allows the reader to witness that part of the “coming of age” initiation which accommodates the birthing of the Black female Self. In Paradise, however, the author uses the subtle art of pastiche to weave together the analogous backgrounds of the convent women, and their collective personae become a manifestation of and (S)ignification for the African-American female’s psychological experience.

Skillfully combining societal, theological, and political issues and icons into a new, synthesized *communitas*, Morrison reincarnates varying aspects of the liminal heroine within her new personae and presents them as the corporate centre of the narrative. In so doing, the author allows Mavis, Connie, Gigi, Seneca, and Pallas to not only engage in the first two phases of the “coming of age” ritual -- initially separating from their families and communities and developing a special relationship of solidarity with each other -- but they also form consciousness and “become” a (S)ignified Truth about the female “Being” and her universal fate. Thus, in Paradise, the disenfranchised, dispossessed liminal heroine, who is now an evolved accretion of personalities, encounters the same patriarchal oppression she experiences in her previous lives (in other of Morrison’s narratives), yet she is able to “migrate” through the threshold of existence, of life and death, and “become” her “Self,” the transcendental Being.

Similar to Morrison’s previous novels and mimetic of the cycle of the phenomenological dialectic, Paradise renders cyclical rather than linear time: the text neither begins at the “beginning” nor concludes with an end. Though Paradise is a text,



the reader enables the words to “become” a story and, thus, a truth about the African-American female condition. The chronology of the narrative unfolds as various characters and an unidentified, omniscient narrator, one Gates would call the “speakerly text,” “talk” about similar and dissimilar migratory experiences. Interestingly, each of the “flights” which culminates in or just outside the small Oklahoma town facilitates the birthing process and subsequent migratory transcendence of the female “Self.”

The structure of the town and its geographical placement relative to the convent elucidate the condition under which any conclusion about female transcendence holds true. Generally, a town or city is defined as an area of land which is delimited by a boundary; however, Ruby is comprised of one central avenue and several closely positioned cross streets. The town does not occupy an area, in the traditional sense. The boundaries are not demarcated and no activity occurs in the quadrants which are not located on the intersecting roads. Figure 3 shows the layout of the town. Contrastingly, though the convent and its garden are located to the north of the town and exist in isolation, the architectural structure is clearly defined. Thus, Figure 4 illustrates the design of the mansion. Interestingly, when rendered in conjunction with each other, as Figure 5 suggests, the two symbols resemble a human figure whose head and body are disconnected, and, perhaps more significantly, the newly constructed figure simulates the icon of the female. The disjointed state of the symbol is not only significant in that it supports the tripartite equation of Hegel’s dialectic, a phenomenon that is peculiar to this novel and different from the others, but it is also meaningful that the “body,” comprised of a patriarchal society, and the “head,” a matriarchal *communitas*, are recurring



Figure 3 -- Illustration of Ruby

Figure 5 -- Human Figure

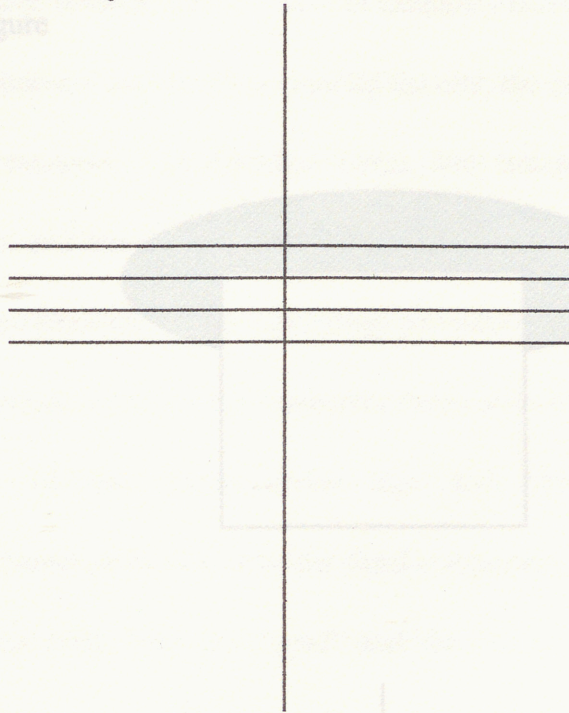


Figure 4 -- Illustration of the Mansion

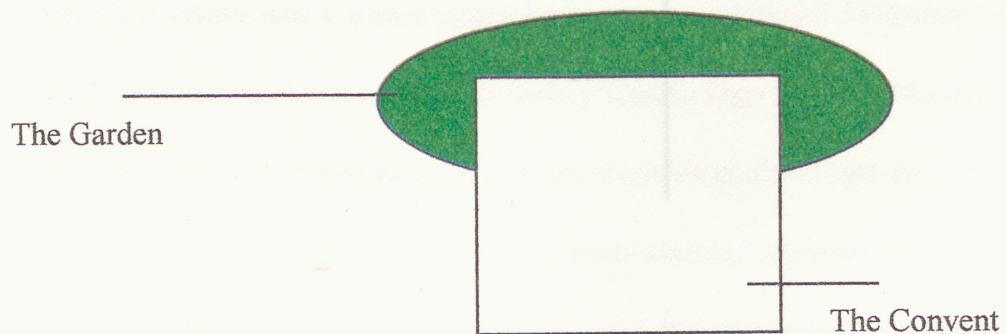




Figure 5 -- Human Figure





anti-thetical structures in the narrative. Several examples illustrate this idea: whereas the townspeople try to prevent anyone from entering the city, the convent women are tolerant and accepting of everyone. In Freudian terms, the structures are male (the town resembles a phallus) and female (the convent represents an orifice); and though Ruby is founded on Christian ideology, pagan cosmology pervades the convent. While the town of Ruby and the convent represent the respective thesis and antithesis of Hegel's system, Husserl's concept of the transcendental ego and Merleau-Ponty's notion of phenomenological corporeality elucidate the third component, of the dialectic. Though two distinct factions exist, both the "head" and the "body" create man's immediate synthesized perception of the Self or ego. According to Merleau-Ponty, phenomenology is the hermeneutic system capable of unifying the mind and body. As was mentioned in Chapter one, his notion reconciles the Cartesian dilemma by asserting that this theory of the body allows man to transcend a reality which is limited by a separate, yet intact, physiological and psychological consciousness. Merleau-Ponty argues that the separateness of the mind and body facilitates man's understanding that he is both a perceived object and a perceiving subject, yet he maintains Descartes' notion that the mind or consciousness governs the body ("Cogito ergo sum"). Merleau-Ponty's ideas, coupled with the fact that citizens of Ruby themselves admit that the female is the "key" and everything that "worries men comes from women," provide support for the assertion that the psyche or, with respect to Paradise, the female *communitas*, determines Being in "Paradise." Conclusively, the perception of the female as the governing symbol and (S)ignification for the phenomena in the narrative poses a strong argument for the



Figure 6 – Illustration of Migratory Transcendence

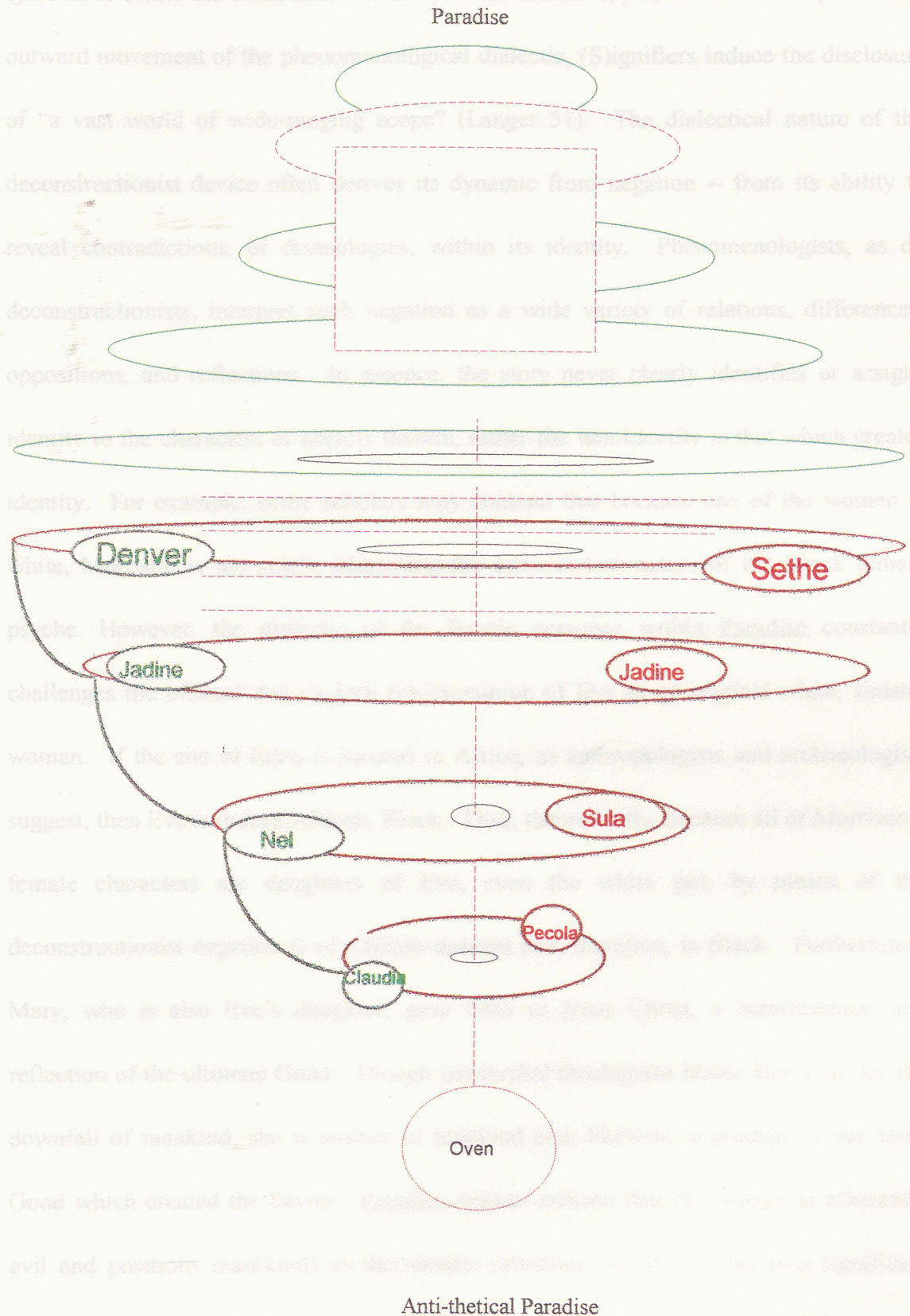
conclusion that the evolved presence of the woman is a transcendental ego. As is the case with Hegel's dialectic, this synthesized perspective does not terminate the phenomenological process, rather, such findings enlighten the reader to another realm of textual consciousness. Consequently, that information which is synthesis of one dialectic becomes the thesis of the subsequent cycle, and these new notions generate additional questions regarding authorial intent.

Demonstrative of the process of this informative narrative, the disjointed head and body reveals the tenets of the evolving female psyche and is representative of not only the dysfunctional relationships each of the convent women endures as well as their discordant affiliation with the townspeople, but, as one in the plethora of ideas Morrison deconstructs, also alludes to larger, more complex concepts. By encouraging the reader to excavate hidden interpretations of Morrison's symbols and allusions, Gates' notions constitute a critical link between the architecture of the narrative, its relationship to previous texts, and its historicity. Figure 6 illustrates the notion that although the evolving female psyche in Morrison's previous narratives began an inductive, upward and outward, phenomenological process, Paradise creates a deductive, upward and inward, dialectic. The deductive migration of the women toward a "Paradise consciousness" substantiates the fact that the *communitas* represents the mind of the transcendental Being.

By naming and/or re-naming other characters within the narrative and by obliquely presenting recognizable historical, biblical phenomena, Morrison acclimates the reader to the presence of (S)ignification. In Paradise, Morrison weaves words and



Figure 6 -- Illustration of Migratory Transcendence





symbols to create the immediate textuality of the narrative, yet, indicative of upward and outward movement of the phenomenological dialectic, (S)ignifiers induce the disclosure of "a vast world of wide-ranging scope" (Langer 51). The dialectical nature of the deconstructionist device often derives its dynamic from negation -- from its ability to reveal contradictions, or disanalogies, within its identity. Phenomenologists, as do deconstructionists, interpret such negation as a wide variety of relations, differences, oppositions, and reflections. In essence, the story never clearly identifies or assigns identity to the characters or objects therein, rather the non-identity is that which creates identity. For example, some scholars may contend that because one of the women is white, Morrison is not solely addressing the transcendent nature of the Black female psyche. However, the dialectic of the female personae within Paradise constantly challenges the biblical and societal representation of Eve as an original white, sinister woman. If the site of Eden is located in Africa, as anthropologists and archaeologists suggest, then Eve is indeed African, Black. Thus, theoretically, because all of Morrison's female characters are daughters of Eve, even the white girl, by means of the deconstructionist negation is of African descent and, therefore, is Black. Furthermore, Mary, who is also Eve's daughter, gave birth to Jesus Christ, a manifestation and reflection of the ultimate Good. Though patriarchal theologians blame Eve's sin for the downfall of mankind, she is mother of mankind and, likewise, a product of the same Good which created the Savior. Paradise negates notions that the woman is inherently evil and positions man(kind) as the sinister influence in Eden. This is a significant disanalogy in that it reinforces the contrary relationship between the matriarchal commu-



nitias and the patriarchal town.

Additionally, this deconstructive exercise can be applied to the textual icons of Heaven and Hell that Morrison uses to illustrate the migration of the townspeople from Haven. The families decide to call the newly established settlement "New Haven." This name implies that the former Haven needs improvement. Consequently, the place which the founding families consider Haven, or Paradise, is actually its anti-thesis; therefore, every subsequent town they settle becomes increasingly less paradisaical, more akin to the negation of "New Haven," an "Old Hell" or, simply, "Hell." For three years after the families moved, everyone calls the new town "New Haven." Though the matriarchs of the town, for the most part, remain silent and invisible, an act of renaming allows them to collectively assert their power over their husbands. After one of the founding mothers dies, the women decide to name the town after her.

Her funeral -- the town's first -- stopped the schedule of discussion and its necessity. They named the town after one of their own and the men did not gainsay them. All right. Well. Ruby. Young Ruby (17).

Though the men in the town paralyze the females' spirits by "taking over" and impregnating those whom no one considers good enough to marry, the patriarchs are ever cognizant that the women ensure the perpetuation of the racially-pure families. Deacon's admission that "Women always the key," coupled with Patricia's discovery that "everything that worries [Steward and Deacon] must come from women" (217) reinforce this notion and, further, suggest that there is latent (S)ignification attached to "Ruby."

First, "Ruby" addresses the aspect of the female psyche which is presented in



Proverbs 31:10: "A wife of noble character who can find? She is worth far more than rubies." The better part of chapter thirty-one defines the mentality of the "ideal woman" and the responsibilities she assumes for her family. Comparable to the virtuous woman (the ruby), the females residing in Ruby sacrifice themselves to tend to their husbands' and children's needs. Sweetie Fleetwood, for example, never leaves the house for fear that her children will die without proper care.

[She had to] massage a little bottom to keep the sores away; or to siphon phlegm or grind food or clean teeth or trim nails or launder out urine or cradle in her arms or sing but mostly in time to watch (124).

Likewise, Soane Morgan frequently drives out to the convent to purchase Connie's peppers to make the dishes her husband likes. The book of Proverbs states that such dutiful wives demonstrate their fear of the Lord, and that fear, the emotion Eve felt after eating of the proverbial apple, "is the beginning of knowledge" (Proverbs 1:7) and the genesis of "flight" from Eden. "Speaking" to the book of Genesis, that Eve's acquiring "knowledge" invokes God's wrath, Morrison uses the female characters in Ruby to "inform" Black females that they should "flee" their roles as the doting wife and mother and, thus, be liberated from the wrath of God.

There is a second meaning attached to the town. The name "Young Ruby" implies that there was an "Old Ruby." When the women in the town re-name New Haven "Ruby," they "speak" the mother's spirit, or Being, into existence; they birth her spirit anew. Ruby, then, not only (S)ignifies the town, population 360, she "becomes"



the immortal, transcendental signification for the female psychical Being or consciousness -- Mother Earth. Ultimately, whatever activities occur in Ruby the town -- the plotting against racial impurity, the revolution of the young, the corruption of mankind -- occur within Ruby the transcendental Being, the world. Phenomenology, specifically Husserl's concepts of the *Lebenswelt* and the *ich selbst*, facilitates the perception of the body, including the mind, as "inherently expressive of existence as a whole" (Langer 121) and foreground the notion that the narrative is a (S)ignification of the female existence, or "Being." On an advanced level of dialectic cycle, the town, which is governed by a patriarchal society, (S)ignifies the female's mind and body, her "Self," and Morrison uses this disjointed symbol to make two important points: though the world is a feminine "Being," man, not woman, governs the part of her psyche that has "become" the hellish realm, and the anti-paradisical female existence is always at odds with the more liberated "Self," the one who has become God-like as a result of her fleeing patriarchal oppression. (Figure 1.4)

It is not impossible to excavate similar (S)ignified meanings for each of the names Morrison assigns to the "8-rock" people of the town and the women of the convent; nevertheless, it is an overwhelming task and, fortunately, not the purpose of this examination. There are several personae, however, whose names are worth dissecting as they reinforce the idea of "being" and "becoming" in Eden and lend credence to the notion of historical intertextuality: Zechariah Morgan and his sons, Deacon and Steward, and the women in the convent.

As the discussion of "Ruby" revealed, biblical allusions pervade the narrative.



Perhaps one signifier which most clearly bespeaks the correlation between Paradise and the Bible is the name of the man who instigates the migration to Paradise, Zechariah Morgan. There is no mistaking the fact that the character's name (S)ignifies the Old Testament prophet. With this (S)ignifier, Morrison clearly presents a new premise which is dissimilar to the common premise of this examination, however, the information is relevant in that it eventually discloses the author's sentiments about the female psyche. The prophet's ministry takes place during the time the Jewish people return to Jerusalem after seventy years of captivity in Babylon. Of all the lessons Zechariah offers, the prophet emphasizes one of the most dominant, re-occurring themes in the Bible: Grace, Love and Compassion, Beauty, Liberation, and Justice constitute the mind of God. In Zechariah 7:11, 12, the prophet identifies the response of their forefather's to God's command that they be a compassionate people, and he instructs that the lack of compassion triggers God's anger. Ironically, the settlement that Zechariah Morgan establishes is the exact opposite of the prophet's message; and the inscription "Big Papa" forges on the Oven creates an additional disanalogy, for, though it implies reverence for God's word, it provokes God's wrath. The re-naming of the Oven illustrates man's "becoming" the thing which incites God, and those who were supposed to "Beware the Furrow of His Brow" "become" the furrow of His brow. Mirroring the actions which resulted in the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Eden and supporting the interpretation of the disconnected female figure, the townspeople, disregard the word of the Lord, and "they [make] the pleasing land desolate" (Zech 7:14).

Deacon and Steward, Zechariah's twin sons, assume responsibility for the preser-



vation of the town after their father dies. Carrying on the family name should be an honor for the sons; however, their last name implies that they are "Morgan-atic," and, therefore, mimetic of the liminal heroine, trapped in the threshold of existence. They are neither of high or low rank and are ensnared in the perpetual state of becoming. The relationship between the men's names and the responsibilities of deacons and stewards in the Christian church is evident. However, there are some subtle points which are not as obvious. As was Zechariah the prophet, deacons are ministers of charity; stewards, on the other hand, are caretakers of items or people left in their possession. In the healthy Christian church, deacons *are* stewards of God's people; they are, or should be, the same persons. Likewise, though Deacon and Steward Morgan appear to be separate characters within the narrative, there is convincing evidence that, analogous to the double consciousness of the female presented in the convent and the town, the twins (S)ignify one person with a dual consciousness of the church - one that is content with the old doctrines, and another that wants to reject or defy them. The cyclical nature of the revolution and evolution of mankind away from God's word exemplifies Deacon's and Steward's liminality and creates the ultimate synthesis of Hell. Deacon and Steward's duality is not the genesis of the dialectic. Interestingly, their father is also a twin.

Few know and fewer remembered that Zechariah had a twin, and before he changed his name, they were known as Coffee and Tea. When Coffee got the statehouse job, Tea seemed as pleased as everybody else. And when his brother was thrown out of office, he was equally affronted and humiliated. One day . . . when he and



his twin were walking near a saloon, some whitemen, amused by the double faces, encouraged the brothers to dance. Since the encouragement took the form of a pistol, Tea, quite reasonably, accommodated the whites, even though he was a grown man, older than they were. Coffee took a bullet in his foot instead. From that moment, they weren't brothers anymore (302).

The dialectic of the twinned leadership has always occurred and, though the townspeople do not recognize it, the schism of the authority's psyche is the catalyst for the town's downward progression toward Hell. Though the premise of this progression is structurally antithetical to the migratory transcendence of the female, the conclusion is similar - one being emerges from the dialectic. Two examples illustrate the degeneration of the town: the chaos surrounding the words forged on the Oven's lip and the attack of the convent women. These occurrences illustrate the spiraling down of the dialectic which cause the "Disallowing" to reverse. Further, an examination of these phenomena unravels Morrison's new conclusion about the female psyche.

The Oven, in addition to being the place of fellowship, represents the town's collective pain of rejection, and Big Daddy's (Zechariah's) words are "more than a rule. [They are] a conundrum: 'Beware the Furrow of His Brow,' in which the 'You' (understood), vocative case, was not a command to the believers but a threat to those who had disallowed them" (195). Inevitably, maintaining the Oven and remembering the rationale behind its inscription becomes the patriarchy's primary purpose. After years of



wear and tear, the Oven becomes less a place of fellowship and more a point of contention for the townspeople, particularly the women. (87)

The women nodded when the men took the Oven apart, packed, moved and reassembled it. But privately they resented the truck space given over to it -- rather than a few more sacks of seed, rather than shoats or even a child's crib . . . Oh how the men loved putting it back together; how proud it had made them, how devoted . . . . A good thing {the women} thought . . . but it went too far . . . . A utility became a shrine (103).

In addition, some letters fall off during the move to Ruby, and the once all-too-clear command Zechariah forges on it no longer emphatically reads "Beware the Furrow of His Brow." Morrison uses this event and the subsequent quarrels surrounding the Oven's inscription to illustrate two forms of (S)ignification. The directive mode, which indirectly "speaks" to the dilemma of the female psyche and uses language to "arouse feelings of anger and hostility" and the expressive mode, which "employs 'direct' speech 'tactics' in the form of a taunt," thereby "impl[ying] an aggressive mode of rhetoric . . . that yields catharsis" (The Signifying Monkey 79). When the townspeople attempt to come to an agreement about what the words used to be, the older generation of men, the grandfathers, do not want anyone to change the command, for they vividly remember the "Disallowing:"

So understand me when I tell you nobody is going to come along some eighty years later claiming to know better what men who



went through hell to learn knew . . . you in long trouble if you think  
 you can disrespect a row you never hoed (87).

The generation of fathers wants to modify the "motto" to read, "Be the Furrow of His  
 Brow" or "We are the Furrow of His Brow";

"Excuse me sir. What's so wrong about 'Be the Furrow of His  
 Brow'?"

"You can't be God, boy." Nathan DuPres spoke kindly as he shook his  
 head.

"It's not being Him, sir; it's being His instrument, His justice . . ."

"God's justice is His alone. How you going to be His instrument if  
 you don't do what He says?"

"Yes, sir, but we are obeying Him . . . if we follow His commandments,  
 we'll be His voice, His retribution" (87).

and the youngest generation, the sons, who are apathetic about the responsibility they  
 have inherited, want to just use the "slogan" "Cut me some slack!" The argument about  
 the words on the Oven mirrors the feud between the dual consciousness of the female  
 psyche. Though it is the men who engage in the debate, they are merely mouthpieces for  
 the inaudible, invisible female, Ruby. In light of that fact, the Oven's words, which  
 memorialize the rejection of the families, are a directive (S)ignification of the of anger  
 and hostility Ruby feels and, likewise, their disintegration (S)ignifies her gradual  
 liberation from her "proverbial" role in society. Similarly, the inaction of the younger  
 generation and the large black fist they paint on the Oven are both expressive



(S)ignifications of the cathartic sentiments of revolution. True to the dialectical pattern, the youngsters' expression evokes hostility in the other townspeople, and the older generation's subsequent cathartic purgation is manifested in the murder of the *communitas*. These (S)ignifications of revolution and liberation advance the birthing process of the female psyche and provide a means for the author to interweave historical milestones into the text of the narrative.

The latter part of the 1960s and the early 1970s were volatile periods for African-Americans; African-American women had a particularly difficult time. They not only had to continue the struggle for civil rights, but white women were also encouraging them to join the feminist movement. Undoubtedly, many African-American women had not previously allied themselves with the causes of Gloria Steinham and the National Organization for Women (N.O.W.), and the Black female population was not all too certain that their struggle for equality was aligned with those of the feminists. Again, this historical intertextuality within Paradise substantiates Figure 1.4. Of course, Morrison does not forthrightly position the women in the convent as feminists; however, they do collectively illustrate some of the stereotypical feminist characteristics: they are not ashamed of their bodies, so they often walk around the convent nude; they do not believe a woman's hair is a sign of beauty, so they shave their heads; and because they have all been betrayed by men, they rely on their own strengths.

Just as American patriarchal society has questioned or stands aloof to the causation of feminist ideology, Ruby does not understand how the "evil elements" penetrate her isolated town. Through the sentiments of Juvenal DuPres and Deacon and



Steward Morgan, the reader witnesses the blame Ruby heaps on the community of outsiders, the “feminist” women living in the convent, for the degradation of her families’ morals. In a desperate attempt to cleanse the disease which threatens Ruby’s existence, a posse of men gather, ride out to the convent, and murder the five pariahs. In an Orwellian sense, Morrison depicts Ruby, one aspect of the female psyche, which, over time, has deconstructed itself and, thus, “become” what it has traditionally accused others of “being-” a “Disallower” of female liberation.

Steward’s subsequent murder of his brother’s former lover, Consolata (Compassion), is the catalytic event which continues the spiraling down of the male, or anti-thetical, anti-Paradisical female consciousness and causes the schism of the twin’s likemindedness, of male and female unity. It likewise signals the beginning of the female rebirth.

Deacon Morgan . . . looks at Consolata and sees in her eyes what has been drained from them and from himself as well. There is blood near her lips. It takes his breath away. He lifts his hand to halt his brother’s and discovers who, between them, is the stronger man. The bullet enters her forehead (289).

Deconstructing the meaning of “Consolata,” the reader can interpret her death as a loss of “charity” and “compassion” in Deacon’s life which causes him to go insane. After confessing his sins to Reverend Misner, he realizes the terrible person he “becomes” in “Paradise.” Barefooted and aloof, he travels north, ascending, so to speak, the main street of Ruby.



Deacon Morgan had never consulted with or taken into his confidence any man. All of his intimate conversations had been wordless ones with his brother . . . [Reverend Misner] listened attentively . . . he could see that the man's life was uninhabitable. Deacon began to speak of a woman he had used; how he had turned his nose to her . . . drop[ped] and despise[d] her. That while the adultery preyed on him . . . his long remorse was at having become what the Old Fathers cursed: the kind of man who set himself up to judge, rout and even destroy the needy, the defenseless, the different (302).

The fact that Deacon "loses" his "mind" is significant in that it provides additional insight into the figure with a disconnected head and body in Figure 5. The symbol (S)ignifies that Ruby the Being, under the authority of those men who have forgotten their original purpose of demonstrating God's charity, is detached from the mind of God, from womankind, and, therefore, Ruby the anti-thetical Paradise, cannot "Become" her liberated "Self." The location of the convent in relationship to the town and the names of the women who comprise the *communitas* reinforce all of the ideas presented. Further, dissecting the female *communitas* and its textual (S)ignification not only highlights the liminality of the female presence, but also creates a link between Paradise and other historical phenomena.

In a 1994 lecture at the University of Buffalo, Morrison disclosed her plans for her "manuscript in progress" and gave a sketchy outline of the plot. Though the author



did not overtly divulge any deep-seated meanings or themes, she did admit that immediately prior to publishing Paradise, she intended to entitle the text “War.” While this title appears to merely support the information presented in this examination about the “warring” dualities of the female psyche, it actually presses the epistemological boundaries of the reader’s textual consciousness and implicates larger, socio-political and historical (S)ignification. One (S)ignifier, in particular, possesses latent meanings which allude to several incidents of “war” in contemporary and ancient times. “Seneca” is the name Morrison assigns to one of the convent women; the author’s use of this name ingeniously (S)ignifies three distinct wars in history which explicitly highlight the theme of liberation: British settlers vs. the Seneca (Iroquois) nation; patriarchal America vs. the women’s liberation movement; the philosophical war waged between Lucius Annaeus Seneca the tragedian and Decimus Junius Juvenalis (Juvenal) the satirist about women’s place in society.

First, parallel to Seneca’s character, the Iroquois Americans are dispossessed orphans who have lost their “mother”land. In the narrative, Seneca’s belief that her mother is her sister is similar to the Native Americans’ perception that the earth and its inhabitants are the brothers and sisters of mankind. Just as Seneca is placed in foster homes and loved for her quiet spirit and accommodating nature, so too were the Seneca placed on reservations and appreciated for their “accommodation” to the siege on their land, culture and religion.

There were two hours and twenty minutes before Seneca’s bus departed . . . Seneca sighed heavily, but there was no danger of tears.



She had not shed one even when she found Jean's letter . . . . Well

cared for, loved perhaps by the mothers in both of the foster homes,

she knew it was not her self that the mothers had approved of but

the fact that she took reprimand quietly ate what given, shared

what she had and never ever cried (135).

Moreover, though more deeply embedded within the context of the narrative, Morrison uses Seneca's character to appeal to the African-American reader's sensibilities about the institution of slavery and African/African-Americans' four-hundred-year struggle to claim their "being" and "become" liberated in this country.

The second sign that "Seneca" references is Seneca Falls, the name of the city in New York where the Women's Liberation Movement began. In 1848, women gathered there to create the Declaration of Sentiments and resolved to forthrightly oppose the oppressive social order of the patriarchy which prevented their "becoming" equal to men within the social order.

Whenever any form of government becomes destructive . . . it is the

right of those who suffer from it to refuse allegiance to it, and to

insist upon the institution of a new government, laying its

foundation on such form, as to them shall seem most likely to

affect their safety and happiness . . . [W]hen a long train of abuses

and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same object, evinces a

design to reduce them under absolute despotism, it is their duty

to throw off such government and to provide new guards for



their future security (qtd. in Declaration of Sentiments).

Morrison drops subtle clues that this “war” is one to which she refers. In the first chapter of the narrative, the men storm the convent and discover a calendar in one of the women’s rooms: “A 1968 calendar, large X’s marking various dates (April 4, July 19) . . .” (7). While the date April 4, 1968 is a telling (S)ignifier -- it is the day of Martin Luther King’s assassination, the day he gained his “freedom” -- July 19th is significant because it is the day on which a delegation of women convened in Seneca Falls, New York to commemorate the beginning of the Women’s Liberation Movement.

The theme of liberation is reinforced in a third (S)ignification of “Seneca.” The stoic philosopher, Lucius Annaeus Seneca, was a leading intellectual figure in the mid-first century AD. At one time, Seneca was accused of adultery and banished from the government system within which he had been a revered statesman. It was then that the tragedian produced one of his more famous essays, “To Helvia on Consolation,” which was written to comfort his mother, Helvia, as she grieved Seneca’s exile and his forthcoming death.

... You cannot use your sex to justify your sorrow when with your virtue you have transcended it. Once you have got over the first wave of sorrow, [women] will invite you to pick yourself up, at least if you look at the example of women who deserve to be ranked with great men (Lefkowitz and Fant 261).

This brief excerpt seems to “speak” directly to the convent women who have all been emotionally wounded and, yet, have transcended their circumstances by the power of



their virtuosity. In stark opposition to Seneca's perception of the transcendent, virtuous female psyche, the themes of Juvenal's (55 - 127AD) satire imply that women are victims of, yet responsible for, the vice, crime, and misuse of wealth in the world. Such perceptions of women have existed since Eve's "original sin" and have, likewise, fueled the incessant love/hate relationship patriarchal society has with women.

Seneca is not the central icon for "being" and "becoming" in the narrative; She is merely one of many (S)ignifiers for the birthing of the female "Self." However, the historicity of her name, in addition to the explication of the content presented earlier in this chapter, illuminates the possible interpretations for the (S)ignifyin(g) names of the other convent women. A series of analogies and disanalogies strengthen the distinctiveness of Morrison's statement about the transcendental Being. For example, each woman serves as a model of the dispossessed, handicapped, abandoned, and abused women Morrison illustrates in The Bluest Eye, Sula, Tar Baby, and Beloved. At the same time, they are a collective representation of God's mind which man, as a designated caretaker and minister of charity, refuses to embrace. Phenomenologically speaking, Gigi (Grace), Consolata (Compassion or Charity), Seneca (Freedom), Pallas (Beauty), and Mavis (Justice) (S)ignify the psyche of the transcendental Being. At the innermost level of the dialectic, this communitas is the thesis of "Being," the perceived object; simultaneously, at the uppermost level, the women represent the synthesized perceiving subject or "Being," Husserl's *ich selbst* ("I myself), the absolute transcendental (S)ignification, the mind of God, and, therefore, God. Slaying the women does not kill them any more than God can be killed. In fact, murdering the flesh of the God-like



women merely sets His spirit free, resurrecting it in the ethereal realm. According to Hegel's theory of the Absolute, the phenomenological dialectic of life and death is a process of discovery towards God's purpose for human existence. [Wo]man is born into the temporal realm and spends her entire life trying to become who she was before she gave birth to herself. When she dies, she becomes her "Self," returns to her "Self," and begins the cycle again.

All of the dissimilarities presented in *Paradise* "allow" Morrison to liberate the female psyche or to give birth to her "Self." At the end of the narrative, resurrected in the spirit, each of the slain women reappears to the family members who had threatened, molested, abandoned, and betrayed them. In so doing, the previously "Disallowed" women "become" physically and emotionally released from their pasts. Gigi visits her rapist father who is serving a life sentence in prison. Her clothing is indicative of her embattled existence in Eden.

"So what are you doing here?" He noticed her clothes for the first time. "You in the army?"

Gigi smiled, "Sort of."

"Sort of? You mean you was? . . ."

Later, as Manley sat on the bus, he went over every detail of what he had seen of his daughter. Her army cap and fatigue pants -- camouflage colors. Heavy army boots, black T-shirt. And now that he thought of it he could swear she was packing . . . (310).

The author continues to play with the reader's sensibilities about the dynamics of



the parent/child relationship when Pallas returns to see her mother in Mehita, New Mexico and when Mavis visits Sally in New Jersey. "Mehita" is an obvious pun of the endearing Spanish term for a daughter, "mi hija." By returning to see her mother, the resurrected Pallas journeys to "her daughter." This deconstructionist exercise mirrors the incessant pattern of the dialectic -- women who were mothers in a former life "become" daughters in the subsequent Eden -- and explains why no one dies in Ruby. Furthermore, this phenomenon reconciles the argument about the regenerative Eve and, likewise, the perpetual self-destructive female "Being."

Mavis's and Sally's encounter, similarly, triggers cyclical phenomena of the mother/daughter relationship. Again, New Jersey is "The Garden State" and Mavis's returning to the "garden" from which she initially "fled" is yet another example of the phenomenological journey. Sally tries to tell her mother about all the trials she has had to endure after Mavis leaves; Mavis knowingly listens and keeps her distance rather than giving her daughter any "motherly" advice. Mavis's apparent apathy is one of the dissimilarities of the mother/daughter relationship that Morrison weaves into the narrative and is not apathy at all. Instead her inaction is a result of the futility in mothers' age-old struggle to prepare their daughters for life's battles, and by allowing her daughter to learn for herself, Mavis exercises one of her God-like characteristics.

[God] did not thunder instructions or whisper messages into ears.

Oh, no. He was a liberating God. A teacher who taught you how to

learn, to see for yourself. His signs were clear, abundantly so . . . (273).

Sally's mother is confident that her daughter will, with or without her words of wisdom,



claim her "Self" and understand God's purpose.

Similar to Mavis's and Gigi's characters, the resurrected Seneca reappears to Jean; however, Jean, who had led Seneca to believe that she was her sister, claims to be Seneca's cousin. Contrasting the previous relationships, Jean and Seneca are psychically and emotionally removed from one another. Psychically, Jean's abandoning Seneca is stored too deeply in her subconscious to remember when or where she left her and that Seneca is, in fact, her daughter.

Several years ago [Jean] had checked out the foster home . . . and saw the mother -- a cheerful, no-nonsense woman the kids seemed to like. So, fine. That was it. She could go on with her life. And did. Until 1966, when her gaze was drawn to girls with huge chocolate eyes. Seneca would be older now, thirteen years old, but she checked with [the foster mother] to see if [Seneca] had kept in touch.

"Who are you, again?"

"Her cousin, Jean."

. . . When she finally bumped into her in 1976, [Seneca] was standing in front of a car, blood running from her hands . . .

"Seneca?" Jean shouted...What happened? It's me! . . . Don't you remember me?"

Seneca looked up . . . "Should I? From where?"

"On Woodlawn. We used to live in those apartments on Woodlawn."

Seneca shook her head. "I lived on Beacon. Next to the



playground”(316-317).

Physically and characteristically mimetic of the resurrected Christ, Seneca's emotions toward her mother are not those of a betrayed and abandoned daughter, rather the young girl is forgiving of her mother's transgressions and responds lovingly.

A girl was standing in front of a car, blood running from her

hands. Jean saw the blood first and then the chocolate eyes . . .

Seneca stroked her palms, first one, then the other . . . “Ow,”

Seneca said . . . She waved her hands in the air. Seneca smiled.

“That's okay. Everybody makes mistakes . . . . Seneca and Jean looked.

Her hands were clean, no blood. Just a few lines that might or

might not leave marks . . . (316 - 317).

Consequently, all of the resurrected women return to the goddess, Piedade, and Morrison is able to validate her proposition that the transcendental Being is a female.

Accordingly, the final statement of the narrative confirms the concept of the evolving presence of the female *communitas*, and “speaks” to the reader's consciousness regarding female divination and the migratory transcendence of her psychical Being.

There is nothing to beat this solace which is what Piedade's song

is about, although the words evoke memories neither one has ever

had of reading age in the company of the other; of speech scared

and divided bread smoking from the fire; the unambivalent bliss of

going home to be at home -- the ease of coming back to love begun.

When the ocean heaves sending rhythms of water ashore, Piedade



Figure 7 – Reverberation of the Phenomenological Dialectic

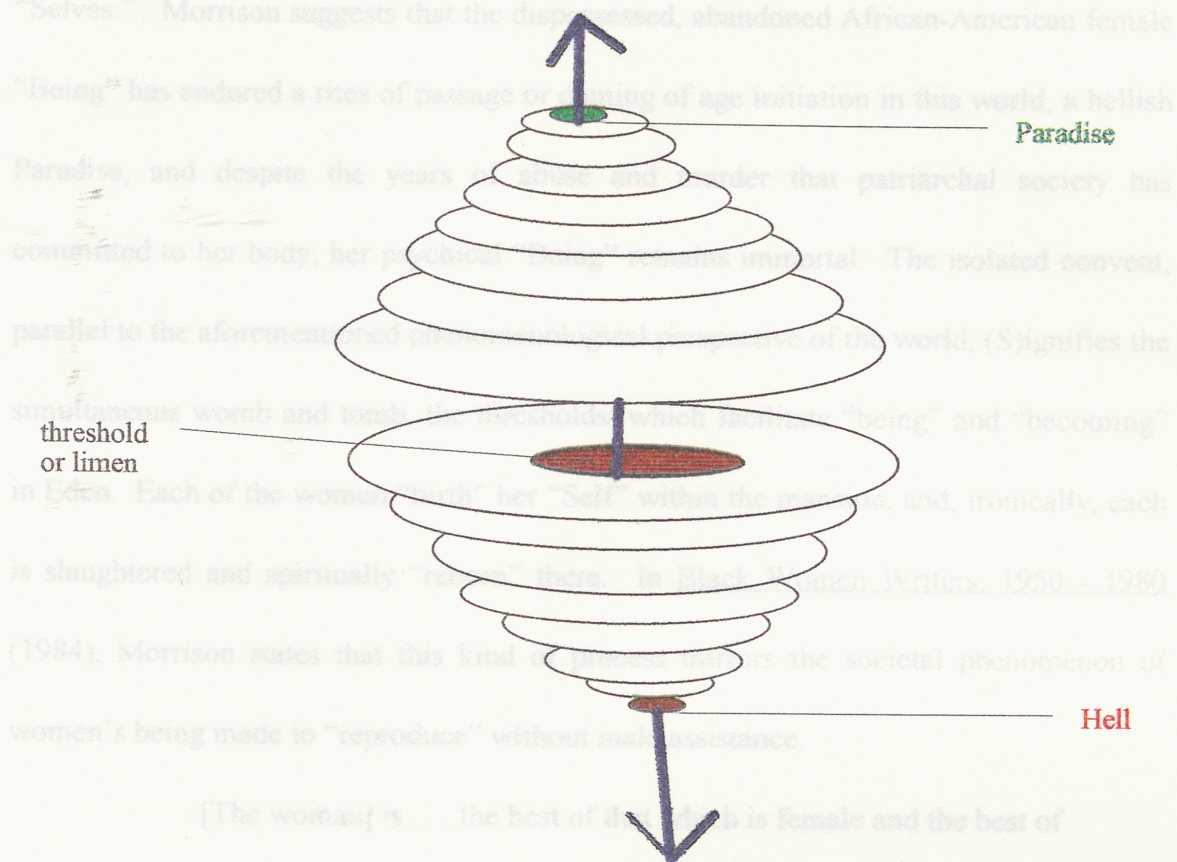
looks to see what has come. Another ship, perhaps, but different, heading to port, crew and passengers, lost and saved, atremble, for they have been disconsolate for some time. Now they will rest before shouldering the endless work they were created to do down here in Paradise (318).

Although the women collectively represent God, the presence of Piedade, a female deity, reverses the dialectical process. The fact that the convent women, or others like them, will one day return “down, in Paradise” causes a reverberation of the dialectic illustrated in Figure 7, reflecting the relationship that Adam and Eve had with God. After the expulsion from Eden, God said: The man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil (Gen 3:22). This verse suggests that though man and woman are anti-thetical to Him in some respects, they are products of God and, therefore, are God. While the anti-thetical phenomena of the world which man created -- society, its church, its laws -- kill the female psyche and induces the process of her “becoming” immortal (a (S)ignified expulsion from Paradise), man’s dependency on God necessitates His perpetual reincarnation of the vestiges of His power and virtue -- the Black female.

Pecola, Claudia, Sula, Nel, Jadine, Sethe, and Denver are not characters in Paradise; however, their spirits manifest themselves in the convent women. Reduction of the phenomenological process elucidates Morrison’s purpose for presenting the black female as an evolving, reincarnated presence. Subsequently resurrecting the liminal black heroine in each of her novels, the author chronicles the collective black female experience and, in so doing, illustrates the universal purpose for her existence: she must



Figure 7 -- Reverberation of the Phenomenological Dialectic



[The woman] is . . . the best of the which is female and the best of that which is male, and that balance is disturbed if it is not nurtured, and if it is not counted on and if it is not reproduced. That is the disability we must be on guard against for the future – the female who reproduces the female who reproduces the female . . . I want to point out the dangers, to show that nice things don't always happen to the totally self-reliant if there is no conscious historical connection.

To say, see – this is what will happen ("Rootedness" 3-4).

The multi-layered architecture of Paradise not only creates the conceptual framework for a phenomenological discussion about the incessant birthing process of the African-American women from impotence to immortality, but also substantiates the



return to liberate the "Rubies" who have been taught to plot against and kill their "Selves." Morrison suggests that the dispossessed, abandoned African-American female "Being" has endured a rites of passage or coming of age initiation in this world, a hellish Paradise, and despite the years of abuse and murder that patriarchal society has committed to her body, her psychical "Being" remains immortal. The isolated convent, parallel to the aforementioned phenomenological perspective of the world, (S)ignifies the simultaneous womb and tomb, the thresholds, which facilitate "being" and "becoming" in Eden. Each of the women "birth" her "Self" within the mansion, and, ironically, each is slaughtered and spiritually "reborn" there. In Black Women Writers: 1950 - 1980 (1984), Morrison states that this kind of process mirrors the societal phenomenon of women's being made to "reproduce" without male assistance.

[The woman] is . . . the best of that which is female and the best of that which is male, and that balance is disturbed if it is not nurtured, and if it is not counted on and if it is not reproduced. That is the disability we must be on guard against for the future -- the female who reproduces the female who reproduces the female . . . I want to point out the dangers, to show that nice things don't always happen to the totally self-reliant if there is no conscious historical connection.

To say, see -- this is what will happen ("Rootedness" 344).

The multi-layered architecture of Paradise not only creates the conceptual framework for a phenomenological discussion about the incessant birthing process of the African-American women from impotence to immortality, but also substantiates the



design of this informative discourse as simultaneously effective directive discourse. Admonishing the evolved African-American female, Morrison proposes that "allowing" her own liberation should negate, or "Disallow," neither her more traditional perceptions of her "Self" in society nor the roles of her male counterpart in order to preserve her Black "Self." Continued opposition to either of the other two variables will inevitably murder the female "Being," thus she will be eternally thrust into war with her psyche.

consistently discloses more phenomena which warrant further investigation. Based on the findings this examination purports, Morrison reinforces Ishmael Reed's notion that the Black experience "is not an always ready black signified, available for literary representation in received Western forms" (Reed 197). Undoubtedly, though Morrison continues to "speak" the "unrepresentable" atrocities and make visible the invisible tragedies of African-American women, she does so without allowing the reader to believe that he or she has seen and heard all there is about the Black female existence and her painful process of "becoming." Similar to an archaeological excavation, this examination has revealed significant evidence regarding the historical intertextuality of *Paradise*; nevertheless, there is a plethora of political and theological (S)ignifiers which remain buried in Eden.

Chapter three of this examination explores various examples of the "warring" dualities of the female psyche and implicates larger historical (S)ignification. In the tradition of the Talking Book, *Paradise* "speaks" a final example of an ancient war that the diametrical town and convent (S)ignify. The same gender wars that prompted women to compose the Declaration of Sentiments and Lucius Seneca to espouse his



## CHAPTER 4

### CONCLUSION AND PROJECTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY OF PARADISE

The phenomenological approach is a sound methodology for arriving at a point of departure for a hermeneutic investigation of Paradise. However, the dialectic it begins consistently discloses more phenomena which warrant further investigation. Based on the findings this examination purports, Morrison reinforces Ishmael Reed's notion that the Black experience "is not an always ready black signified, available for literary representation in received Western forms" (Reed 107). Undoubtedly, though Morrison continues to "speak" the "unspeakable" atrocities and make visible the invisible tragedies of African-American women, she does so without allowing the reader to believe that he or she has seen and heard all there is about the Black female existence and her painful process of "becoming." Similar to an archaeological excavation, this examination has revealed significant evidence regarding the historical intertextuality of Paradise; nevertheless, there is a plethora of political and theological (S)ignifiers which remains buried in Eden.

Chapter three of this examination explores various examples of the "warring" dualities of the female psyche and implicates larger historical (S)ignification. In the tradition of the Talking Book, Paradise "speaks" a final example of an ancient war that the diametrical town and convent (S)ignify. The same gender wars that prompted women to compose the Declaration of Sentiments and Lucius Seneca to espouse his



belief that women do “deserve to be ranked with great men” merely echo the battles men and women began three thousand years ago in Jerusalem, the Hebrew “Paradise.” In this decade, archaeologists have discovered evidence which suggests that before the Israelites converted to Judaism, the ancients worshipped a mother goddess, Asherah. Modern feminist archaeologists allege that Asherah is the goddess of human destiny and that male scribes have tried to erase her from Judeo-Christian theology. There is substantial proof that, throughout history, many other cultures have maintained the male/female duality of the Transcendental Being. For example, the Egyptians worshipped Isis and Osiris, Hera and Zeus presided over ancient Greece; and the Hindi acknowledge Shiva and Krishna. Historians claim that when Jerusalem was sacked by the Babylonians in 596 BC, the Israelites blamed their captivity on female idolatry, and, consequently, Asherah was erased from religious texts. Since 1960, archaeologists Ben Deever and Cathleen Kenyon have raised questions about the validity of God’s “helpmate” and their search for remnants of the female cults who worshipped Asherah has prompted society to question the Bible’s representation of women.

Deever and Kenyon offer clues which may lend credence to Asherah’s existence. The lady lion, a common theme in present-day Israeli art, is usually the image positioned just below the representation of Yahweh. In the last two decades, the archaeologists have discovered dozens of ancient statues of woman standing between two lions and beneath the image of Yahweh, and they are convinced the woman is Asherah. Interestingly, Morrison uses this image of the lady lion in her illustration of Mavis’ daughter and of the *communitas*.



The night that Mavis leaves her family, she fears that her daughter, Sally, wants to kill her.

The rest of the night she waited, not closing her eyes for a second . . . and she would have slopped out of bed . . . and opened the door except for the breathing beyond it. She was sure

Sal squatted there -- ready to pounce or grab her legs. Her upper lip would be raised showing eleven-year-old teeth too big for her snarling mouth . . . (26).

Similarly, after the *communitas* is murdered, one of the women in the town, the nurse who takes Pallas to the convent to be “nurtured back to health,” reflects on the thoughtful women who had once “treated her so well” and “had given her sunny kindness.”

Billie Delia was perhaps the only one in town who was not puzzled by where the women were or concerned about how they disappeared. She had another question: When will they return? When will they reappear, with blazing eyes, war paint and huge hands to rip up and stomp down this prison calling itself a town? . . . She hoped with all her heart that the women were out there, darkly burnished, biding their time, brass-metalling their nails, filing their incisors -- but out there . . . The convent women would roar . . . She could see their pointy teeth (308).

This passage concretizes the relationship between the evolving black female presence in



Morrison's narratives and those women within the context of history. The "darkly burnished" lioness (S)ignifies the African-American female psyche, who will one day reemerge to wage war on those who would stifle her greatness, prevent her from acquiring equal status within the social order, and plot to kill her.

In addition to revealing the historical motif of revolution and liberation of the female, the phenomenological approach lends itself to theological investigations which, further, segue into more involved discussions of Gates' (S)ignifying monkey. While this examination has focused on Eve in the novel and has alluded to the presence of Adam, very little attention has been given to the snake, "the Enemy," in Paradise. Chapter two mentioned various female characters' interaction with or observance of "the Enemy." Claudia, Nel, Jadine and Denver each recognized "the enemy" in her time; however, unlike their "darker" counterparts -- Pecola, Sula, Jadine, and Sethe -- they are able to resist temptation and persevere. From a theological perspective, one could argue that [wo]mankind's free will, her desire and decision to *be* God without being God-like, is "the Enemy."

"... Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden'?" ... "You will not surely die," the serpent said to the woman. "For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil (Genesis 1: 1, 4, 5).

Eve wanted to be omniscient, as God is, but she did not want to be obedient and submissive to God's divine will. While she cannot be blamed for Adam's subsequent



fall, for Adam had his own free will, Paradise provides substantial evidence that “the true “Enemy” of African-American female is her own psyche.

This examination utilizes one facet of Gates’s complex theories about the African-American novel. One aspect which was not addressed and would serve as the foundation for an interesting heuristic of Paradise is the (S)ignifying monkey, the trickster, Esu-Elegbara. According to Gates’s research, the fundamental tenets of Yoruba mythology present the monkey as responsible for interpreting the “talk” or “recurring topos” which exists “throughout black oral narrative traditions (The Signifying Monkey 5). In The Signifying Monkey, Gates identifies the names that Africans throughout the Diaspora have assigned to Esu and asserts that the monkey interprets Ifa, divine word, which writes itself “as a cryptogram” (13). Esu possesses many characteristics which liken him to an “Enemy” of God: “a partial list of these qualities might include individuality, satire, parody, irony, magic, indeterminacy, open-endedness, ambiguity, sexuality, chance, uncertainty, and betrayal” (The Signifying Monkey 6). Interestingly, each of these attributes is a manifestation of the psyche and, therefore, of free will. The fact that Esu is the only interpreter of Ifa, divine will, initiates a complex dialectic among Esu; the female psyche presented in this exegesis; the reader, whose duty is it to decode the numerous encrypted (S)ignifiers in Paradise; and Morrison who, as author, presents the signs which may be inappropriately explained. Just as the female psyche is perceived as the “Enemy” in that she unsuccessfully deciphers signs of God’s will, the reader can also be perceived as an “Enemy” because he or she may mistranslate the literary (S)ignifiers in Paradise:



These visual signs are known in the Yoruba as “signature of an Odu,” and each signature the bablawo, or priest, translates by reading or reciting meanings are lushly metaphorical, ambiguous, and enigmatic, foundation as riddles, which the propitiate must decipher and apply as is appropriate to his or her own quandary” (The Signifying Monkey 10).

Conceivably, if the female mind and the reader comprise an “Enemy” presence in the Paradise, so too must Morrison’s presentation of the (S)ignifiers she perceives, for though she is the subjectivistic author of the text, she is not *the* Transcendental signified. Or is she?

Many, if not all, of the notions purported within this examination of Paradise appear akin to those for which Morrison has received her “feminist” status. However, the author emphatically states that her purpose for writing lies in the ways that her personal “Black experience” can be imparted to African-American females. Excluding, or, perhaps, deferring her attention away from what she perceives as a “white” feminist movement, as well as what some male critics have negatively termed the “Black feminist” movement, Morrison does not succumb to the delimitations literary theorists impose on her writing. In “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation,” the author adamantly counters those who would label the absence of “strong” male characters as a the stereotypically feminist act of “bashing” men.

You know, there are a lot of people who talk about the position that men hold as of primary importance, but actually it is if we



don't keep in touch with the ancestor that we are, in fact, lost . . . I

don't have much to say about [the necessity to develop a specific

Black feminist model for critical inquiry] except that I think there

is more danger in it than fruit . . . any model of criticism or evaluation

that excludes males from it is as hampered as any model of criticism

of Black literature that excludes women . . . yes, the work must be

political . . . if it [is not], it is tainted ("Rootedness" 344-345).

In light of Morrison's position, any ensuing discourse regarding the textuality of Paradise

would have to surpass the extant critical feminist pedantry. Though most critics often

relegate discussions of theology, politics and deconstructionist theories to literature

produced by men, Toni Morrison's presentation of the African-American female psyche

in Paradise traverses those delimitations and, once again, raises the standards for the role

of the author as well as for the function of literature in society.



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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Here I am using Bertrand Russel's definition of "objective" found in "The Analysis of Matter" (1972) p. 223. Russel asserts that the objectivity of perception does not solely depend upon what the phenomenon is in itself, but also upon "the experience of the percipient."

<sup>2</sup> "Phenomenology." Oxford English Dictionary. 1995 ed.

<sup>3</sup> The amount of literature produced by African-American males during this period is substantially greater than that generated by female counterparts.

<sup>4</sup> Here the term "Black Aesthetic" refers to the Western notion that African-American people adopt European standards of beauty and culture and reject their African heritage.

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