Myth, Ritual and Iconography

An exploration of the nature and logic of cultural symbols in Morrison’s fiction will provide the means to understand how she links her narrative with the spiritual traditions of Africa. Her artistic intentions to include black beliefs and worldviews in her fiction consequently influence not only the content but also the form of her novels. Ritual acts, and other indigenous values and practices are employed in order to re-integrate the African-American personality, and restore individual and communal cohesion. Within the broad framework of African worldviews embedded in her stories, she reclaims and reintegrates African-American identity by establishing their links with “the sacred cosmos of beliefs and their ritual participation.”

One of Morrison’s predominant concerns is to adapt myths and rituals that will restore community cohesion in a time of conflict and disintegration illustrating her commitment towards recovering and renewing the mythic and ritualistic constituents of black life. Frederick Bird defines ritual as “Culturally transmitted symbolic codes which are stylized, regularly repeated, dramatically structured, authoritatively designated and intrinsically valued.” According to Nigel Thomas, it “refers to those forms of behaviour devised by people over long periods of time to reinforce the key values of their culture and to promote social
harmony and individual and group confidence." This corresponds to the notion that through the enactment of rites and rituals, individual behaviour is made meaningful by reference to a community’s belief systems and myths. In Morrison’s fiction, African-centred rites of passage mark the transitional or critical periods in an individual’s life, such as birth, initiation, marriage, and death. The ultimate goal of such rituals is to ensure the individual’s bonding with the community and the cosmos. Morrison’s incorporations of African-American rituals vary according to the value encoded the ritual in question.

In Morrison’s fictional world, ritual is a way of ordering the chaos of African-American life. In The Bluest Eye, she reconsiders the power of ritual to counter the myths of the infallibility of white standards of beauty. Claudia rebels against “the universal love of white baby dolls, Shirley Temples, and Maureen Peals” (BE, p.149) by enacting a ritual dismemberment of the blue-eyed dolls she receives for Christmas, “to discover the dearness, to find the beauty, the desirability that had escaped me, but apparently only me.” (BE, p.14) Claudia and her sister perform a more significant ritual in the planting of the marigold seeds in order to counter the self-negating sentiments regarding Pecola’s perceived ugliness, to save her unborn baby, and to eliminate the gossip surrounding it:
Quiet as its kept, there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941. We thought, at the time, that it was because Pecola was having her father’s baby that the marigolds did not grow. (BE, p.3)

In attempting to connect the baby’s development to the cycles of nature, they reveal their “belief in signs and the principle of causality relative to the natural world.”¹⁰ By linking the notions of conception and birth with the seasonal cycle, with magic and ritual language, the two girls indicate their knowledge of the correlation between moral codes and natural happenings as well as the spiritual potency of saying “the right words.” (BE, p.3) Although the girls’ performance of magic rites fails to counter the negative impact of white cultural myths on Pecola’s life, it reflects their concept of African values that are supposed to ensure their own survival.

The need to order and focus experience is also a major concern in *Sula*, as many of the main characters struggle to extract an ordered meaning from the events in their lives. Rituals that affirm community values, social purpose, and group experience are evidenced in the novel. Examples that come to mind are the involvement of the whole community at Nel’s marriage and Chicken Little’s funeral ceremony. Marriage and death represent important aspects of life’s cycle. In African society, the collective enacting of these rituals concerning marriage or
death, render individual actions meaningful. Regarding the rite of
marriage, John Mbiti states:

> It is the point where all the members of a given community
> meet: the departed, the living and those yet to be born. All
> the dimensions of time meet here, and the whole drama of
> history is repeated, renewed and revitalized. Marriage is a
> drama in which everyone becomes an actor or actress and
> not just a spectator. Therefore, marriage is a duty, a
> requirement from the corporate society, and a rhythm of life
> in which everyone must participate.\textsuperscript{11}

At Nel’s wedding, the involvement of the whole community is thus taken
for granted, something unusual in a western celebration of a similar
event:

> No invitations were sent. There was no need for that
> formality. Folks just came, bringing a gift if they had one,
> none if they didn’t. (S, p.80)

In the total participation of all of its members, communal cohesion is
achieved:

> Old people were dancing with little children. Young boys
> with their sisters, and the church women who frowned on
> any bodily expression of joy (except when the hand of God
> commanded it) tapped their feet. (S, p.79)

Moreover, the celebration becomes an occasion where even Nel’s mother,
Helen Wright, reins in her personal idiosyncrasies for the benefit of the
group.

> In spite of enslavement and the suppression of African culture,
many African-Americans have maintained distinctly African funeral
traditions based on the African belief that death is not the end of life, but a transition into a spirit life. Scholars refer to the West African burial ritual as one of the most powerful unifying elements of African religion. Sterling Stuckey believes that this is because almost every element of African religion, which survived and benefited African-American self-definition, was associated with this single ceremony. The basic goal of the burial was to enable “the soul to go to God”, reflecting the belief that death is a gateway to the domain of spirits. Stuckey also associates other forms of artistic expression, which had positive self-defining characteristics with the burial ritual, particularly dance and music. Dance functioned as a form of worship and means of achieving union with God. In *Sula*, Morrison incorporates these aspects of the burial ritual in her description of the mourning scene of Chicken Little’s funeral in which there is much lamentation but also exultation as the community comes to terms with the tragic event of his drowning:

> They spoke, for they were full and needed to say. They swayed, for the rivulets of grief or of ecstasy must be rocked. And when they thought of all that life and death locked into that little closed coffin they danced and screamed, not to protest God’s will but to acknowledge it and confirm once more their conviction that the only way to avoid the Hand of God is to get in it. (*S*, pp.65-66)

Another aspect of ritualized mourning is found in the celebratory party, the joyful music and exuberant dancing which follows the funeral
rites. The funeral banquet following Aunt Jimmy’s burial in *The Bluest Eye*, is described as “a peal of joy after the thunderous beauty of the funeral.” (*BE*, p.111) Just as there was “the restoration of order in nature at the graveyard” (*BE*, p.114) ritual celebration restores cohesion to the community after the disorder brought by death:

Thus, the banquet was the exultation, the harmony, the acceptance of physical frailty, joy in the termination of misery. Laughter, relief, a steep hunger for food. (*BE*, p.114)

In *Sula*, Shadrack, whose war experiences have destroyed his sense of reality, develops the need to order his own existence and finally hits upon the idea of devoting one day in a year to death in order to “exorcise all thoughts of it for the rest of the year.” (*S*, p.14) Thus, National Suicide Day is born. The initial fear and suspicion of the Bottom residents and their inability to understand Shadrack reflect their losing touch with their African selves.”

Vashti Lewis points out that in traditional African ontology the spirit of people who lay unconscious for many days (as had Shadrack in his shell shocked condition), left the body, and entered the ancestral world. As such, the mad Shadrack would have been treated with respect and awe in traditional African culture; instead, he is viewed with fear and distrust. However, the villagers of Medallion show that they still have a lingering sense of their African selves by coming to accept Shadrack’s Suicide Day as a part of their physical and spiritual lives. In
traditional African practices, invoking the spirits of the dead usually resulted in their appearance and Shadrack’s ritual of Suicide Day involves invoking these spirits. The narrator of *Sula* attests to the response of the spirits,

Someone said to a friend, “You sure was a long time delivering that baby. How long was you in labor? And the friend answered, “bout three days. The pains started on Suicide Day and kept up till the following Sunday.” (S, p.15-16)

Then, “somebody’s grandmother said her hens always started a laying of double yolks right after Suicide Day.” And weddings do not take place on Suicide Day for fear of it being disrupted, by the spirits. Since coincidence is an alien concept to African people, these happenings are attributed to National Suicide Day. The very nature and name of the day places it in the realm of the supernatural and anything that happened on that day would thus have superstitious value.

Through the creative incorporation of its rituals, the author explores what they imply about the hopes, beliefs, and daily reality of black existence. Among the functions that regulate individual life and communal coexistence are those that deal “with natural processes centering on the body – nourishing, healing, conjuring—and a second [triad] that operates on the plane of representation—joking, storytelling and singing.”16 In fact, characters attain social identity through the functions they perform on behalf of the community. Unlike “the Western
notion of contractual exchange regulating profit and merit in society,” the ideal African-American community is “based on interactive exchange contributing to both individual and collective well-being.” As with the ritual of mourning, whether it is that of telling a story, or singing a song, or providing nourishment, performance matters.

Regarding the concept of nurturance, characters are assessed according to their ability to provide physical as well as spiritual nourishment to others. The emphasis on nurturance in Morrison’s fiction, is at the heart of the concept of generational continuities, and traditionally regarded as a woman’s domain. For example, in *Sula*, unlike the “oppressive neatness” of Nels’s house, Sula lives in “a woolly house, where a pot of something was always cooking on the stove; [...] where all sorts of people dropped in; [...] and where a one-legged grandmother named Eva handed you Goobers from deep inside her pockets or read you a dream.” (*S*, p.29) In other words, whereas Nel’s house imitates white middle-class standards, Sula’s household is more in keeping with the cultural ethos of black communities where visitors are always welcome, where food is always available and where neatness is secondary to the time spent in interactive storytelling and joking with one’s communal members.
In *Song of Solomon*, Pilate manifests her powers of nurturing at her very first meeting with Milkman, when she conducts a theory-cum-practical lesson, a ritual performance of how to make a perfect soft-boiled egg. In the making of this food item, and in passing on the technique of its making, Pilate preserves cultural history. Her house is filled with the smell of fruits, wine, and the forest—a pungent "piny-winy smell," which "is a symbol of the widespread and pervasive dispersion of her nurturing power." Just as the messiness of Sula's house is an endless source of fascination for Nel, "Milkman is initially fascinated with [Pilate's] matriarchal household because of its difference from his patriarchal one. Here stories are told, food is tasty and plentiful, and none of the rigidity of his own home is present." Similarly, Consolata in *Paradise* is a provider of food, shelter, and herbal remedies to the women who find their way to the Convent. The food and herbs are the products of agricultural processes based on a symbiotic relationship between the land and the women's nurturing powers. Meals at the Convent are carefully and lovingly prepared, particularly by Consolata, and shared by the inmates. Here the nurturing function is elevated to ritual status, ensuring harmony, and satisfying not only physical needs but also psychic ones as well. Even Ruby's women seek out the convent women for the special foods and herbal remedies available there, and for the caring, inclusive
kindness proffered by them demonstrating how intertwined physical and psychic healing are.

Central to the concept of nurturing and nourishing in Morrison’s communities, is their function to foster group cohesion. “If conducted in the right way, the sharing of food promotes both the social and physical well-being of the group.” Nevertheless, food that is offered for selfish individual gratification, such as Ruth Dead’s extended breastfeeding of Milkman, as also her badly prepared meals; unwholesome foods like Valerian’s candy or the sugary substitutes that Joe and Dorcas feed on, cannot promote the well-being of either the individual or group. Further, food that is withheld, such as Pauline Breedlove’s blueberry cobbler, or food that is offered in excess, such as Baby Suggs’s feast, “can cause strife.”

Closely allied to the nourishing principle is the practice of healing by combining spiritual and natural remedies. Morrison’s re-inscription of the concept of the female healer in her novels illustrates how “traditional Black female activities of root working, herbal medicine, conjure, and midwifery” find their way into the fabric of her stories. It also paves the way for discussing how she links the narrative to ritual as a way of restoring balance in both the physical and spiritual realms. In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison gives us the example of M’Dear, as a medicine woman
connected to the spiritual arts of healing. Everything about M’Dear, including her physical description, identifies her as a woman who has maintained indigenous knowledge of healing through spiritual insight and communication with the ancestral world. Her ability to communicate with the spiritual codes of her ancestors is evidenced in her gestures (tapping her hickory stick), ritual postures, and in her diagnosis of the root cause of Aunt Jimmy’s sickness. The other community women aid M’Dear in her healing ritual, by carrying out her prescription for Aunt Jimmy to “drink only pot liquor and nothing else.” (BE, p.137) Consequently, they busy themselves with procuring the right kind of food:

That evening the women brought bowls of pot liquor from black-eyed peas, from mustards, from cabbage, from kale, from collards, from turnips, from beets, from green beans. Even the juice from a boiling hog jowl.” (BE, p.137)

Kokahvah Zauditu-Sellasie notes that plants are like straws, “which harness the energy from the earth and contain the vital essences of life.” Energy from the spiritual plane is transferred to the physical plane using “gateways,” such as the circle of old women tending to Aunt Jimmy. These gateways function as the meeting point of the physical and spiritual realms.

Although most of Morrison’s healers are female, Son Greene in Tar Baby can be included as one of her healers. From the beginning, he is
closely associated with nature as with “food, survival, and the support of a nurturant female force.”25 His entry into the fictional world of the novel is via the sea, assisted and guided by “the water lily lady,” and his departure likewise, is through water escorted by the blind Therese. His natural primitivism is suggested in the “savannahs in his face” (TB, p.205), in his smile which is “like a sudden rustling of wind” (TB, p.181), in his “woodsy” voice (TB, p.181) and earthy “animal” smell. (TB, p.123)

And as the novel’s ending shows, Son apparently becomes one with nature, and the past. His nurturing powers are illustrated in the way he applies banana leaves onto Ondine’s sore feet to heal them. (TB, p.138) His magical fingers also restore plants and cause them to bloom. (TB, p.127)

Morrison gives us another example of an effective rootworker, healer, and midwife in the character of Pilate. Pilate’s performance of Milkman’s pre-birth rites prepares him for other rituals that will initiate him into becoming a mature, responsible, and active member of his community. In her role as spiritual midwife and of “mothering” in the African and African-American sense, Pilate helps Milkman to reunite with the stories of his ancestors, to reconnect with his past and with his dead and living relatives, thus, delivering him from his spiritual dilemma. Her “othermothering” role relates to the concept of “Aje,” which is more
than giving physical or biological birth. Teresa Washington explains that Aje is a Yoruba word and concept that describes a spiritual force that is thought to be inherent in ‘Africana women;' additionally, spiritually empowered humans are called Aje.\footnote{26}

Another female healer and conjuror in the mould of Pilate is Tar Baby’s Marie Therese Foucault. A descendent of one of the mythical blind horsemen and a swamp woman, Therése “demonstrates the power of interacting with the natural, non-human world, and the agency of spiritual return.”\footnote{27} Although her employers dismiss her as an “illiterate” washwoman and indifferently call her “Mary,” she steadily gains stature in the novel through her association with Son. The first to detect his presence on the island, having met him in a dream, Therése provides him physical nourishment by giving him access to an endless supply of chocolates. But more significantly, she is perceptive to Son’s inner needs and gives the spiritual guidance that releases him from the tar baby trap and the chance to re-invent his identity. Assisted by her, he is transformed into a legendary male, one of the island’s blind horsemen, who gains the spiritual insight necessary to restore order to the natural world.

Stanlie James asserts that the historical practices of “othermothering and community othermothering have been critical to the survival of Black communities” in America.\footnote{28} Othermothering has
functioned as a survival mechanism to withstand the displacement and disruption of African-American families and communities following slavery, migration, and racism. Nurturing and care giving activities, usually associated with biological mothering, are thus, extended to all members of the community. In *Jazz*, Morrison employs reciprocal mothering acts related to the powers of nurturing and healing through Violet Trace and Alice Manfred. Although both women are not physically mothers, through the reciprocal dimension of their burgeoning relationship, Morrison suggests an alternative way of constructing new possibilities to articulate their deepest thoughts and individual circumstances. While Violet motivates and maneuvers Alice’s self-interrogation and self-discovery, Alice recognizes Violet’s broken spirit reflected in her frayed and worn clothes. As a seamstress, Alice works at putting things back together, stitching up fallen hems and loose seams, “Her stitches were invisible to the eye.” (*J*, p.111) According to Kokahvah Zauditu-Sellasie, Morrison employs the Yoruba *Oshun*’s symbol, the needle, one of whose spiritual functions is binding and sewing society together. In mending Violet’s torn sleeve and coat lining, Alice helps to heal Violet’s fractured sense of self. Their shared experience sews both their lives together exemplifying Morrison’s
intentions of using the needle as a cultural symbol that can “repair the
cultural breaches of African people rent asunder in North America.”

Morrison also incorporates a number of ritual acts in Paradise to
enable women characters to reconstruct their lives. For instance, the
Convent provides a space for validating ordinary women and “their small
stories” (P, p.212) that ensures survival. Within the framework of this
community, survival requires a mutual, cooperative nurturing in both
physical and psychic sense. Connie considers the connection between
mothers and daughters to be as essential as the connection between body
and spirit. This becomes clear in her healing ritual, where she talks about
loving the flesh and forbids the women from breaking them in two:
‘Never put one over the other. Eve is Mary’s mother. Mary is the
daughter of Eve’ (P, p.263). An important part of the ritual Connie uses
to heal the women is called ‘loud dreaming’ (P, p.264), in which the
women lie “unspeaking” and unmoving within the painted outlines of
their bodies. These iconographic depictions are “sacred ideograms
representative of their spiritual personalities” and the means by which
they externalize and confront their wounded physical selves. That
Morrison adopts the ritual from indigenous sources is further attested to
by Newbell Niles Puckett’s comments of how Southern black “women
cure pain by drawing mystical symbols on the ground.”
As the ritual of storytelling in *Paradise* illustrates, Morrison’s characters deploy storytelling as a means of coping with their painful existence, expressing it for the benefit of others. Storytelling rituals employ the concept of “rememory,” a word that Morrison coins to combine memory, remembrance and the idea of repetition that is involved in recreating what is essentially a reciprocal community function. In all her novels, most of the characters have a story, but not all are storytellers in the folkloric sense of the term. In *The Bluest Eye*, Claudia attempts to tell Pecola’s story, but not having access to the whole truth, she cannot account for the “why” surrounding the central action of the story. Consequently, her storytelling becomes more or less a conceptualized account of her own life story. Nevertheless, in a ritual enactment of testifying and witnessing to her community about Pecola’s pain, she is able to create a community of listeners, at least among readers. In *Tar Baby*, although each of the characters has a story, there are no willing listeners. Characters cling to their private, personal myths hindering mutual understanding. Without listeners, the stories of each character remain in the realm of the incommunicable. Even the history and legends surrounding the island seem to be not related to the world of men. Hence, “In the Street household, we find rituals bereft of mythic content, and on
the mythic island, we sense the presence of deities cut off from the consideration of men.”

In *Song of Solomon*, the storytelling act itself plays an important function in the novel. Moreover, it serves to illustrate Morrison’s style of creating stories that carry elements of generational lessons, cultural beliefs, and wisdom. On one level, Milkman’s quest to find himself is really about finding a story to tell. The history of the Dead family is transmitted through traditional storytelling that includes local legends and stories of close family friends and through the Sugarman blues song that is sung by Pilate. At first, Milkman’s story consists of his isolation from other people; even his own parents are for him, mere characters in someone else’s “story.” In this regard, he is not alone. His parent’s stories, and his friend, Guitar’s story, all share the tendency of being too enclosed and fixed. Each of these characters, like those in *Tar Baby*, is locked within the confines of their own stories, resulting in isolation and estrangement from other people and their stories. But Morrison believes in the capacity of storytelling to present a way out of this impasse by asserting the relationship between teller and listener. Milkman must learn to listen to the stories of other people and understand the significance of shared history through shared stories and traditions, before he can communicate his own story. The notion of teller and listener sharing a
common background of beliefs is illustrated as the stories Milkman gathers from Rev. Cooper, Circe, Susan Byrd and others, tell him the collective story of his ancestors. Milkman now begins to understand himself in relation to other people through these stories and thereby acquires a communal sense of identity. In this, Pilate, whose song ritually chants the names of her ancestor, Solomon, and recreates his original flight, assists Milkman in reconnecting him with the stories of his ancestors.

Storytelling in Beloved is one of the functions defining community and reveals the importance that Morrison places on this African-American traditional activity. As in Song of Solomon, storytelling in Beloved is a recurring motif: it bridges the gap between the past and present. Throughout, the text highlights the various processes by which stories that have been repressed, are told, or remembered through the consciousness of the characters. Paul D, Sethe and Denver are stunted and unable to realize and incorporate themselves into the present world because they have repressed their past. The atrocities of slavery have left each of them physically and emotionally battered. Paul D has buried his past in the “rusted tobacco tin” of his heart (B, p.); Sethe remains outside society unable to think or speak about her past; Denver exists without a community, without a past and without her own story. The nature of each
character’s repression allows them to live only partially. Yet Morrison’s stance is that they must remember and pass on their stories, however terrible and painful, they must find the language, rituals, and codes of conduct originating from the oral tradition that hold the answers to their healing.

The character Beloved, as the manifestation of the repressed past, instigates release by forcing confrontation. Her direct and relentless questioning sparks Sethe to remember and to tell things she once was unable to do. Her presence also prompts Paul D to reveal for the first time his 18-year struggle, his endless running and hiding. Hence, up to a point, Beloved’s presence is a healing one since it incites Paul D and Sethe to rediscover the past together and allows them to form a cohesive narration of past events by filling the gaps of each other’s stories. For Denver too, the advent of Beloved is a catalyst for her escape from the enslaving existence of 124 Bluestone Road. In the deadlock of love in which Sethe and Beloved finally become involved, Denver realizes that her mother is in danger. She plucks up the courage to leave the house and to step out to tell the community the story of Sethe and Beloved. The novel thus demonstrates how stories are put together and put to rest.\(^35\)
African Cosmology, Religion, and Spirituality

Morrison’s spiritual landscape is permeated with references to African cosmology and religion, sacred symbols of nature, knowledge of traditional belief structures, signs, and omens in an African context. Through her fiction, Morrison mediates between African belief systems and the realities of African-Americans in the western world by employing symbolic, temporal, and cultural codes reflective of traditional African religions and indigenous value. By transporting the spiritual culture of Africa to America in her literary figurations, she provides a context for African-Americans to reclaim their fractured identities by recovering their ancestral memory and individual and communal significance.

One of the main elements of western religions is the split between a spiritual and material world, in which matter and spirit belong to different realms rather than existing as two components of the physical world. In contrast, the folklore tradition as represented in Morrison’s fiction highlights an African worldview in which there is no dichotomy between the visible and non-visible world. Mbiti reminds us that traditional African philosophy “emphasized that the spiritual universe is a unit with the physical, and that these two intermingle and dovetail into each other so much that it is not easy, or even necessary, at times to draw the distinctions or separate them.” In African-American cultural tradition,
the “soul signifies the moral and emotional fibers of the black man”\textsuperscript{38} and spirituality refers to “spiritual beings, to that which gives life, form, and meaning to physical realities. It is the breadth of life.”\textsuperscript{39} Drawing upon such notions of spirituality, Morrison’s fiction proposes a spirituality that is compatible with the real world and can exist in the physical one. The inference is that the spiritual is part of the physical world but is to be differentiated from the merely material. \textit{Song of Solomon} explores the ways in which African-Americans themselves have contributed to the marginalization or negation by white America of African-American traditions and belief systems about spirituality. Yet as Morrison demonstrates in the novel, the repressed system of beliefs confront the dominant ideology not only through rationally unexplainable elements such as Solomon’s flight or Pilate’s conjuring powers, but also through a depiction of spiritual emptiness experienced, for instance, by Milkman. Initially, Milkman’s quest is a material one, a search for the mythic treasure at his materialistic father’s instigation.

The journey that Milkman undertakes involves leaving the community and at the same time he hopes to discover a sense of self, or some spiritual insight lacking in his empty life. What he finds at the end of his quest is his family’s story and the myth of the flying African. But ironically, he also discovers how in participating in and not distancing
himself from the community’s life would have been enough to provide him with spiritual insights. Instead of the complicated journey to the south that Milkman undertakes, a simple trip to the other side of the town he lived in would have probably revealed to him as much about the spirituality he was seeking. He only had to notice how Pilate and her family functioned to realize that the spiritual being is a result of the connections among humans in the physical world. He only had to look at Pilate to see how it was possible to fly without ever leaving the ground.

The perspective that he eventually adopts is that of an individual who gains understanding of himself and meaning in his life in the network of relationships to which he belongs, and thus gain a sense of the spiritual. The spiritual value of Solomon’s flight was not his mythical flight itself, but the remembrance of it by those who were left behind who create a communal bond out of this myth.

Religious references and allusions, from both Western and African traditions, abound in Morrison’s fiction. In many of her novels, Morrison often depicts the African-American Christian church as a place of communal support within a uniquely African-American cultural specificity. In tandem, she also critiques normative Christianity as being hypocritical, narrow-minded, and powerless to solve misfortune and self-hatred. The intention here, however, is not to expand on this topic but to
highlight the importance that African spirituality including its supernatural and magic components has in Morrison’s fiction, and to account for her rejection of a dualistic philosophical framework, the either/or requirement that underlies much of Western systems of thought. In this regard, Lauren Lepow directs attention to Morrison’s critique of dualistic thinking referring particularly to Christianity with its dichotomy of good and evil, body and soul, flesh and spirit.⁴⁰

Sugiyama Naoko in her paper, “‘Blessed Malelessness’ as Womanist Critique?: Toni Morrison’s Representation of Goddess in Paradise”⁴¹ refers to the relationship between Christianity and African-American women writers. In an insightful exploration of this relationship, she cites the fictional works of many notable African-American women authors, in which the cultural and spiritual survival of African-Americans are symbolized by non-Christian religions and the use of African-American spiritual resources that originated in Africa. Of these writers, Alice Walker is one, who emphasizes an African-American feminist religious view, and who develops this religious view to form a syncretism of ancestor worship, goddess worship, and Christianity. However, as Sugiyama argues, “Toni Morrison, on the other hand, seems to emphasize the African-American characteristics within Christian tradition by using
Biblical words and images to support African-American survival and self-affirmation.\textsuperscript{42}

Christianity does indeed inform all of Morrison’s writing. Besides the examples of Baby Suggs’ speech in \textit{Beloved}, and the funeral scene in \textit{Song of Solomon} that Sugiyama refers to, numerous other examples of the profound presence of an Africanized Christian theology can be found.\textsuperscript{43} In addition to the many and obvious Biblical allusions and analogies that abound in all her novels, a number of her characters, such as Sethe, Baby Suggs, Consolata, and even Sula and Pecola to name a few, also embody Christ like qualities. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, Morrison’s novels depict scenes that reflect the church as a centre of community, and particularly, as places where people gather together in order to mourn the dead and console the grieving. At the same time, however, Morrison also fills her fictional world with supernatural events and women who “practice,” with supernatural events and with people who accept them as part of everyday life.

Revisiting Baby Suggs’ speech in the Clearing, the reader will find elements of African animism incorporated into the Christian faith. Although it is a concretized improvisation of traditional Christian sermonizing, Morrison rewrites the sermon with a challenging redefinition of the way to worship the Creator. While the traditional black
sermon stressed the power, might, and beauty of God, Baby Suggs questions the racial inferiority implied by slavery, which denies the benevolence of the Creator. Preaching for a re-evaluation of their black physical selves, her sermon does not advocate a heaven delayed until after death, but a promise of a better life on earth, but which must come from the people themselves. The African animism of pre-Christian worship in her congregations’ bare-footed contact with the earth emphasizes her message that the material and the spiritual cannot be separated, but can only flourish when together.

Another way in which Morrison uses religious allusions, both African and Western, is to use Western theological notions to portray how her characters are “misled by dualistic images of the Christian God.” Religious references and allusions to God abound in *The Bluest Eye*. In the novel, a young Cholly Breedlove watching a father of a family lift a watermelon over his head to break it open on the ground discovers the inadequacy of the white conception of God to account for the underlying religious and ritualistic purpose of communal partaking of food. The father’s god-like stance does not fit the image of God in Cholly’s mind:

“God was a nice old white man, with long white hair, flowing white beard, and little blue eyes that looked sad when people died and mean when they were bad. It must be the devil who looks like that—” (*BE*, p.106)
On the other hand, Pauline Breedlove adopts Western theological traditions of dualistic thinking, and builds her religion on a rigid demarcation between good and evil, righteous and unrighteous. The adoption of such a narrow-minded interpretation of Christian morality leads her to condemn her alcoholic and out-of-work husband as being “beyond redemption.” (BE, p. 37) Worse still, the either-or approach of her belief system leads her to judge Pecola from a moralistic standpoint that contributes to her daughter’s psychological breakdown.

Morrison’s fictional representation of God includes other aspects and characteristics that are different from the traditional Christian notion of the Trinity of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. In Sula, she introduces the concept of the fourth face of God derived from African religious traditions, in which God “is brought into the picture primarily as an attempt to explain what is otherwise difficult for the human mind.”45 The Bottom community, who sees Sula as the source of their misfortunes explains her existence thus:

In their world, aberrations were as much a part of nature as grace. It was not for them to expel or annihilate it. They would no more run Sula out of town than they would kill the robins that brought her back, for in their secret awareness if Him, He was not the God of three faces they sang about. They knew well that He had four, and that fourth explained Sula. (S, p. 118)
As Allen Alexander says, “God possesses a fourth face, one that is an explanation for all those things - the existence of evil, the suffering of the innocent and just - that seems so inexplicable in the face of religious tradition that preaches the omnipotence of a benevolent God.”

An example given earlier illustrates how at a church picnic Cholly watches a man smash a watermelon, and rejects the image of the white God for a more vibrant and exciting concept, something more in line with the image of the devil. “The image that Cholly relishes is one that embraces the fourth face, one that portrays God as much more than the pallid, antiseptic God envisioned by white society.” In *Sula*, as Sula violates one convention after another, she is perceived as the evil agent, the fourth face of God, who is responsible for the incomprehensible events that cause pain and suffering in the community. In this way, “a folklore is created that includes both tales of her evil actions and interpretations of ‘signs’ associated with her.”

Most scholars of African religions argue that African religions usually associate evil with God in some way and tend not to divorce God from the problem of evil. Again, as Alexander explains, “Within the belief system of many African peoples God’s kinship to evil surpasses that of a source of origin. Evil not only derives its power from God but is
allowed to flourish by God." Morrison's own comments on her use of evil in *Sula* are illuminating:

It never occurs to the people of Medallion to kill Sula. Black people never annihilate evil. They do not run it out of their neighbourhoods, chop it up or burn it up: they don't have witch hangings. They accept it, almost like a fourth dimension in their lives. They try to protect themselves from evil, of course, but they do not have that puritanical thing which says if you see a witch, then burn it, or if you see something then kill it.

This is the attitude that the people of Medallion adopt towards Sula, which is an attitude similar to the ones held by the mourners at Aunt Jimmy and Chicken Little's funerals that reflects their African heritage that views evil as a natural aspect of life itself. Nevertheless, acceptance does not mean that they did not struggle to overcome it. In *Sula*, we see how the Bottom residents work together to mitigate its influence, not by trying to destroy it but by trying to survive it by actively engaging with it: “The presence of evil was something to be first recognized, then dealt with, survived, outwitted, triumphed over...” (S, p.118) But as Morrison seems to suggest, African-American characters, such as Pauline, Pecola, and Soaphead Church, who are disconnected from an African sensitivity and heritage are incapable of recognizing God’s fourth face, and therefore fail to overcome their circumstances.

It is in depicting the community’s perception of illness and death and of evil that Morrison most reveals her awareness of the African
Spiritual traditions. She sums up the folk philosophy of the black community of Bottom in these words:

They did not believe doctors could heal-for them, none ever had done so. They did not believe death was accidental-life might be, but death was deliberate. They did not believe Nature was ever askew-only inconvenient. Plague and draught was as “natural” as springtime. If milk could curdle, God knows robins could fall. The purpose of evil was to survive it and they determined ...to survive floods, white people, tuberculosis, famine and ignorance. They knew anger well but not despair, and they didn’t commit suicide—it was beneath them.” (S, p.90)

Their notions of illness and death, of natural catastrophes and evil in general, are strongly derivative of their African heritage. African people believe in a force behind the visible events and experiences that take place in people’s lives. Thus, things do not just happen and there is no such thing as coincidence within this framework of belief; the normal possibility of ‘natural death’ is practically a contradiction in terms. Such a concept is found in Sula. Illness and death in the novel are rarely accidental or natural. Violent deaths abound as in almost every chapter someone dies and that too, horribly. There is ambiguity surrounding the “accidental” deaths of Chicken Little, Hannah, Plum Peace, and the collective “suicide” of the Bottom residents. The black community in Sula seeks supernatural explanations rather than naturalistic reasons for these deaths, mostly linking them with Sula.
The superstitious character of the Bottom people is also revealed through their belief in signs and omens. Eva Peace is a woman who knows things. She is one of those who believe in the power of signs and is therefore upset that she failed to identify the signs that prefigured Hannah’s death. In Eva’s reconstruction of the signs presaging Hannah’s terrible death by fire, the emphasis is about importance of the events and not a chronological sequencing of the events. For instance, strange events such as Hannah’s dream of a red bridal gown, and her asking Eva if she had ever loved her children (a question that should never have been asked, in Eva’s opinion), is first recounted, although the event of a fierce wind that had swept through the town had occurred first. The order of Eva’s reconstruction of the events—the second sign recounted before the first—is significant from the point of an African cyclical time-frame, in which there is no beginning or end, and hence must be understood in relation to events. These unusual events imply that there is an order behind what appears to be random disorder.

Religion and spirituality are also central concerns in *Paradise*. In this novel, Morrison uses a multiplicity of religious beliefs in innovative ways to enact a cultural healing and transformation. While the Christian faith is the foundation of Ruby and the main streets are named after the gospels, the women in the Convent practice mystical religions and
communicate with spirits. The kind of spirituality that the Convent women practice is all-inclusive and non-denominational, unlike the exclusions of institutionalized Christianity. In Ruby, there are three separate Christian denominations, of which Misner’s Baptist Church is the largest and most powerful. But the religious structure is itself deeply patriarchal as is illustrated in the meeting called by Richard Misner to bring together the various parties involved in the Arnette/K.D. affair. The glaring absence of Arnette herself, her mother, or any other woman in the negotiations, serves to reinforce the fact that the text also criticizes normative Christian traditions for contributing to the subjugation of women. It is therefore no surprise that despite the “irreconcilable differences” that exists among themselves, members from all these three churches “merged solidly on the necessity of” killing the Convent women. (P, p.9)

In Paradise, Morrison continues her criticism of normative Christianity for constructing dualisms that split its practitioners from their bodies and the world they live in. Lone DuPres, Ruby’s root worker and midwife, disagrees with Consolata when the latter tells her that Church and everything holy forbid the knowledge and practice of magic, and that faith in Christianity is all that she needs. In Consolata’s view, humans should not “interfere with natural consequences.” (P, p.244) Lone’s ideas
are different, and the dualisms found in Consolata’s Christian beliefs that separate the spiritual and material, humans and nature give way to a more balanced and composite worldview. As she tells Consolata,

You need what we all need: earth, air, water. Don’t separate God from His elements. He created it all. You stuck on dividing Him from His works. Don’t unbalance His world. *(P, p.244)*

The African cosmological concept of a spiritually unified universe influences Lone’s ideas. Geoffrey Parinder in *African Mythology* describes a pyramidal relationship of God, man and the forces of nature in which humans reside in the middle of all these forces and must try to keep in balance with all of them.*54* That Consolata finally comes to accept Lone’s teaching and her magical powers of healing reveals Morrison’s endorsement of a more connected view of the earth.

Describing her new beliefs to the women residents at the Convent, Consolata tells them, “Eve is Mary’s mother, Mary is the daughter of Eve” *(P, p.263)* invoking “the matriarchal heritage of Biblical feminine authority.”*55* Her emphasis on the interconnections of both body and spirit, rather than the privileging of one over the other criticizes traditional Christian and patriarchal definitions of who and what is Good and Evil, which women are Mary, which are Eve. Consolata’s teachings propagates a more accepting form of religion that is inclusive of a multiplicity of beliefs, including Catholic principles, African-American
female traditions of root working and conjuring, and Candomblé—a Brazilian religion combining African spirit worship and Roman Catholicism. Drawing on the worship of the “water goddess,” the orisha Yemanji or Yemanjá of Yoruba tradition, or Mama Oxum in the Brazilian context, Consolata introduces the concept of Goddess worship through the image of Piedade in *Paradise.* The goddess’s association with the life giving powers of water, and with the maternal, has important significance in the context of the novel. Firstly, water is a recurring image in the stories Consolata tells of Piedade, in the new myths she creates to instigate the post-traumatic recovery of the Convent women. Secondly, by taking on the role of mother-healer, Consolata brings about their healing through the magic ritual of cleansing water.

Piedade is thus the amalgamation of various religious images and exemplifies Morrison’s strategy of drawing from specifically African origins to empower African-American women in a racist and sexist environment. However, her “radical representation of the female divine is never totally apart from Christianity and its American and African-American religious tradition.” In the Brazilian context, Yemanji is associated with the Virgin Mary of the Catholic faith. In addition, Piedade’s “ruined” fingers are associated with the hard manual labor enforced on the Brazilian working class, particularly Third-World female
workers and with the red-black swollen fingers of the peppers grown at the Convent, symbolizing the five women gathered there. 59

Candomblé, then, is a system of ideas that represents a radical departure from the rules that have guided the life of the protagonist to this point: this religious system encourages not sacrifice in hopes of attaining everlasting life in the afterlife but wholeness and completion in this life. In Paradise, through her presentation of magic, Christianity and Goddess worship, Morrison challenges readers to reconsider religious faith, “its images and practices” by exploring the issue of the power of religion and black women’s civil empowerment. 60

Ghosts and the Ancestor

The use of the supernatural as an African component of the African-American tradition by Morrison witnesses the entry of ghosts and haunting in her writing. Ghosts and ghostly forces inhabit the internal and external lives of Morrison’s characters, and function as emblems and symbols. In African cosmology, ghosts occupy a liminal position between the world of the living and the world of the dead, what Mbiti calls, the now or “sasa” where the living and the dead whose name is still remembered inhabit. 61 Contrary to haunting scenes as depicted in Western literature, the circumstances under which ghosts appear in Morrison’s novels seem “more mundane than otherworldly, and they are tolerated
rather than feared.” For instance, the presence of Pilate’s dead father is a source of comfort to her, and Sethe and Denver are reconciled to living with the spiteful ghost that haunts them at 124 Bluestone Road. Often, these spirits or ghosts are dead members of a family who take on the role of ancestors. In African culture, elders of the community are greatly respected because they have lived the longest and have acquired the most knowledge. Once an elder crosses over into the realm of the spirits through death, they become ancestors. An ancestor in the realm of the spirit has access to knowledge to which no living being is privy. The importance of ancestors in this regard is that they can provide, to those who seek them out, information of things and forces unseen.

In “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation,” Toni Morrison identifies a link between folklore as a repository of ancestral wisdom and values and use of an ancestral figure as an indicator of cultural integrity. As she explains:

These ancestors are not just parents; they are a sort of timeless people whose relationships to the characters are benevolent, instructive, and protective, and they provide a certain wisdom. The supernatural occurrences in Song of Solomon are explicit aspects of African cultural heritage and “attest to an alternative reality presented in Morrison’s cultural discourse.” When Macon tells Milkman, “Pilate can’t teach you a thing you can use in this world. Maybe the next, but not
this one” (*SoS*, p.55), he is making a sharp division between the material and spiritual world in consonance with Western culture which equates the ‘real’ with the visible.’ However, as pointed out by Gay Wilentz, the characters, (mostly women) that are deeply rooted in the black tradition in the novel have a more integrated worldview, one that includes “an African perspective in which there is dialogue with the ancestors.”

Pilate can also be seen as a keeper of African cultural ways, “a culture bearer in touch with her ancestry.” Like many traditional societies in Africa, there is a long tradition of women as keepers of the spiritual culture. In *Song of Solomon*, consulting the spirits of the dead is a recurrent theme in the life of Pilate and Ruth as with African culture. Both Pilate and Ruth have close posthumous communications with their fathers. But it is Pilate who receives information and instructions from the spirit world that give her certain supernatural powers. As she tells Ruth,

> “I see him still. He’s helpful to me, real helpful. Tells me things I need to know.”
> “What things?”
> “All kinds of things, It’s a good feeling to know he’s around. I tell you he’s a person I can always rely on. I tell you something else. He’s the only one.” (*SoS*, p.141)

Though not told explicitly what kind of teaching she receives from her contact with her dead father, the reader can assume that this knowledge is part of the “discredited knowledge” to which Morrison often refers. With
the knowledge she gains, Pilate is able to unravel the family history and to pass on this information to the next generation through Milkman.

In *Beloved*, Morrison makes liberal use of mysticism and magic to accentuate their intricacies as well as to highlight their manifold presence in African-American culture. Their multifaceted qualities are present throughout the text and visible in everything from the use of folk medicine, to supernatural and folk belief. Moreover, the boundaries between myth and reality, between the physical and spiritual worlds not only disappear in the novel, but also, through the character Beloved, are violated to explore the possible existence of other levels of reality and to offer an alternative to the established one.

Trudier Harris writes that, in *Beloved*, Morrison attempts to challenge Western beliefs about ghosts, that "the demise of the body is the end of being in this realm." She also comments that Morrison treats ghosts as "a probable occurrence" and that readers must therefore "suspend disbelief long enough to see where she takes us with the possibility."67 However, the worldview out of which Morrison writes is one that accepts ghosts not as "probable" occurrences but as actual occurrences. *Beloved* is firmly rooted in the African worldview that death is the threshold to a parallel existence and that spirits continue to exist and interact with living people. It is not difficult to believe, as the
characters in the novel come to believe, that Beloved is the reincarnated daughter of Sethe, and the one she killed to prevent re-enslavement. The novel gives many instances and signs that indicate this idea. In fact, Morrison in *Beloved* exploits the abiku/ogbanje phenomenon that addresses reincarnated children who return to torment their parents. Beloved is the "marked" child in African-American culture who is affected, in vitro, by the horrors the mother witnessed. She is also the abiku child of the Yoruba—the one born-to-die—who is slashed and scarred to prevent return, but re-enters, from the spirit realm, the traumatized womb for rebirth and perhaps a chance at terrestrial longevity.

The concept of abiku embraces various beliefs about predestination, reincarnation and the relationship between the real world and that of spirits. Ogbanje/abiku are names for a spirit child or spirit children who are said to die early only to be born again and again to the same mother. At the core is a deadly parent-child struggle for power. In *Beloved*, Sethe’s murdered daughter returns incarnated as Beloved to torment Sethe. Overwhelmed by feelings of guilt, Sethe allows Beloved to blackmail her into serving her every whim:

She took the best of everything—first. The best chair, the biggest piece, the prettiest plate, the brightest ribbon for her hair; and the more she took, the more Sethe began to talk, explain, describe how much she had suffered, been through,
for her children, [...] None of which made the impression it was supposed to. Beloved accused her of leaving her behind. Of not being nice to her, not smiling at her. (*B*, p.241)

Finally, it takes Ella and the community women of Cincinnati to perform the singing and chanting ritual necessary to expel the ogbanje.

Morrison’s Beloved defies categorization. “Like a true spirit, this character remains elusive, embodying certain ideas and functions, embodying not just herself literally, but also metaphorically, and always ambiguously.”\(^7^0\) Whether as a person or as a spirit, Beloved’s function is to bridge “the gap between Africa and Afro-America and the gap between the living and the dead and the gap between the past and the present.”\(^7^1\) As an embodiment of the “ghost” of slavery, she symbolizes all the ancestors, “the Sixty Million and more” who had perished under slavery and the infamous Middle Passage, illustrating Morrison’s ultimate tribute to the ancestors.

Morrison’s novels highlight one of the main qualities that apparitional figures can offer. As an alternative to established reality, they provide the opportunity for discussing often-avoided spheres of knowledge. The ability of the ghost to speak from the past in the present moment, and to be present while being absent, calls for openness towards a sphere that demands a new ordering of knowledge and of knowledge production. At the same time, the recurrent journeys into the past through
ancestral characters and ghosts entail the breaking of a linear narrative common to Western literary practices. In *Beloved*, for instance, Morrison’s employment of circularity, episodic fragmented re-telling of the past and use of narrative flashbacks and shifts in subject as narrative techniques accounts for the constant leaps between the past and present made by the characters and readers, via the ghost of the child Beloved.

Like other novels of black women novelists, such as Paule Marshall’s *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983), Morrison’s ancestral figures are central to her fictional communities because of their connection to racial memory. In this sense, she has often focused on the dominant role of the ancestral female as culture bearer. In her novels, the struggle to attain a firm sense of self often implies a search for connectedness with the past, in particular the "ancestral past" of African-American history, folklore, and music. Her characters must learn to rediscover the value and sustaining force of this authentic "black" past, or else resign themselves to a life in which they have internalized white cultural values but find themselves unhappy and alienated at heart. In *Tar Baby* for instance, the need to preserve links with the ancestor and to reconnect with black people’s “ancient properties” is realized through emblematic female figures such as the “swamp women,” and the “night women.” These figures serve as reminders of the African cultural heritage and Afrocentric
values which Jadine has rejected in pursuit of all things Eurocentric. These female figures are in varying degrees, symbolic of all the things that Jadine is not—the "authentic" black person. And although she is haunted by them, Jadine is so cut off from her roots, she cannot see "the original self" that Morrison says, "is always there." Representing the African-American qualities of personal and racial nurturing, these figures provide the link for reconciliation with the ancestral mothers and ethnic self, thus functioning as positive forces. But Jadine responds to them with dread, revealing a Western habit of thinking, by viewing these ghostly apparitions as intrusive and traumatizing.

Joanne Braxton in her essay, "The Outraged Mother," examines the ancestral presence of the outraged mother as a primary archetype in the narratives of contemporary Blacks writers. Often, the ancestor figure is an outraged mother who embodies the values of sacrifice, nurturance, personal courage, and spiritual strength, whether Christian or derived from African belief and Braxton identifies Pilate as one of them. In Song of Solomon, the presence of the ancestor is felt through the enactment of Pilate's outrage when one of Reba's male friends quarrels with her and beats her in Pilate's backyard. Holding a knife to his heart, Pilate "overwhelmed the man and spoke to him in the language of the outraged mother, a language of the heart" telling him that although a woman
lacks the strength of men, she does the best she can, even if she must jeopardize her own safety to protect the ones she loves. Similarly, the image of “terrible mother” is presented through the character of Sethe as well. Upon seeing the slave catchers, Sethe’s instinctive action is to protect her children and prevent their returning to slavery:

And if she thought anything, it was No. No. Nono. Nonono. Simple. She just flew. Collected every bit of life she made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful, and carried, pushed, dragged them through the veil, out, away, over there where no one could hurt them. Over there. Outside this place, where they would be safe.” (B, p.163)

The theme of the great mother, as nurturant and nursing figure is linked to the ‘matrifocal’ kinship system in African society, in which the role of mother or female members of the clan is central in passing down the cultural mores and values of their society- particularly through and to the children. An example of the ancestor as mother figure in Sula, who presents another facet of the outraged mother, will explain Morrison’s comments on the usage of such figures. Sula’s is a multigenerational household run by unconventional women. Heading this matriarchal community is Eva Peace, “creator and sovereign” (S, p.30) of her household. Her matriarchal powers include the power of naming, and of giving and taking away life. When Sula commits Eva to a nursing home, she rejects all that Eva stands for, and does what Morrison warns against, “In killing the ancestor, you kill yourself.” From that point on,
Sula’s life, although lived as she wants to, is a gradual downward spiral, leading to her lonely death at the young age of thirty.

However, if Sula fails to acknowledge her indebtedness to her mothers, Eva as ancestor, does not fail her progeny even after Sula dies. Her ancestral knowledge is validated when she becomes “the agent through which the legacy of Sula’s personality can be understood, absorbed, and appreciated by Nel, a full two decades after Sula’s death.” In the context of black cultural values, Eva, as ancestral matriarch, leads Nel to open her eyes to the truth about her own life. With regard to Nel’s involvement in the death of Chicken Little, Eva’s statement, “Me, I never would’ve watched” (S, p.168) becomes a message of culture transmitted to a younger generation. Her sharp and direct tongue is the verbal mother wit that characterizes black women of the oral tradition. In this way, Morrison “fundamentally creates a matriarchal community in which the ancestor becomes the source of vitality and truth telling that in the end, permits her progeny to prevail.”

In giving us the image of Eva, aging and senile, yet compelling still in her ability to voice the deepest truths with courage and conviction— the hallmark of the ancestor— Morrison affirms those folk processes that give coherence to black people as a community at a time when that community most needs it.
Conjuring and Witchcraft

The female conjurer in folklore and literature represents a throwback to the oral tradition and her placement there is most often symbolic of the major themes of the novel. In terms of folklore, the African-American conjure woman is a key supernatural force who has the power to manipulate and change, to make things grow or die, and to utilize nature to her advantage. Besides these characteristics, Morrison incorporates spiritual elements to the conjure-women she draws up, illustrating her themes on a completely different level. Barbara Christian in her work *Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition 1892-1976* (1980), discusses the figure of the conjure-woman in antebellum literature in the United States. According to her, the conjure woman image incorporates the signs of traditional African religions that the southern gentry pointed to as dark and evil, heathen forces. On the other hand, the image of the conjurer was, in southern literature, treated with some measure of respect and awe, as if the dark, incomprehensible forces did exist and had some power to affect the fortunes of men.80

In *Sula*, a text that is replete with representations of the supernatural, Morrison offers the mother of Ajax, one of Sula’s lovers, as “an evil conjure woman, blessed with seven adoring children.” (S, p.126) In fact, she “was as stubborn in her pursuits of the occult as the women of
Greater Saint Matthew’s were in the search for redeeming grace.” (S, p.127) Communal ideas neither of propriety, nor of conformity with black societal ideals of motherhood, interfered with her way of conducting her life as she wills, or of providing a supportive, loving upbringing for her family: she “inspired thoughtfulness and generosity in all of her sons.” (S, p.126) While the people of the Bottom marginalize Ajax’s mother, they respect her to a certain degree: she is able to earn a living due to her knowledge of “the weather, omens, the living, the dead, dreams and all illnesses.” (S, p.126) They therefore, implicitly acknowledge that she possesses a certain knowledge that they do not.

Another conjurer in the same novel who is given a more significant treatment is Sula. In the works of many ethnic women writers, the female conjurer is represented as the embodiment of the connecting counter-culture of spirituality and the supernatural, and the paradigm of duality and hybridity since she is in between the natural and the supernatural worlds. As a conjurer, Sula transcends race and gender and straddles the line between the physical world and the spiritual realm. Her physical description is seemingly ordinary with the exception of an unusual birthmark “that spread from the middle of the lid toward the eyebrow, shaped something like a stemmed rose.” (S, p.52) Although this birthmark is in itself simply a mark of difference, it also functions as a
physical sign that compliments her eccentric nature and the bizarre happenings that are associated with her. In fact, Christopher Okonkwo suggests that this birthmark, along with her outlandish behavior, implicates Sula as ogbanje/abiku, the Nigerian/West African spirit children.\textsuperscript{81} As he notes:

In Sula's overarching eccentricity—for which the Bottom designates her evil and which subsumes and refracts her other ascertained ogbanje-abiku signs, namely her birthmark, insinuated supernaturality Sula collates intrinsically and manifests the features of the spirit child.\textsuperscript{82}

This highlights Sula's supernatural and spiritual connections and the effect of her relationships with her family and the Bottom community.

Regarding the incident of Hannah’s death by fire, Eva recalls at the hospital that she had seen Sula standing on the back porch just looking. Similar to the Chicken Little incident, Sula does nothing to help and Eva remained convinced that Sula had watched Hannah burn not because she was stunned, but because she was “interested.” (\textit{S}, p.78) Eva symbolically lays the blame for Hannah’s death on Sula. In doing so, she “adds the personalistic or evil agent element...that Sula must be possessed of an evil spirit to watch her mother burn.”\textsuperscript{83} By assigning an unnatural label to Sula’s motionless and emotionless reaction to her mother’s burning plight, Eva demonstrates Sula’s ‘abnormality.’ In the years to come, the community of Bottom will do the same thing.
Sula’s return to Bottom is connected with all kinds of ominous events that bolster the community’s belief that she was indeed “evil.” As the tally of her social infractions mounts, the community responds by casting her in the role of the public witch. She is blamed for Teapot’s fall, Mr. Finley’s death, and for the sty on Desire’s eye. Her ever-youthful appearance, the absence of childhood illnesses or of bodily scars is taken to be evil manifestations of her power. In this way, traditional African conjuring or witchcraft finds its place in Sula, as the townspeople gather evidence of Sula’s alleged witchcraft and evil. The “plague of robins” that accompany her return to the Bottom, become an evil omen, and the birthmark over her eye, read in different ways by different observers, is read by the community as ashes, symbolizing “her association with hellish forces.”

In the inverted world of the Bottom, Morrison defines a specifically nonwestern cosmology, of which Sula, as conjurer, forms a vital part. Her “evil” ways actually make the community stronger, as they unite against her as pariah. While they are afraid of her, the community acknowledges that they are better when she is there and thus will not push her away. Rather than embodying evil in the traditional religious sense, Sula exists outside of a dichotomized good and evil, a manifestation of the fourth face of God. (S, p.118)
Even Sula’s death questions the boundaries of life and suggests the continuation of her spiritual self:

[S]he noticed that she was not breathing, that her heart had stopped completely. Then she realized, or rather she sensed, that there was not going to be any pain. She was not breathing because she didn't have to. Her body did not need oxygen. She was dead. Sula felt her face smiling. "Well I'll be damned, she thought, "it didn't even hurt. Wait'll I tell Nel.' (S, p.149, emphasis added)

When she dies, the few who were not afraid to witness the burial of a witch came just to verify her being put away (S, p.150). However, even her death has a profound effect on the Bottom suggesting that Sula’s spirit is still present. Her presence is acknowledged in the physical changes in the weather and condition of Medallion. (S, p.151) At first, her passing seems to be a good omen, but soon, it becomes clear that her death also signifies the death of the community itself: “A falling away, a dislocation was taking place.” (S, p.153) Such dislocation would lead to the ultimate disintegration of the community on, ironically, the National Suicide Day.

Morrison in Song of Solomon also associates with Pilate all the ideal qualities of African values and culture not only in just a physical way but also in the way she practiced its spiritual aspects as a conjurer. Pilate is “believed to have the power to step out of her skin, set a bush afire from yards, and turn a man into a ripe rutabaga—all on account of
the fact that she had no navel.” (SoS, p.94) This distinguishing feature of being born without a navel sets her apart from the rest of the community and indicates her supernatural and transformative power. As one who had birthed herself, Pilate has special access to the spiritual world and its sacred powers. Despite the fact that this alienates her from the community, her role as conjurer is communally centred nonetheless. Although like Sula, her relationship with the community is unconventional, unlike Sula, she is a culture bearer who values motherhood, and her conjuring abilities cater to the comprehensive well-being of members of the community. The mythic use of conjuring also centres on natural processes like nurturing and healing, and “depends on objective appraisal of the fears, desires, and needs of the individuals involved.”

Conjure-women, also called “healers,” “obeah women” or “midwives” among other names, are the ones who dealt with cases of both physical and spiritual illness, using mainly herbs, plants, and roots and resorting to healing rituals.

As a skilled rootworker, Pilate facilitates Milkman’s conception by giving Ruth a greenish-grey powder to put in Macon’s food, prepared through knowledge gained from what seems, another world source. In many African societies, pregnant women are kept in the care of a spiritual person (usually a woman) and a midwife whose work is to make sure that
the child is nurtured correctly, and to ensure that no harm, either physical or spiritual, comes to the child. Pilate serves the purpose of being both, physical and spiritual midwife. When Macon, through several crude attempts, tries to cause Ruth to abort the child she is carrying, Pilate instructs Ruth on what she must do and even prescribes for her a diet that would have her eat what the baby craved. She also reminds Macon of her obeah powers. As spiritual midwife, Pilate protects the yet unborn Milkman, by putting a male doll with a painted chicken bone stuck between its legs in his office. The strength of her spiritual powers is seen by the fact that it took Macon "nine separate burnings before the fire got down to the straw and cotton ticking of its insides." (SoS, p.132) This was a definite warning to Macon from his sister to leave Ruth and the baby alone, which he did. 86

One aspect of African spiritual culture, often associated with witchcraft, is the belief that certain people, mostly women, have the ability to change themselves into other forms. In Song of Solomon, Milkman and Guitar thinking that it held gold steal Pilate's green sack. When they are held and questioned at the police station about what they have in their possession, Pilate appears and weaves a "sambo" story to save them. More amazing is her physical metamorphosis before the police officers. In Milkman's memory,
Pilate had been shorter. As she stood there in the receiving room of the jail, she didn’t even come up to the sergeant’s shoulder-and the sergeant’s head barely reached Milkman’s own. But Pilate was as tall as he was.” (S, p.208)

Short. Whining, and with trembling hands she was very different from the tall statuesque woman with the booming voice he had known all these years. As soon as they were out of danger, “Pilate was tall again…..And her own voice was back” (S, p.209).

Similarly, the representation of the supernatural in Paradise links witchcraft with conjuring practices by female characters. Therese Higgins in Religiosity, Cosmology and Folklore alludes to the mystical presences that exist within the Convent.87 The most mystical of these presences is Consolata, who can undoubtedly be likened to a conjure woman. The people of Ruby usually avoid the Convent, unless they need something. Famous for their peppers and other plants, people often come in search of food, cure, or treatment, concocted by Consolata. Her expertise with herbs is at odds with what the Ruby townsfolk would consider normal, conventional medical practices. In addition, she is also a conjure woman with powers “beyond the normal,” and magical control of natural energy. Through her psychic abilities of “seeing in,” she is able to cure illnesses, prolong life (Mary Magna’s), and even raise the dead as in the case of Scout Morgan’s accident. Her conjuring extends into the lives of the women who live with her. Acting as mother-healer in the Convent,
Consolata initiates the post-traumatic recovery of the women through new rituals that combine magic, Christianity and Goddess worship.

However, Consolata is not the only woman in *Paradise* who is identified as having magical powers. In fact, Lone Dupres is the woman who leads her to discover and to accept the gift of “in sight.” “Something God made free to anyone who wanted to develop it.” *(P, p.247)* Lone, a skilled midwife and root worker from Ruby has the power of reading people’s minds. Although marginalized by the people of Ruby, who after her delivery of the Fleetwood’s disabled babies, refuse her services as a midwife as if “she had *made* the babies, not simply delivered them” *(P, p.271)*, Lone plays an important role in Consolata’s change, successfully instructing her to face and accept her magical powers. Like Pilate who guides Milkman “home” and Baby Suggs who teaches her people how to love themselves, Lone also represents the strength and knowledge of African-American women.88 Functioning as Consolata’s ancestral mother, Lone moulds her into becoming in turn, another mother-healer to the women who seek her help. Through these two powerful conjure women, Morrison is able to turn the marginality of conjuring into a space of resistance to patriarchy and a source of individual and communal empowerment.
In *Paradise*, the awareness among the members of Ruby of Consolata’s conjuring abilities, and of the newly acquired spirituality of the women inside the Convent, makes it easier to label them as “witches,” in the Western sense. After the attack on the Convent in which all the inmates are killed, Morrison continues with her exploration of the supernatural in this novel by portraying their complete physical disappearance. The magical final scene of the novel moves them beyond the normal boundaries of representation into “another realm.” Although not geographically specified, the “paradise” the women reappear on is at once spiritual and material, not the transcendent realm of normative Christian tradition: “Now they will rest before shouldering the endless work they were created to do down here in Paradise.” *(P, p.318)* Morrison here seems to suggest the idea that they, like Sula, and Pilate before them, are still alive in their deaths. The last three lines of the epigraph in *Paradise*: “And they will find me there, / and they will live, / and they will not die again” support such a reading.

Morrison draws on African folklore and spirituality by creating these conjure women as a way to pay homage to the folklore tradition and to turn the marginality of conjuring into a source of identity and power. However, her inclusion of fantasy is “not to foreground the supernatural as a unique expression of the black community, but as way to Signify the
difference between culturally imposed ways of seeing.” As she states in an interview, “what distinguishes the colonized from the colonist was viewing what is rational and what is not.” The implication is that there is not just one single reality but also several, not just on truth but several truths:

Morrison’s ultimate purpose in using the supernatural in art is not to prove its existence-her novels intentionally represent it ambiguously- but to create this ongoing dialectic between the seen and the unseen, the knowable and the unknowable, the signified and the Signified- the supernatural as a trope on reality.

Through her presentation of varied portraits of spiritual systems that exist outside of orthodox Christianity, the supernatural in Morrison’s fiction becomes a space of resistance. By consciously choosing marginal, alternative, and oppositional positions, she advocates the legitimacy of the marginal, and challenges Western concept of reality and literary realism. By making us question that which is considered ‘real’ or ‘normal,’ Morrison succeeds in showing us how necessary it is to open up to other ways of seeing and knowing, to alternative worldviews and realities in order to generate future social change and the well-being of not only the African-American community, but of all human in general.
Epigraphs


Endnotes


5 Traditionally, magic realism has been associated with contemporary Latin American fiction, particularly the writing of Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Alejo Carpentier, but it is also found in the work of other ethnic writers from the Caribbean, Nigeria, and India.

6 This is partly because of the negative connotations that the term “magic” has had in the Western world, and partly, because the label “magic realism” overlooks the ultimate origins of her writings “and leads us to underestimate the cultural paradigm in which she works as


9 Nigel Thomas, *From Folklore to Fiction*, p.111.

10 Zauditu-Sellasie, p.40.


17 Ibid.

18 Ibid, p.93.


20 Harding and Martin, p.93.

21 Ibid.


23 See Kokahvah Zauditu-Sellasie ‘s essay, “Women Who Know Things: African Epistemologies, Ecocriticism, and Female Spiritual Authority in the Novels of Toni Morrison,” for a detailed analysis of M’Dear’s spiritual and healing powers and the associative ideas connected with this figure.

24 Ibid, p.44.


27 Zauditu-Sellasie, p.46.

29 Zauditu-Selassie, p.51.

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid, p.53.


33 Harding and Martin, p.123.


36 Zauditu-Selassie, p.40.

37 Mbiti, p.44.


44 Harding and Martin, p.116.

45 Mbiti, p.45.


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12 pages.


48 Byerman, p.198.


The orixás or orishas are the gods and goddesses of creation, according to practitioners of the Brazilian form of the Yoruba religion known as candomblé. Oxum is the goddess of sweet waters such as rivers and lakes, who symbolizes love, harmony, and beauty. Iemanjá is the mother of all creation, the goddess of the oceans.


Sugiyama, p.181.


Sugiyama, p.184.

Mbiti, p.21-23.


65 Wilentz, p.91.


Rootedness, p.344.


Sokoloff, p.434.

Barbara Christian, pp.16-17.

Christopher Okonkwo, p.651.


Byerman, p.199.

Harding and Martin, p.95.

Nigel Thomas explains that conjuring is not to be confused with Voodoo even though the Hoodoo priest is frequently a conjurer. Conjuring is intended to be a deadly art and is related to sorcery, as opposed to Voodhoism. In most West African communities sorcerers who cast spells, if caught, were severely punished. Voodhoism emphasizes the spiritual wholeness of the community, and the “obeah” in many parts of Africa is related to communal morality (From Folklore, 40).

88 Ibid. p.196.

89 Denise Heinze, p.159.


91 Heinze, p.160.