Chapter 3

LINDEN HILLS
The Women of Brewster Place chronicles the plight of eight black women living in an urban lower-class cul-de-sac. With few exceptions – most notably the portrayal of a ghastly gang rape, which takes on mythic proportions – the novel realistically portrays the characters' efforts to overcome the poverty and anguish of their lives. Linden Hills, Naylor's second novel, also uses a confined geographic setting to construct a tale about the interconnected lives of a group of black characters. It is, however, a much more ambitious work in which realism is subordinated to allegory. Although flawed, it tackles a controversial subject with boldness and originality.

Linden Hills is in seven chapters. In the pattern of Naylor's first novel, The Women of Brewster Place, the Introduction presents the birth of Linden Hills and the following chapters are dated and named from December 19th to December 24th just a week before the day of Christmas. Naylor adopted the structure of Linden Hills from Dante's Inferno, circular in path towards the end where Luther's (also known as Lucifer) family resides. If one travels inside, one feels that the "bottom becomes the top." The lower one goes the materialistic one becomes and only the poor blacks dwell at the top of the Hill.

Like Amiri Baraka in The Systems of Dante's Hell (1965), Naylor adopted the structure of Linden Hills from Dante's Inferno to her own fictional purpose. The setting is Linden Hills, an upper-middle-class black community built on a huge plot of land owned by the mysterious Nedeed family. Purchased by Luther Nedeed in 1820 – after he had sold his octoroon wife and six children into slavery and moved from
Tupelo, Mississippi, we are told – the land has remained under the proprietorship of the Nedeeds for more than 150 years. Luther, as all the males in the Nedeed family are named, opened a funeral parlor, then developed the land and leased sections to black families. Luther Nedeed is the creator of the Linden Hills and its community has a frightening history. He and his male progeny all named Luther Nedeed, are possessed by a vision of what their little world should be. His sons and grandsons, all of whom are physical copies of the original landowner, furthered his plan – to establish a showcase black community. That community, as the original Luther says, would not only be an “ebony jewel” representing black achievement, but also “a beautiful, black wad of spit right in the white eye of America” (9). Mel Watkins observes in a review, “… the novel can be read as a tale of lost black souls trapped in the American dream.”

The novel shows the influence of some of the best contemporary black writers without imitating any one of them. *Linden Hills* deals with men’s oppression of women, a subject that Alice Walker has examined so forcefully in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* and *The Color Purple*. Naylor’s novel also emphasizes the important role a person’s cultural history plays in his identity, a topic that has been explored by Paule Marshall in *Praisesong for the Widow* and by Toni Morrison in *Song of Solomon* and *Tar Baby*.

Naylor’s tale is an allegory based on the physical and moral topography of Dante’s *Inferno*. It covers four days in the life of a twenty-year-old black poet, Willie Mason, who lives in a poor neighbourhood called Putney Wayne that lies above
Linden Hills. Working temporarily as a handyman to earn money to buy Christmas presents, Willie passes through Linden Hills and, like Dante, analyzes the moral failures of the lost souls he encounters. By the time Willie escapes from the frozen lake at the bottom of Linden Hills and crosses to the safety of a nearby apple orchard, he has experienced a spiritual awakening. The "new" Willie has decided to give up his aimless drifting and to take charge of his life. He becomes, as his name implies, a decisive builder. He accepts responsibility for his life, he refuses to blame his problems on others or on fate, and he realizes that he can choose a middle way between the poverty of the ghetto and the depravity of Linden Hills.

Linden Hills becomes a metaphor for a Faustian pact with the Devil Nedeed. Lester and Willie illustrate through their own discovery one person after another's willingness to sacrifice personal dreams - in love, in careers, and in leisure activity - for a downward movement through the circular drives. Each is striving toward the ultimate of addresses in this inverted and perverse world. These characters seem oblivious that their destination - where the proprietor's name spelled backward, de eden, is only an ironic reminder of whence and how far they have fallen. Because the people of Linden Hills, individually, represent a myriad of ways in which the fall can take place, looking at their individual stories explains Linden Hills. These people, as a neighbourhood, do not need each other; their lives do not depend on nor are they involved with each other.

The physical description of Linden Hills is deliberately similar to Dante's Inferno. Here is a map of where people live in Linden Hills. In an allegorical reading,
their addresses suggest their sins. First Crescent Drive is Dante's first circle of the unbaptized (Lester Tilson); Second Crescent is the second circle of the lustful (Winston Alcott); Third Crescent is the third circle of the gluttonous (Xavier Donnell); Fourth Crescent is the fourth circle of the misers and the wastrels (Chester Parker); Fifth Crescent is the fifth circle of the delivering angel (Rev. Michael Hollis). Tupelo Drive is a combination of the last three of Dante's circle—a place for suicides (Laurel Dumont), hypocrites (Daniel Braithwaite), and traitors (Luther Neeed).

Naylor creates five Luther Neeeds, each one having a solitary son. Collectively, they appear as a continuum; each one, virtually indistinguishable from the one before, responds to history as it unfolds around him. The Luther of 1820
bought the land and defied, through the power of his eyes and his demeanor, intrusion from anyone as he gave birth to his dream. In Genesis, God speaks the world into existence in seven days and comments on its goodness. Sitting in the dead centre of the lowest point of Linden Hills, Luther, in the same amount of time, thought his world into a plan and projected its birth by closing his eyes at the end of his vigil and smiling. Because this Luther read well the world in which he lived, he knew how to play its game, understood the role of blacks in a world dominated by whites. He returned to Tupelo, Mississippi, by 1837, to find an octroon wife, who bore him a son. For the next 42 years, until his death in 1879, Luther pursued his business along with his son once he came of age. Together they were referred to as “big frog and little frog” (4). They were identical in physical features with “short, squat body” and “protruding eyes” which were “actually dark brown” like “huge bottomless globes” (3).

The second Luther, as a young man, supplied guns to the Confederacy, an action that supplanted a moral conscience with a greed for material gain. This Luther rented shacks on Tupelo Drive, built a moat around the expanded Nedeed home, and began the sale, “practically for air” (7), of land to the people who were renting, with conditions attached. These people might sell to another black, pass the property to their children, or forfeit the place to the continuing line of Luthers. At this point in the history of Linden Hills, the decision to offer the thousand-year-and-a-day lease was to keep the land in the hands of black people, and any black person would do. The
government and real estate developers, other than Luther himself, of course, were clearly seen as the white enemy.

The third Luther, the most vaguely drawn, played the role of a conjunction, connecting his grandfather and father to his son, the fourth Luther, who dealt with the Great Depression. This Luther knew the world is heading white and, for him, Linden Hills took on a new dimension: “a beautiful, black wad of spit right in the white eye of American” (9). It became the job of the fourth Luther to correct the second Luther’s giving away the land. The houses had to be owned by the “right” kind of people – just any black person would no longer fit the design.

The fourth Luther understood that material goods mattered, that their accumulation spelled success, and that turning Linden Hills into an ebony jewel would be his method of making the white squirm. In the white folk, this Luther wanted to “spawn dreams of dark kings with dark counselors leading dark armies against the white god and toward a retribution” (10). He created the Tupelo Realty Corporation in order to finance, construct, and sell private development.

When *Linden Hills* begins, all of these Luthers are dead. The one who reigns supreme during the development of the novel is the fifth Luther. As the last of the Luthers on the continuum, this one adds his knowledge to the reader’s information base. He sees the difference in the dream of the Luthers before him – to have Linden Hills reflect some greatness back on the Luthers – and his awareness of the reality that there is no white god at whom to shake a fist: “Linden Hills wasn’t black; it was successful” (17). The people who continue to send in applications to Linden Hills, to
gain entry into a place that would show the world they had made it, to move downward to prestige only to vanish, get lost in the process of their arrival. The fifth Luther knows this because he alone “wondered why none of the applicants ever questioned the fact that there was always space in Linden Hills” (18). These are hollow people.

The fifth Luther is the father of the sixth Luther, the child that he does not believe is his own, so he creates the conditions that bring about the child’s death. He also creates the conditions that eventually will, at story’s end, cause his own death, terminating the 150-year continuum of a Nedeed design.

Linden Hills is not about being black but about success, there is no God, only “the will to possess” (17). Thus, the residents of Linden Hills are willing to disappear, lose their identity for the sake of possessing material wealth: “Luther is the archetypal capitalist who recognizes the commercial value of life and death as well as dreams.”

The magic of capitalism with its subtle corruption of human ambitions and desires can enslave the modern mind successfully.

The novel tells the stories of Willie K. Manson and Lester Field Walcott Montgomery Tilson, both twenty years old. It starts just outside Linden Hills, when Willie meets his friend and fellow poet, Lester Tilson, in the schoolyard of Wayne Junior High. Lester, like Virgil, is Willie’s companion and guide. They live in an economically poor black community of the city. These two men have been friends since they were in the seventh grade at Wayne Junior High School. Willie is in a Dantean Dark Wood, having dropped out of school after the eighth grade because he
considers formal education a gateway to spiritual corruption. He is of the view that “the written word dulls the mind, and since most of what’s written is by white men, it’s positively poisonous” (29). Hence he memorizes 665 poems, a number that is only one away from the number of the beast, 666, in Revelations 13:18. Hebrew and Greek letters have numerical equivalents, and the sum of the separate letters of the Antichrist’s name equals the number 666. On the other hand, Lester, who completed his high school but refused to attend college, writes his poem down; but Willie’s poetic tradition is oral and therefore ephemeral.

Naylor uses these two poets to bring out the unfolding world of Linden Hills’ secrets. Lester is more worldly wise than Willie. Lester’s neighbourhood is Linden Hills and he is willing to be Willie’s host and guide. They act like Virgil who knows Hell and makes the offer to Dante. Together they move out of Linden Hills in search of the soul-killing milieu of a “middle ground,” a world somewhere between black ghetto and white middle class. Leaving “a world where reality (has) caved in”, Willie and Lester walk hopefully out of Tupelo Drive into the waning days of the year.

In Linden Hills up is down; the most prestigious lots are those lower down the hill. To gain one of these lots, which are never sold but are leased for 1001 years, each of the residents must give up something—a part of his soul, ties with his past, ties with his community, his spiritual values, even his sense of who he is. Like Dante’s lost souls, the people of Linden Hills live in a circle that is appropriate to their “sins.” Here most residents stay for the rest of their lives, locked in their wrong choices.
Willie and Lester go from the schoolyard to visit Ruth Anderson, who, like Willie, also lives on Wayne Avenue, a poor street just outside Linden Hills. Ruth had once lived in Fifth Crescent Drive, but now, after a divorce and marriage to Norman, who suffers from periodic schizophrenia, Ruth lives in extreme poverty. Ruth and Norman Anderson are an exemplary model of a happily married couple; it is significant that they make their home outside of Linden Hills. The names Naylor has chosen correspond with the names of a real-life exemplary couple, Ruth and Norman Vincent Peale (1898-1993). Through positive thinking, Ruth and Norman manage to put the best possible spin on their relationship and live together in full awareness that "love rules in this house" (38). Ruth, who tells Norman that she will follow him anywhere except back to Linden Hills, is the ideal wife of the Book of Ruth, who finds a second husband in an alien country. Lester fails to see Ruth's spiritual intensity. To him, she is simply an object he lusts after. But to Willie she is a dream and a source of inspiration. It is Ruth who suggests to Willie that he and Lester earn Christmas money by working at odd jobs in Linden Hills. Although Willie is afraid of going into Linden Hills, he enters to please Ruth. Later, Ruth sends Norman down to Fifth Crescent Drive because she is afraid Willie may be in trouble. Ruth is a symbol of the fullest expression of human love. But even though she is willing to sacrifice her life out of love for Norman, she will not sacrifice her spirit for him. Ruth knows who she is, where she comes from, and where she's going. She is no plaster saint, but a beautiful, joyous person – in sharp contrast to Laurel Dumont or the Nedeed women.
Once in Linden Hills, Willie and Lester stop at Lester’s home on First Crescent Drive. Here, like the neutrals in the vestibule outside Circle One of the *Inferno*, live those who are neither good nor evil, the uncommitted who chase after banners and are stung by wasps and hornets that cause putrid, oozing sores. Into this category fall Lester’s sister Roxanne and their mother, and to some extent Lester himself. The trio is nasty and bickering. Lester mocks his mother’s materialism and eagerness to be accepted by those “further down” in Linden Hills. Also, Lester considers Roxanne a hypocrite because, though she has given token support to Civil Rights issues, her true goal is to marry “well.” Sarcastic and unloving with his mother and sister, in his own eyes Lester is morally superior because he refuses to go to college and supports himself by giving poetry readings and doing odd jobs. But he continues to live in comfort at home, while condemning the source of his physical comfort.

Willie and Lester spend their first full day of work as busboys at the wedding of Winston Alcott of Second Crescent Drive, equivalent to Dante’s circle of carnal sinners. Winston has been persuaded to end an eight-year relationship with his lover David because rumours of Winston’s homosexuality threaten his legal career. As a reward to Winston for entering a doomed marriage, Luther Nedeed grants him a lease on the exclusive Tupelo Drive area. In Naylor’s version, David recites and parodies a Whitman poem as a means of announcing to Winston that their love affair will end if he goes through with the marriage. David suffers in this circle because he loves a man who is unworthy of him, but Winston is headed for lower Hell, among the betrayers. Both are miserable. Willie is shocked when he surmises the relationship between
David and Winston and Winston's rejection of it, but at first Willie is secretly "proud that someone black could afford" (82) such a lavish reception. Later, however, Willie sees that beneath the glittering surface, the wedding guests are devoid of life and spontaneity. They are not living; they are watching themselves live.

At the Alcott wedding Willie meets Xavier Donnell from Third Crescent Drive, the circle of the gluttons. Xavier is in love with Roxanne Tilson, but he worries about whether she would be a "wise" choice as a wife. Xavier is as ambitious as Maxwell Symth; he just has not learned all of Maxwell's tricks for hiding his blackness. When Xavier asks Maxwell's opinion about marrying Roxanne, Maxwell advises against it because Roxanne's family "has one foot in the ghetto and the other on a watermelon rind" (116).

Willie's and Lester's next task takes them to Fourth Crescent Drive and the home of Chester Parker, who is entertaining mourners the night before the funeral of his wife Lycentia. The house is crowded with guests who keep the twelve chairs around Chester's dining table filled. The scene is a depraved parody of the Last Supper as Parker's guests stuff themselves with food, especially with the white cake that Luther Nedeed brings. The table is also a reflection of Chester's marriage. Lycentia is not yet buried, but Chester has hired Willie and Lester to steam off the wallpaper in her bedroom so that the room will be repapered and new furniture moved in during the funeral; thus all will be ready for Chester's next wife as soon as Lycentia is buried.
Lycentia is a dog-in-the-manger type. In life she spearheaded a group whose goal was to block a housing development in Putney Wayne in order to preserve values in Linden Hills. Lycentia called it keeping "those dirty niggers out of our community (135)". Luther Nedeed completes Lycentia's work by cutting a deal with a white racist organization.

The next day these same mourners gather to hear the Reverend Michael T. Hollis conduct Lycentia's funeral. The Reverend lives at 000 Fifth Crescent Drive, the last house on the last circle in the upper section of Linden Hills. This drive parallels Circle Five in the Inferno, where the angry tear at each other and the melancholic bring forth a bubbly froth whenever they try to speak. Hollis is a lesser version of Nedeed, and the two quarrel at Lycentia’s funeral. Hollis is angry because he thinks that Nedeed is infringing on his territory by assuming an official role at the service. As the president of the Tupelo Drive Realty Company, Nedeed delivers a eulogy whenever a tenant dies. Hollis is also depressed. He has to lubricate himself with multiple shots of Scotch in order to deliver an old-style, emotional sermon. Years spent pursuing sensual pleasure and material possessions have isolated Hollis. He has an endless supply of women, closets full of expensive suits, and a couple of LTD’s, but he has lost his wife and he has lost touch with his own feelings. He is portrayed as an emotional zero.

Two brick pillars mark the entrance of Tupelo Drive and the last three levels of Linden Hills, where Laurel Dumont, Professor Daniel Braithwaite, and the Nedeed "family" live. When Willie witnesses Laurel Dumont’s suicide, he sees her make the
last of a series of wrong choices. The history of Laurel’s decline lies in the string of residents that Willie has met so far and what they had to give up to get where they are. Her education fed a professional ambition that left no room for human love. She never forged any ties with her past or developed any close sense of her own identity.

Willie is sickened by Laurel’s suicide, but the other witness, Daniel Braithwaite, remains analytically detached. Braithwaite is a history scholar whose entire education has been paid for by Nedeed. After receiving his PhD, he moved to Linden Hills and settled down in a home given to him by Nedeed. He has lived there for thirty years. With his intimate knowledge of Linden Hills, and with his full access to the records of the Tupelo Drive Reality Company, he has written a twelve-volume history of the area. His goal is to win the Nobel Prize. However, since the death of his wife, Laurel Dumont, his house is transformed into a tomb. It is closed up. The only thing that he works on is to record the decay around him. He has no intention of stopping the corruption that he observes, but thinks only of using it as a means of winning honour. All these characters live a stale and sterile life as they are guided by the philosophy of Nedeed.

During the four days that Willie has been working in Linden Hills, he has suffered from increasing terrifying nightmares that reflect his daytime experiences. He dreams first of a huge clock with snakes and spiders for hands, then of hands shooting out from rows of coffins and offering him specious gifts; finally he dreams of himself – a man with no face. The dreams trace the path of degradation that Willie has
witnessed in Linden Hills and the temptations he has suffered and rejected. Twenty
years old, Willie is not yet at midlife as Dante was, but he faces a crisis nevertheless.

More serious work awaits Willie, but he fears that he will sell out for unworthy
gains, or, worse yet, lose touch with himself. On Christmas Eve Willie sits alone on
his window sill and takes stock of his journey so far. He decides that there is “no such
thing as fate or predestination ... People ... [make] their own fate” (274). Willie
makes up his mind to leave Putney Wayne, but not for Linden Hills. He will succeed
in some other, as yet undefined, way. Before he can go on to life beyond Linden Hills,
however, Willie and Lester have one more chore to complete, helping Luther Nedeed
put up his family Christmas tree. Nedeed has agreed to match whatever they have
earned all week if they will help him. With great reluctance Willie goes, lured by the
money. There he meets his female counterpart, Luther Nedeed’s wife, Willa Prescott
Nedeed. Her story is full of horrors, which is a direct result of Luther Nedeed’s
misconceptions about black women and life. Like her predecessors, other Nedeed
women, Willa’s is a story of “progressive depersonalization.”

Each of the Needed wives bore their husbands one black, froglike son, who
was a physical and spiritual duplicate of the father – all except for Willa Prescott
Nedeed, who is dark-skinned but bears a fair son. Nedeed considers the child a
bastard, and to punish his wife he locks her and the six year old boy in the morgue-
basement of their home with a limited supply of cereal and water. Luther suspects her
as a treacherous woman who betrayed him, creates a second hell for her, both
physically and psychologically. John Noell More comments, “…inside the hell of
Linden Hills, he turns the old basement morgue of his house into a second hell for Willa and her son.5 The son, who is Nedeed’s but carries the light-skinned genes of his material ancestors, dies; but Willa survives and, dazed, rooted through the papers and trunks in the basement that reveal to her the stories of the previous Nedeed women. Theirs is a tale of progressive depersonalization, as each husband became in turn more cruel and evil than his father. Willa suffers in this circle because she is a traitor. Willa has betrayed herself by willingly submerging her own identity in her husband’s. She becomes his faceless tool and allows him to starve their son to death without really putting up a fight. Willa hopes that if she does not protest about Nedeed’s murder of their son, Luther will allow her to come out of the basement and bear him another child. She is like Count Ugolina in Circle Nine of the Inferno, who, with his sons and grandsons, was imprisoned in a tower and starved. Unlike Ugolina, however, Willa ultimately finds salvation.

Not only the present Luther, the old Nedeeds also neglected and alienated their wives in pursuit of their materialistic lives. The first Nedeed considered his wife, Luwana Packerwille, a slave even after marriage and she was not even allowed to speak before them except in some situations and daily wishes. In her dispossessed and ostracized life, she started writing letters to herself with a hope to communicate her suffering to an assumed sister. The negligence of second Nedeed of his wife, Evelyn, resulted in her sexual frustration and self-hatred, which was exposed through her obsession for cooking. Finally her obsession led her to commit suicide with rat poison. Even the third Nedeed’s wife, Priscilla McGuire, was subject to lose her identity and
presence both physically in photographs and psychologically from Nedeed’s mind. The present Nedeed also locks his wife, Willa, in the basement for her suspected betrayal. This resulted in the death of their only son and the psychological death of Willa, which lead to the total destruction of Nedeeds.

In the basement, Willa learns about the previous Nedeed women from the homely records they left behind in letters, diaries, cookbooks, and photographs. Naylor implies that the history of women is found not in books and official archives but in the oral wisdom of a Roberta Johnson and in the mundane records of women’s daily lives. From the papers of Luwana Parkerwille, Willa learns how enslavement by her husband caused Luwana to lose faith in God. Because Luwana’s husband had bought her before he married her, she literally belonged to him. After he used her to produce the male heir he required, he totally ignored her. When Luther read a newspaper account of a slave who had killed his owner by poisoning his soup, he denied Luwana the one service she had been allowed to perform for her husband and son – cooking. Year passed; no one spoke to Luwana and she spoke to no one. But her total silence was not even noticed. In desperation she wrote and answered letters to herself. A religious woman, Luwana eventually lost faith and decided, “There can be no God” (93).

After Luwana Packerville’s Bible journal, Willa discovers the history of the second Nedeed wife, Evelyn Creton Nedeed. Evelyn tried to manipulate her world through food. She understood Nedeed’s sexual inadequacies, which explains his coldness towards her. Evelyn’s sexual frustration and self-hatred were expressed in an
obsession with cooking. First she baked huge meals in order to win her husband’s attention, if not love. After that she used small furtive doses of aphrodisiacs and the bulmic purgatives. When neither device yielded any positive result, she finally starved herself to death by eating little and consuming large doses of laxatives and in the end she used rat poison to kill herself on Christmas Eve.

After discovering the sad tale of Evelyn, Willa comes to understand her own position clearly. She, too, had put on weight after the marriage, sought help from expensive perfumes, and is now starving. She believes she will die on Christmas Eve but she decides to take her husband with her. In the midst of this stage of discovery, she barely manages to stifle the memory of seeing Luther embalming one of his female corpses. Intuitively she begins to recognize Luther’s perverted potency. Like all his forebears, he too exercises all his powers in making his dead women look alive, like satisfied lovers. The ironic parallel between the two processes is all the more grim because of Will’s response. In rage she rips up the cookbooks and recipe files and scatters them over the room. Thus she emerges from apathy and returns to life.

Willa’s discovery of the pictures leads to her third and final encounter with Priscilla McGuire Nedeed’s photo album, leads to her reaffirmation of her own identity, her freedom, and her sense of responsibility for her own life. The series of annual family portraits over the years demonstrates graphically how a pervious Luther and his son overshadowed this spiritual woman’s selfhood until she began removing her face from all of the pictures. She changes from an enthusiastic woman with a strong sense of her own identity to a fading and finally “absent” presence. In the last
photos, she is found to have cut out or blotting out her face and in the empty space written “me” (249).

In the beginning she affirms her own identity, freedom, and sense of responsibility for her own life. And through a series of photographs she demonstrates graphically how a previous Luther and his son gradually swallowed this spirited woman’s selfhood until she began removing her face from all the pictures. As Willa begins to look at one of her predecessors in the family photo album, she observes a progression of a woman who literally fades from the picture:

Her face was gone. The photo album trembled in her cold hands as she realized there was no mistaking what she now saw: Priscilla McGuine ended at the neck and without her features, she was only a flattened outline pressed beneath cellophane.... The sight of it sickened her as she kept slamming through the album, feeling her empty stomach heave. She had been tricked into this.... I knew you would come, and I’m so pleased.... Into another twisted life.... She came to the last photograph. And scrawled across the empty hole in lilac-coloured ink was the word me. (249)

The three wives are Naylor’s version of the three arch-traitors whom Satan chews on in Circle Ten. Judas, Brutus, and Cassius have betrayed their lords or benefactors; the Nedeed women have betrayed themselves. Each has cooperated with her husband’s denial of her value. Luwana is Luther’s silent victim, who renounces God instead of renouncing her husband’s treatment. Evelyn tries to earn her husband’s
love for a while, but finally gives up and destroys her own body. Priscilla is worse. Without a fight, she watches as the shadows of her husband and son blot out her soul.

Naylor has said that the treatment of the Nedeed women symbolizes the way that men have regarded women throughout history — as means of generation that have no value in themselves. As far as men are concerned, women have no history because they do not really exist. Now Naylor calls attention to that history.

For four days Willa’s voice, “a long thin wail,” has risen from her basement prison and reverberated throughout Linden Hills. The cry is the lamentation of generations of women whose existence has been denied by men, and it is Willa’s own “plea for lost time.” At first Willie cannot hear Willa’s plea; later it grows stronger and haunts him. To rid himself of nightmare images of Willa Nedeed, whom he has never met, Willie tries to capture her essence in a poem: “There is a man in a house at the bottom of a hill. And his wife has no name” (277). By the time Willa emerges from the basement, she has found the identity she had lost. Shocked by Priscilla’s annihilation of her self, Willa staggers around the basement in a daze and glances down into a pan of water. There she sees the sign of her soul, which Grandma Tilson had warned her children never to lose. When Willa sees the blurred outline of her dirty, emaciated face, she realizes for the first time that she really exists. At that moment she is reborn. She cries, then drinks the stale, rusty water and decides to rebuild her life.

Willa examines and evaluates herself for the first time. Like Willie, she decides that she is responsible for her life; she is stuck down in the cellar not because of her
parents or Luther, but because of herself. She realizes that she has made wrong choices and is continuing to make them. Luther may have led her to the basement steps, but she had walked down herself and can walk back up whenever she is ready. This knowledge gives her "strength" and "power" but then leaves Willa exhausted, and she sleeps. In her sleep she recreates her person and awakens "Willa Prescott Nedeed," determined to set her house in order. She cleans the filthy basement where she has lived for weeks.

When she reaches the final step, the only thing that stops her is the locked door. Willa's psychological journey ends when she enters her "home" with her dead son and tries to take up the task of cleaning the kitchen as a wife. It is like a second life for her with the help of Willie. Even their names are rhythmic and similar just as their strong and determined wills. It is a two way journey, as Catherine C. Ward comments:

The novel traces two journeys. It follow Willie Mason's physical journey through Linden Hills and his growing awareness of the spiritual qualities that true success should have; and it traces Willa Nedeed, Luther's wife, as she discovers the history of the Nedeed women and, through their failures, learners what success should mean for women.6

Luther is shocked and flabbergasted to see her through the kitchen door as he witnesses in the eyes of Willa the courage of a "lone army ant" when she opens her "cracked," and "husky" and strained mouth to say "Luther, your son is dead" (299). This is the first direct word articulated by Willa after her long imprisonment and the determination in her assertion of her self, which startles Luther.
When Willa steps into the kitchen, she accepts who she is and where she has been, and she takes charge of where she is going. Willa is determined that nothing will hinder her from putting her life in order. She begins to clean her kitchen, and when Luther tries to stop her, she hits him. When he tries to keep her out of the rest of the house, she grabs him, while still holding on to the child. The three are locked in a fatal embrace – as negative and positive life forces, with the dead child between them. In their struggle they brush against a fireplace, and the train of an old bridal veil that is wrapped around the child’s body ignites. Although Willa and Luther are destroyed in a flash fire that sweeps the house, still Willa is triumphant. She has put an end to the Nedeed dynasty and has inspired Willie to continue his spiritual odyssey wherever it leads him.

Traitors dwell in the ninth circle of Dante’s Hell, and this is the home of Luther Nedeed. The frozen lake Cocytus has its counterpart on the frozen lake where Willie and Lester watch the fire burn. Satan is depicted as having three faces, and when the three charred bodies are brought from the ruins, it is as “one massive bulk” (303). As Dante is led out of Hell by Virgil, so Lester leads Willie out, suggesting the best way to depart. Willie’s deepening lessons about the internal mirror that must not be lost, sold, forgotten, or broken are reflected in the somewhat psychic bond he holds with Willa, who in order to leave that basement must first be able to see herself in some external mirror, to know that she still exists. The structure of the novel is an external and internal mirroring – reflecting externally Dante’s *Inferno*, some of American’s
greatest poets, books of the Bible, contemporary African-American writers, and finally, internally, Willie and Willa.

The presentation of memories is preserved in *Linden Hills* because Willa Neeed must rely on dead women from the past to inform her. The chronicles and pictures left by former Neeed wives inform Willa of her peril, but they cannot offer alternatives to the isolation and destruction that they have experienced. The dead women, while they provide information about Willa’s peculiar circumstances, provide no access to women who demonstrate strength or self-determination within marriage. Willa has no one, male or female, with whom to check or validate her experience. The dead Neeed wives reveal pitfalls, but they cannot point to an escape. Willa has no means to return to the community. Her husband and a locked door stand as barriers between her and the rest of the world.

Having removed Willa from the roles of wife and mother, Gloria Naylor has two choices concerning Willa’s fate. Willa can either die, or she can succumb to the overwhelming pressure brought by her husband and suffer the fate as former Neeed wives. Willa’s characterization is concluded with her physical death by fire, just as her mental health has been destroyed prior to her actual death.

Willa’s journey from innocence to self-discovery is dead end, but she has also brought to an end the Neeed dynasty. She has achieved selfhood and poetic justice with a strength derived from recognizing the accumulated suffering of the Neeed women. It is in this way that a kind of sisterhood has been established over time, between Willa and her dead predecessors who haunt the Neeed house. She is restored
briefly to a meaningful life through her recognition of a common bond with these other women. Naylor emphasizes the need of a bond in the discovery of one’s own identity. In a way, Naylor focuses on women characters who in their march towards their identity in an oppressive, nefarious and destructive society, regain their originality with the help of communal bonds they create either visibly or invisibly with the other ailing alienated women. Naylor commented in an Interview with Morrison, “What eventually evolved through all the pain that she went through was the discovery that she liked being where she was – a conventional house wife…. But what her self-affirmation became was acknowledging her conventional position.” She even believes that a woman’s self-affirmation does not evolve by sitting in the executive chair at IBM or anything like that, indirectly pointing to Laurel’s failure in Naylor’s next novel Mama Day. Mama Day, the great aunt of Willa, thinks Nedeed’s face is “like a bottomless pit” and sympathizes with Willa for the fate she had to face. She remarks, “Little Willa didn’t deserve that kind of end; she was a good enough child if not a whit of courage.” In her opinion, she is not courageous enough to assert her identity, as she is unaware of Willa’s imprisonment and agony. Cocoa, Willa’s cousin and Mama Day’s great niece, considers it a very tragic incident and her husband responds to it as “an awful, awful thing” when he reads about it.

In this way one can find a logical continuity in Naylor’s novels as they respond and react to the characters and incidents either in the preceding novel or in her next novel. In The Women of Brewster Place, Kiswana thinks of her locality – Linden Hills – where she and her lover, Abshu, have actually come from and this black community
can be seen from the sixth floor apartment of Kiswana in Brewster Place. When compared to her next novel, Willa is the grand niece of Mama Day and cousin to Cocoa. And Willa in her internment remembers her great aunt’s magical powers of healing through herbs and roots and her knowledge of them makes her “mama” to the whole community. She associates with them imaginatively creating a bond of sisterhood to relieve herself from the suffering, at least for a while.

The unraveling of the pathetic stories of the previous Nedeed women by Willa leads to the climax of Nedeed’s destruction, physically by burning down and psychologically by liberating their hidden identities. Naylor’s description of burning down the house of the Nedeeds symbolizes destruction of black bourgeoisie authority over poor blacks, the internal class distinctions among the people of black community and a way of threatening white’s patriarchy.

In this way, the novel presents a detailed account of many other characters like Grandma Tilson, who opposed the idea of selling one’s soul in order to live in Linden Hills; Roberta Johnson, who valued marital life and warned her granddaughter Laurel to go back to her husband; Laurel Dumont, the biggest woman at IBM, and her failure to attain a “home” and “self” resulting in her suicide; Ruth Anderson, a psychological force to Willie and Lester and good friend to both Willa and Ruth; Roxanne, sister of Lester, a revolutionist, who was trying to settle well by marrying a black man; Cassandra, though a minor character, married to a gay Winston Alcott which was the beginning of her suffering; Lycentia Parker, who wanted to keep away those “dirty
niggers" from Linden Hills; Mrs. Tilson, who wanted to show off her well-to-do life but which remained an unfulfilled dream for her.

There are some men characters too who dedicated their lives for materialistic pursuit like Maxwell Symth, Xavier Dunnell, Daniel Braithwaite and Winston, who left his gay friend for his social privilege. David Rev. Hollis and Norman were exception from this type of men. All these characters present different spectra of life as depicted by Naylor. Naylor wants to remind the black people that they should not forget their cultural past, what and who they are and where they have come from. By adopting the method of white masters' racism, the rich blacks should not alienate the poor blacks, as they have the same roots. The Nedeeds not only used racism, but also suppressed the voices of their wives from communicating with the outer world. In that agony a bond of sisterhood helped them regain their selfhood and their dream of a "home" is fulfilled.

Though the novel highlights the author's adept narration of allegorical characters, it was strongly disapproved on the grounds of creating blacks as the perpetrators of their own community. Even the black professionals of the Linden Hills community are not fully satisfied with their lives: Laurel Dumont, Roxanne Tilson, Xavier Dunnell, and Maxwell Symth, hardly enjoy their materialistic life in the white dominated society. The pretentious posh lives of these blacks made this novel less successful compared to Naylor's first novel, The Women of Brewster Place. But the feminist perspectives of Naylor help create a positive character of Willa in her self-discovery.
Naylor's version of the *Inferno* suggests that blacks who aspire to the white world and material success are pawns of the Devil and they will experience the torments of hell. It is an intriguing allegory, and for the most part Naylor presents it with wit and insight into the tensions and anxieties that plague assimilated blacks. The problem is that perhaps because of the rigid allegorical structure, the narrative lists toward the didactic. Moreover, intimations of some bizarre rituals are never made quite clear.

Although Naylor has not been completely successful in adapting the *Inferno* to the world of the black middle class, in *Linden Hills* she has shown a willingness to expand her fictional realm and to take risks. Its flaws notwithstanding, the novel's ominous atmosphere and inspired set pieces — such as the minister's drunken fundamentalist sermon before an incredulous Hills congregation — make it a fascinating departure for Naylor, as well as a provocative, iconoclastic novel about a seldom-addressed subject.
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