CHAPTER – 4

LINDEN HILLS

“The great community... was no longer a school. It had grown into a machine. It was now a show place in the black belt.... Life had died out of it. It was... now only a big knife with cruelly sharp edges ruthlessly cutting all to a pattern, the white man’s pattern .... [I]t tolerated no innovations, no individualisms.”

Representing the African American community as a homogenous cultural entity was no longer possible in the 1980s because of the much pronounced class differences in the community. The corresponding promise of material success had become the criteria that many African Americans were using as the yardstick to evaluate self and others. As a consequence, such adherence to the mythological American Dream was proving to be destructive to the African American culture and identity and most importantly, the community. In portraying a realistic view of the African American community, Gloria Naylor, like most of the writers of her time, had to take such a situation into consideration. The Women of Brewster Place, even though a celebration of community bonding, reflects the gradual corruption within the community, and this is all the more highlighted in Linden Hills (1985).

Linden Hills presents a scathing examination of the precarious struggle for African American identity in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The relationship between personal identity and cultural history is the main theme in this book. Naylor, here, focuses on a community of soulless people who have become disconnected from their cultural past in the process of climbing the corporate ladder towards a brighter monetary future. In this pursuit of upward mobility, the inhabitants of Linden Hills have even turned away from the sense of their actual identity. Naylor, in projecting
such a community, very aptly frames her novel on a similar pattern as Dante’s (1265-1321) *Inferno* (1314). Many critics have identified *Linden Hills* as a modern version of Dante’s *Inferno* in which, as Catherine C. Ward states, “souls are damned not because they have offended God or have violated a religious system but because they have offended themselves.” The novel’s symbolic structure may be better examined by analyzing Naylor’s use of allegory based on the physical and moral topography of Dante’s *Inferno*.

Located in the same city as Brewster Place, in fact visible from the top floors of the tenement, is the Linden Hills neighbourhood, where, the further down the hill one lives, the wealthier one is and, ironically, the more spiritually and culturally malnourished one is. Linden Hills consist of eight concentric drives. The first five drives correspond to the first five circles in Dante’s Upper Hell. At the bottom of the Linden Hills neighbourhood is an exclusive area known as Tupelo Drive – the street on which no one can turn around – symbolic of the Dungeon of Dis, the abode of Satan, in Dante’s *Inferno*. Naylor chooses this location as the home of Luther Nedeed, the creator of the Linden Hills experiment. The Nedeed home is surrounded by a frozen lake, similar to Lake Cocytus in *Inferno* which fills the bottom of the lowest pit of Hell which holds the souls of the traitors. Naylor places her lost souls in proper circles appropriate to their ‘sins’ as Dante’s sinners.

The present Luther Nedeed is the fifth in his line. The original Luther Nedeed had come from Tupelo, Mississippi, and founded the area in 1820. Nedeed and his male progeny, all named Luther Nedeed, had a plan based on the first Nedeed’s understanding that the “future of Wayne County – the future of America… was going to be white: white money backing white wars for white power because the very earth was white.” (8) Luther creates the Tupelo Realty Corporation to make money, and
only those blacks who, like the Nedeeds, were comfortable with the idea of 
obliterating themselves and their culture to achieve material gains were qualified for 
admission to the privileged lots of Linden Hills. The Nedeeds, who are the prime 
exploiters and capital accumulators of the community, never sell their property, but 
lease it for a period of thousand years and a day to the residents provided they pass 
their property on to their children. Run by five generations of morgue caretakers, the 
Nedeed family is the replacement for white oppression in an all-black town, and as 
Catherine C. Ward states, through their undertaker and real estate business, they have 
been “able to control the residents in death as well as in life.”

Naylor’s idea of the Nedeeds as the very embodiment of evil is highlighted by the 
choice of name, the physical attributes of the Nedeed men and other obvious symbolic 
association. Interestingly, spelled backwards, the name ‘Nedeed’ sounds like ‘dead 
end’. Concerned only with the accumulation of money, the Nedeeds have no doubt 
reached a dead end, a point from where there cannot be any return. Eric Haralson 
suggests that “Nedeed” spelled backwards is “de-Eden” or Hell. Naylor probably had 
chosen this name because the Nedeeds are the satanic rulers of the false paradise of 
Linden Hills. As all the Nedeeds through generations have been evil personified, 
Naylor retains the same name for all the Nedeed men. The Nedeeds do not only have 
the same name, but are also portrayed as having the same physical attributes: short, 
squat, dark, with an immobile face. This description reminds the readers of Dante’s 
description of the hideous appearance of Satan. Naylor uses lots of symbolic 
associations with Nedeed to highlight his satanic features. Prominent among these, is 
the house number 999 of the Nedeeds. Catherine C. Ward states, that in a letter to her, 
Naylor says that she gave the house this number because in Linden Hills, where 
everything is upside down, 999 “is really 666, the sign of the beast.”
The beastly nature of the Nedeeds is further highlighted by the complete subordination of the Nedeed wives by their husbands. Each Nedeed marries a pale-skinned octoroon woman who must be known only as ‘Mrs. Nedeed’, thus erasing their very identity, and maintaining at the level of the name the Nedeeds’ appearance as an unchanging black significance for the community. Naming had always been an important ritual for the Africans as well as the African Americans. It is through this ritual that the communal and ancestral connections of a person are established. In negating these associations, the Nedeeds have not only robbed their wives of their identities, but have also erased their cultural past. Thus, Linden Hills has reached the point where what is ‘black’ is only a thinly disguised ‘white’:

The survival of the community now depends on Nedeed cynically struggling to assert a mastery of signification, of boundaries, of women in order to maintain the façade of blackness, but the boundaries have somehow already broken down, and whiteness has insidiously, ‘treacherously’ entered the community.7

The last Nedeed himself completes the revelation of the Linden Hills hypocrisy by breaking the trend of his forefathers and marrying not an octoroon woman, but rather, a dark-skinned woman, who gives him a son who turns out to be white.

In order to explore the madness that lurks underneath these outwardly successful, upwardly mobile African Americans, Naylor positions much of her critique of their lives through the visions of two young men, Lester Tilson, whose family lives at the top of Linden Hills but still in it, and Willie Mason, who lives in Putney Wayne, a poor black neighbourhood that lies above Linden Hills. The two men have been friends since junior high school and are both poets. Willie, the true trickster figure of the novel, is an oral poet. He composes poems in his head, memorizes them, and then recites them for pay. He compares himself to the great slave poet Jupiter Hammon, who being illiterate, memorized thousands of verses. Both the friends are out of work.
It is by doing odd jobs for the residents of Linden Hills in the days before Christmas that these two men, especially the gifted, sensitive and insightful Willie, are able to peek inside these people’s lives who have ‘made it’ and see the loss of African American identity and humanity, which can easily be one of the payments for material success.

Willie and Lester’s journey through Linden Hills allows the readers to get a bird’s eye view of the different sections of the community. Lester, like Virgil, is Willie’s companion and guide. They come across the wealthy and materialistic residents of Linden Hills, as well as, the poorer section of the society who are psychologically and culturally healthier than their richer counterparts. Willie and Lester’s visit to the Anderson apartment is a good example of the cultural health in the lives of the have-nots. The Andersons, like Willie, live on Wayne Avenue, a poor street outside Linden Hills neighbourhood. Norman Anderson invites Willie and Lester to his and Ruth’s (Norman’s wife) apartment because it is cold outside. Without any formality and unnecessary show, he says simply and sincerely: “Look, why don’t you joy monkeys come on up to the house and have a little something hot?” (32) Norman offers real hospitality even though he is very poor, for “[t]he Anderson’s poverty was a standing joke on Wayne Avenue. People said that if Norman brought home air, Ruth would make gravy, pour it over it, and tell him not to bring so much the next time.”(32) Furthermore, the Anderson apartment is threadbare, for every twenty-one months Norman went “screaming and tearing at his face and hair with his fingernails, trying to scrape off the pinks.” (34) The narrator describes his plight as he "restored to his teeth and bare nails only after everything else had failed – jagged sections of plates and glasses, wire hangers, curtain rods, splinters of wood once part of a dresser." (34) Eventually Ruth does not replace the furniture which Norman destroys and she
removes glasses and silverware from the apartment, so that finally the Andersons only have three Styrofoam cups — cups that cannot be broken when Norman suffers from periodic illness. Although the Andersons do not have material possessions, the “dilapidated garden-apartment” (33) is one in which “[v]isitors found themselves thinking, What a nice feeling to be allowed into a home.” (33) Norman and Ruth are genuine hosts, the kind who make guests feel welcome: Ruth set the Styrofoam cups before Willie and Lester as if they were expensive china, and “Norman poured the coffee and made such a ceremony of unwrapping Willie’s cheap blackberry brandy…you might have thought it a rare cognac.” (33) The warmth of the Anderson home was a product of the genuine love and bonding between the husband and wife despite their poverty and as they themselves reveal “Love rules in this house…” (38) This did not escape even the eyes of their visitors:

Willie had a hard time figuring out how Ruth and Norman were both drinking from the same cup. Norman would take a sip and talk, and then she’d take a sip. It soon appeared unthinkable that there should be more than one cup between them since they never reached for it at the same time. (34)

Into such a scene is projected sincere talking and good-natured laughter — a sense of community.

Willie, Lester, Ruth and Norman provide the initial commentary on the Linden Hills residents. Ruth, who had once lived in Linden Hills, says that she never wants to live there again, “I’ve had that life…and I lasted six months. Those folks just aren’t real....” (39) Lester says that the Linden Hills residents “are a bunch of the saddest niggers you’ll ever wanna meet. They eat, sleep, and breathe for one thing — making it.” (39) Lester Tilson, though he lives in Linden Hills — just barely since his family home is at the top — has taken advantage of the insights which his grandmother, Mamie Tilson, gave to him. She was the only one of her generation of Linden Hills
residents to stand up to a Luther Nedeed and had the courage to tell him that she
“used to fish with your daddy down in that there pond, Luther, and he gave me this
land and I ain’t giving it up. So take your frog-eyed self and your frog-eyed son out of
here. And I know your evil ways – all of you.”(12) Lester remembers his
grandmother’s legacy and tells Willie, Ruth and Norman that “[Grandma Tilson]
hated those Nedeeds.”(40) Interestingly, those characters who were never a part of
Linden Hills, like Willie and Norman, or those who mentally or physically leave it,
like Lester, Ruth and Kiswana Browne, are the most psychologically and culturally
healthy characters in the novel, even though they do not have money, cars, houses,
and all the other material and dominant culture-determined signs of success.

Willie and Lester’s journey down Linden Hills starts with their stopping at Lester’s
home on the First Crescent Drive. In fact, Willie’s visit to Lester’s home on the same
day as they had visited the Andersons, serves as a major contrast to the genuine
warmth which the two men had experienced at the Anderson home. Lester invites
Willie to spend the night so that the two young men can have an early start on seeking
odd jobs in Linden Hills. The First Crescent Drive is like the Vestibule of Hell, the
abode of the Futile, in Dante’s *Inferno*, where live people who are neither virtuous nor
wicked. In this category fall Lester’s sister, Roxanne, and their mother, and to some
extent Lester himself. Lester does not follow social protocol in forewarning his
mother that Willie would be having dinner and spending the night. Mrs. Tilson’s first
condescending and hypocritical statement is, “Well, I guess we can always find more,
and especially for such a good friend of Lester’s.”(48) Willie and Lester both knew
that she had never approved of Willie as a friend for her son. Willie, who “always felt
big and awkward and black” (48) in the presence of Mrs. Tilson, is able to mutter,
“Look, I know you didn’t plan on me being here....It’s sort of short notice and I’m
not very hungry anyway.\(^{(48)}\) Mrs. Tilson, trying to recover and re-institute her social graces, says, “Non-sense....There’s always something for company. But we’re eating like peasants tonight – just fried chicken.”\(^{(48};\) emphasis added) Rather than the relaxed and unassuming sense of community which Willie had experienced in the Anderson home, here he finds serialized smiles, updates on the cost of reupholstering furniture, the obligatory coasters, and a general sense of discomfiture. A similar atmosphere is depicted by Toni Morrison in *The Bluest Eye* (1970) where she shows black women who deliberately remove a great deal of their black culture and black identity in their quest to be middle class:

…these women go to land-grant colleges...and learn how...to behave. The careful development of thrift, patience, high morals, and good manners. In short, how to get rid of the funkiness. The dreadful funkiness of passion, the funkiness of nature, the funkiness of the wide range of human emotions.\(^{8}\)

Same is the case with Lester’s mother and sister. The dinner itself reveals that Mrs. Tilson and Roxanne have given up their naturalness to live among the privileged. After making sure that her dining table is set with starched linen napkins, china, silverware, and fragile Norwegian crystal, only then is Mrs. Tilson concerned with how Willie might be perceiving the argument that erupts during dinner between Roxanne and Lester: “Lester, Roxanne, please, not in front of company” \(^{(55)}\) and then, again, “Now Willie’s going to think we’re a group of barbarians in this house.”\(^{(55)}\) Roxanne, on the other hand, is bent on defending her upwardly mobile boyfriend, Xavier Donnell, and filling the conversation “with the importance of her new promotion....”\(^{(54)}\) A typical product of the materialistic and shallow Linden Hills community, she has “groomed her life and body with a hawklike determination to marry black, marry well – or not at all.”\(^{(53)}\) In contrast to Grandma Tilson’s spirited and defiant nature, the other two Tilson women are devoid of naturalness.
Lester’s mother craves entrance into the more prestigious lower Linden Hills which makes her push her overworked husband to an early grave by urging him to earn more and more. Roxanne has, on the other hand, not made her ‘move down’ yet, but she is clearly headed on down. Lester is no less blameless just because he mocks at his mother’s and sister’s urge to move further down in Linden Hills. He continues to lead a comfortable life even though he condemns the source of his comforts. The Tilsons, like the ‘Futiles’ in the Vestibule of Hell, are moral weaklings who are never able to make a clear choice. Devoid of genuine love and concern, they are also running an endless, futile race like Dante’s sinners, which do not lead them to any goal.

Naylor explores additional nuances of these superficial materialism and cultural deprivation in her dissection of the other residents of Linden Hills and the absence of positive African American identity in their lives who are struggling to ‘make it’. Willie and Lester’s journey down Linden Hills doing odd jobs starts with working in a wedding reception in Linden Hills. As they enter Linden Hills proper, we are reminded of the inscription upon the lintel seen by Dante and Virgil at the gate of Hell: “Abandon ignorance, ye who enter here.” These words which come like a thunderclap upon the senses set the keynote of the episodes which follow in Naylor’s novel too, for now Willie and Lester have entered the regions of the eternally lost souls. Their first day of work bring them to the wedding reception of Winston Alcott of Second Crescent Drive, the place which is equivalent to Dante’s circle of carnal sinners. The two friends are not thought of as good enough to work as waiters, where they will be seen and thus, present a reminder to these middle-class folks that they have given up their own identity in the pursuit of material success. The families of the bride and groom hire whites as waiters and servers. Willie and Lester are hired to take out the trash and garbage, to help load and unload supplies; but they are able, while
doing the dirty work, to occasionally look through the kitchen doors and observe the wedding preparations: “The four-foot wedding cake held miniatures of the bridal party on two sets of golden stairways that ran up each of its sides....This was definitely no fried-chicken-and-potato-salad affair.”(82) Willie is amazed at the extravagance of the event, and even somewhat proud that black people can afford such an affair. But at the same time he could sense that the feeling of spontaneity and naturalness were amiss from the jeweled sparkle in the air and “....he could see that he hadn’t been alone in his awe of all that splendor. He was actually watching them watch themselves having this type of affair.”(83) These people actually represent fakeness and superficiality hidden beneath glamour which symbolizes nothing.

Naylor’s representation of superficiality does not end only with the guests at the wedding reception. The bridegroom, Winston Alcott, is himself fakeness personified. He is gay, has had a long-term relationship with his best man, David, but refuses to follow his heart and continue with his homosexual relationship because being married to a woman is necessary for his promotion to full-partnership in his law firm and for continued descent in Linden Hills to the most prestigious address, Tupelo Drive. Even though David had tried to change his mind, Winston affirmed his decision: “I can’t live with you. Not in Linden Hills. That would be suicide, and you know it....and my future is here. My career....” (78,79) Willie and Lester, apart from seeing the shallowness of the people in the function, are much more surprised at the superficial speech of Luther Nedeed – the most distinguished guest. Lester says that the way Nedeed addresses the gathering; he seems to be “straight out of a gothic novel.”(86) Nedeed’s gift to the bride and groom is “a mortgage on Tupelo Drive”(87), the announcement of which is met with a “wild and thunderous applause”(87) from the audience. And although Winston should be happy that he has ‘made it’, all he can do,
like most of the guests, is present a "frozen grimace" (87)) for a smile. Catherine C. Ward compares Winston and David to Paolo and Francesca in Dante's *Inferno*, the medieval lovers who were punished by being locked in an eternal embrace while flying around in a perpetual whirlwind. David and Winston's punishment is not the eternal embrace, but a lifelong separation. When David goes up to the bandstand to give the best man's toast and reads a Walt Whitman poem, which was written by a man for another man, Willie realizes that Winston has traded true love for the acceptance of the Linden Hills community. Towards the end of the function, Willie also realizes that Winston has traded away his only chance at happiness in exchange for the chance to live on Tupelo Drive.

Willie and Lester's next job takes them to the house of Roxanne's boyfriend, Xavier Donnell, who lives in Third Crescent Drive, which may be compared to Dante's circle of gluttons, where the people are hungry for money and status. Willie and Lester are hired by Xavier's aunt to clean out the garage. They had, in fact, seen Xavier the previous day at the Alcott wedding with a white woman, a secretary in his office. Xavier had thought that escorting a white woman would generate the appropriate appearance. Xavier's materialistic tendency makes him burdened with the thought that he is falling in love with Roxanne Tilson, and, like Winston Alcott and his rejection of David, Xavier is not convinced that Roxanne is the best match for his professional and pecuniary pursuits. He is unsure whether he should ask Roxanne to marry him because she is not on the same social (or geographical) level as he is; he is unsure what impact such a marriage would have on his position as Vice-President of Minority Affairs at General Motors Corporation. He knew that "...if he didn't take some sort of drastic action, he would ask Roxanne Tilson to marry him. And the only thing that frightened him more than that was the thought that she would say yes."(99)
Xavier wanted to be absolutely sure that Roxanne would not hinder his prospects at General Motors or his social ascension down Linden Hills. He had worked hard to become the perfect, super nigger, including an Ivy League education-brainwashing. So he consults the epitome of black sophistication, Maxwell Smyth, Assistant to the Executive Director at General Motors, and next in line for the Executive Director position. This man’s life story is a telling one – remarkable for his thorough devotion to climb up high in the materialistic world:

Maxwell had discovered long ago that he doubled the odds of finishing first if he didn’t carry the weight of that milligram of [black] pigment in his skin....in college he found that his blackness began to disappear behind his straight A average, and his reputation for never sweating....He allowed nothing to happen at the office that didn’t put him at the best advantage or that he couldn’t manipulate to make it seem so....In short, his entire life became a race against the natural – and he was winning. (102,103,104)

Maxwell’s story shows Naylor’s scathing examination of the extremes which some blacks take to defeat the ‘natural’ in their pursuit of material success and white acceptance. People like Maxwell are Naylor’s version of Dante’s gluttons, too hungry for professional and financial advancement. Central to ‘making it’ for the Linden Hills residents, like Maxwell and Xavier, is the elimination of anything overtly connected to positive African American life and culture. For all these reasons it should not, and does not, surprise Xavier that Maxwell’s advice to him is not to marry Roxanne. She is not, in Maxwell’s view, perfect enough:

I know that, for whatever reasons, you’re only into black women....The few who just might be up to your standards, who’ve distinguished themselves in the world, are into white men....The best and the brightest are going that way, so what’s left for you? The Roxanne Tilsons of this world.(108)

He suggests that Xavier marry a white woman or wait for that special black woman, exceptional like Maxwell, though he admits that such finds are rare.
During Maxwell's visit to Xavier, Willie and Lester who are cleaning the garage, have an encounter with them. The conversation takes an immediate turn to race and the lack of opportunities available to black people. Maxwell and Xavier contend that progress is being made and that they are both living proof, in their view, of the fact. Maxwell argues that "[b]eing black has nothing to do with being poor. And being poor doesn't mean that you have to stay that way."

Willie and Lester offer a counter-position that black people are poor because they are black, that racism and discrimination are still major determining forces in the lives of everyday black people. Maxwell thinks that real progress can be measured; one need only look at the most recent issue of Penthouse magazine to see that racial barriers are no longer operative, for he says, "There was a time when you couldn't find a picture of one black woman in a magazine like Penthouse. And see what the centerfold is this month?" The picture was an eight-page spread of a lush, tropical forest and a very dark-skinned model with revealing clothes posed to pull against an iron chain that was wrapped around her clenched fists. The picture shocks Willie and Lester so much that Lester instantly retorts "You call this progress?...They're trying to tell you that black people still belong in the jungle." That the Maxwell Smyths of the world are completely lost to their people is captured at the end of the episode when the narrator records Willie's reaction to the magazine centrefold, for he understands what Maxwell cannot. He recognizes the exploitation of people and even family in that photograph and "that woman was a dead ringer for his baby sister."

The contrast between Willie and Lester's racial and cultural health and the loss of personal and cultural identity of most of the Linden Hills residents are captured in another group scene, much like the Alcott wedding reception. Willie and Lester have come to Mr. Chester Parker's house in Fourth Crescent Drive to do an unspecified
job. Mr. Parker’s wife, Lycentia, has died and it is the night before her burial. Before the guests arrive for the wake, Mr. Parker tells the young men that he wants them to steam the wallpaper off the master bedroom so that the next day the paperhangers can put up new wallpaper and he can bring out new furniture for his new bride. Mr. Parker plans to remarry as soon as Lycentia is buried. Lycentia in her lifetime was no less a hypocrite and fraud as her husband. She headed a group who wanted to block a housing development in Putney Wayne in order to preserve the property values in Linden Hills. In Lycentia’s terms, it was necessary to keep “those dirty niggers out” (135) and in doing so, her group was supported by Nedeed for his own obvious interest. Nedeed and Lycentia’s group symbolize the two groups of sinners, the hoarders and the spendthrifts, in Dante’s Circle Four who were forced to roll huge stones against one another. Ironically, Nedeed and Lycentia’s group join hands to obstruct the development in the poorer section of the neighbourhood, and thus negate a part of their own selves.

The coldness and sterility in the lives of such people are highlighted as the narrator captures the scene where the guests who have come for the wake attempt to express their forced and superficial condolences –

People were moving slowly between the living room and dining room, forming quiet clusters of conversations that kept breaking and shifting as someone left to greet a newcomer, refill a coffee cup, or help themselves to the cold buffet that was laid out on a sideboard in the dining room.(130)

The guests stuff themselves with food, and the cutting, chewing, and swallowing continue as the mourners eat in isolation. These people are similar to Dante’s gluttons who have no communication with each other and are heedless to their neighbours. Similar to Willie’s earlier reaction to the guests at the Alcott wedding, during the Parker wake, the monotony and the lack of spontaneity of the people as they talk and
eat, seize his attention and provide both the description and the criticism of these people’s hollow lives. The shallowness in the community is further heightened when Luther Nedeed arrives carrying a cellophane-wrapped cake and lies to the guests that his wife has baked it. He dominates the conversation, and, although the other guests had already eaten, when he declares that he does not like eating alone, “[o]ne by one, the other knives and forks were lifted as the meal continued with the pathetic motions of children being forced to eat.”(138) The guests are like machines, and Willie is surprised that they actually, somehow, manage to eat. Naylor probes deeper into the reactions of Willie at the unnatural and shallow community which is brought out by his nightmares after eating the left-over food from the wake. He has wild and crazy dreams of a pale hand with bright red fingernails growing and curling like snakes around the cake that was offered to him in a shrill echoing refrain “Willie, eat it...Eat it....”(145) The next day Willie tells Lester, “That stuff Parker gave us upset my stomach....There was something strange about that cake....I mean, it didn’t taste homemade....”(152) Underlying Willie’s reaction is the real fact that there is not any ‘home’ in the Linden Hills residents’ lives. Willie could also identify the topsy-turvy condition of the rich Linden Hills residents’ lives by focusing on the shallowness that he witnessed in the Alcott wedding and the Parker wake. The wedding had in fact, represented a funeral and “was like a death march” (274) whereas; the funeral “was already a wedding”. (274) The topsy-turvy condition in Linden Hills is summed up in Willie’s words “Everything was turned upside down in that place.”(274)

Willie and Lester’s next job leads them to Reverend Michael T. Hollis, preacher of the Mount Sinai Baptist church. He lives at House No. 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, the abode of the wrathful who bite and kick at each other.
In Dante’s Circle Five, buried deeper in the mire, are also the souls of the sullen, those who took no joy of the earth and its beauties. Naylor presents to us the inner conflicts of Rev. Hollis as he is torn between the role society wants him to accept and his own desire to live in a way that accords with his true nature. Rev. Hollis’ identity conflict seems to be rooted in the struggle between his personal expectations for his career as a preacher, and the expectations of the Mount Sinai Baptist congregation, members of the richest church in Linden Hills. Hollis always wanted his vocation to be filled with the powerful force he felt sweep through him as a child, when he attended emotional church services with his grandmother. Although his grandmother’s church was raggedy and poor, the people in the congregation were filled with the power of God, a feeling that the citizens of Linden Hills have never known. Reflecting upon his past while preparing for Mrs. Parker’s funeral, Rev. Hollis recalls the reason that he chose to dedicate his life to the church:

What had drawn him was the power that was possible between people; together they created ‘God’ – so real and electrifying you could believe that once it was a voice that shook mountains. That was what he had set out to follow. But somehow, somewhere, it was a calling that went wrong. (177)

The middle-class people of Linden Hills are more concerned with his handling of the church’s economic matters rather than wanting him to help them create the great voice of God. He tries to hide his disappointment with his life by numbing his mind with alcohol and covering his body with nice clothes, but these techniques only fool the superficial people of Linden Hills. Having spent years in sensual pleasure and material possessions, he cannot hide the truth from himself that he has been living a false life ever since he came to this wealthy community.

Willie is the inspirational catalyst who motivates Rev. Hollis to make a stand against the role that he has been playing at Mount Sinai Baptist. Before Mrs. Parker’s
funeral, when Hollis meets Willie, he is prepared for another day of playing the part of the unemotional preacher. But when Willie tells the Rev. how much the Rev.'s annual Christmas parties meant to him as a child, Hollis begins to realize that he still has a chance to turn his ministry around. With the inspiration he receives from Willie, Hollis is ready to break out of the role the people of Linden Hills expect him to play. During the funeral, he delivers an emotional sermon for the first time in Linden Hills, much to the dismay and disappointment of the congregation. The content of his sermon emphasizes his opposition to the community's values, as he asserts that one can never be prepared for death. This notion is revolutionary in Linden Hills, where every aspect of life is prearranged, leaving no room for spontaneity. After his sermon, Nedeed gives the eulogy in a monotonous voice, focusing on the material aspects of Mrs. Parker's life, much to the relief of the congregation. Witnessing people's positive reactions to Luther's speech, Hollis realizes that the people of Linden Hills want him to speak in an unimposing way that does not challenge their materialistic values. Even though Hollis is angry with Nedeed for infringing in his territory, he is helpless and so, in an effort to win back the support of his congregation, Hollis reverts to playing his old role, and he passively utters, "Let us rise. And pray"(184) throwing away his dreams of preaching like he has always wanted, because he cannot resist the expectations of his materialistic congregation. A critic has identified that Naylor "...seems to be using the struggles of...Reverend Hollis to tell the reader that in the African-American community, success can be accompanied by a corruption of morals and the degradation of personal dreams." Naylor seems to be suggesting that it is better to live by one's own volition in poverty, if that is where one's volition would lead one, than it is to live a false life in a wealthy community.
As Willie and Lester pass through the First Crescent Drive to the Fifth Crescent Drive corresponding to the Circle of Incontinence in Dante’s Hell, we are aware of the aura of absolute futility and savage self-frustration that pervades there. Naylor has not included the circle of the Heretics in Linden Hills because her “sinners are at odds with themselves and not necessarily with God.” Willie and Lester’s next job takes them to the most prestigious area of Linden Hills, known as Tupelo Drive. This area corresponds to the last three circles of Dante’s Hell, the abode of the willful sinners.

Walking down through Linden Hills, Willie and Lester come across several other people living a false life in a wealthy community which cannot offer any ‘home’ to its residents. One such person is Laurel Dumont who realizes, all too late, that there is no home in Linden Hills. She then temporarily leaves hers in search of one. She visits her grandmother, Roberta Johnson, in rural Georgia, for, as a child, it had always been visits to her grandmother that contained the most meaningful significance and warmth in her life. In her trip to Georgia, Laurel tries to recapture ‘home’, but her education at the University of California at Berkeley; her executive position at IBM; her husband, Howard [whose family had lived in Linden Hills for over sixty years and who was “the first black D.A. in Wayne County, handpicked to be the next state attorney general” (232)] and even her house, a showcase; remind her that her grandmother’s house is no longer her home. But her grandmother had understood this long ago, when Laurel went to college: “(A)ll Roberta knew was that she had cashed in her life insurance to send a child she had named Laurel Johnson to the state of California, and it sent her back a stranger.”(226-227)

Roberta Johnson is like the Andersons, Willie, Lester, and Grandma Tilson: down to earth, warm, comfortable, and real. One of Roberta’s first gestures upon Laurel’s
arrival is to offer her some homemade lemonade. When Laurel explains to Roberta why she has come, Roberta tells her, “But this ain’t your home, child.”(231)

Roberta’s intention is to encourage Laurel to make a home for herself on her own territory. It is with this understanding that Laurel returns to Linden Hills. Soon after arriving in Linden Hills, Laurel slips into a depression that overwhelms her. She concludes that her house is sterile, her marriage a charade, and her career meaningless. Although these insights are necessary ones, Laurel’s energies spent trying to ‘get over’ mean that she has no resources, especially no cultural or racial ones, which might help her to understand that she can begin again. Instead, she thinks that her life is hopeless (even after Roberta comes to Linden Hills to help her) and plunges into her empty, expensive, specially made diving pool. By committing suicide and negating the gift of life, she commits violence against her own self. Just as in the ‘wood of the suicides’ in Inferno, the overall atmosphere in this episode of Naylor’s novel is one of sterility and barrenness. With no knowledge of or ability to recognize a tradition of women who had succeeded on their own terms, Laurel, thinks individual freedom can only be achieved in death.

Willie and Lester who were hired to clear the snow outside the Dumont house are witnesses to the suicide. Willie being a very sensitive person was too shocked by the incident and, therefore, accepted the hospitality of Daniel Braithwaite, a neighbour of Laurel Dumont, who offered to take them to his house. Braithwaite is a historian whose entire education has been paid for by the Nedeeds, and he is working on the history of the Linden Hills community. Over the years the Nedeeds have given him exclusive access to all their family records, and gradually Braithwaite has detected that there was a drastic change in the goals of the community, and that his study was actually amounting to the record of a people who are lost. But instead of bringing this
fact to the view of the community, Braithwaite continues to compile the data because
ultimately what he seeks for is a Nobel Prize for his work and not any improvement of
the community. The fraudulent counselors in Dante’s Circle Eight are sinners because
they gave false counsels. But Braithwaite is one step ahead of them by refusing to
counsel at all. Willie is completely shocked at Braithwaite’s negation of his
responsibility and asks himself, “After such knowledge, what forgiveness?” (262)
Teresa Goddu says “(b)y focusing on Luther’s individual achievement rather than the
collective accomplishments of Linden Hills, Braithwaite transforms a communal
history into the myth of a single, ‘special’ man.”¹³ Braithwaite, then, simply imitates
Luther’s version of Linden Hills instead of signifying against it. He replicates Linden
Hills in his detailed historical data and thus, acts not to change the history of Linden
Hills, but to perpetuate it. Willie leaves Braithwaite’s house fully determined never to
become anyone’s hired pen like Braithwaite, and resolves never to live in Linden hills
even if it is the last place on earth.

Willie and Lester’s journey through Linden Hills allows the reader to see the loss
of African American identity and humanity resulting from excessive materialistic
tendencies in the lives of Linden Hills residents. One other way that Naylor allows the
reader to see inside the vacuity of these people’s lives is through a parallel narrative
that focuses on five generations of Nedeed women. All these women’s tales represent
their progressive depersonalization under the domination of their husbands. The
Nedeeds use their octoroon wives merely as tools to beget children. The present
Luther Nedeed has imprisoned his wife, Willa Prescott Nedeed, and his son in the
basement of their home presumably because his five year old son is too light-
complexioned and, therefore, Willa, according to him, must have been unfaithful.
Luther fails to remember or acknowledge that all the Nedeed men had married
quadroons or octoroons and that sooner or later those ‘white genes’ would surface. In her basement-prison, Willa Prescott survives as best as she can on the supply of powdered milk and cereal that Luther believes will help to teach her his lesson for her presumed infidelity, subdue her spirit, and cancel any right she thinks she might have for an independent life. As a critic says, “(a) major strategy which the Nedeed men use to maintain authority over their women is to keep them isolated from the community. They accomplish this mainly by using their class status.” That is, because the Nedeed men are the wealthiest members of the black community, they and their wives are not fully participating members of the community at large. Instead, the Nedeed women’s lives are similar to that of Janie in Zora Neale Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching God; like Janie, they are put on a pedestal because of their socio-economic position and are denied access to the larger black community that might provide resources that could create alternatives to the effacing process which is the price one apparently pays for the Nedeeds’ kind of American success.

Willa, whose name is not revealed until late in the novel, is identified merely as Mrs. Luther Nedeed, indicative of her objectification. It is she who, after her child dies in the basement-prison, slowly and painfully begins to explore the boxes and books in the basement and discovers the records of the previous Nedeed women’s existence. Unlike Lucielia (in The Women of Brewster Place), who has lost her daughter, Willa Nedeed has no Mattie to comfort her but instead must construct comfort from the records of the past:

While imprisoned in the basement, Naylor’s variation on the gothic imprisonment-in-attic convention, Willa Nedeed discovers writings and other records produced by the three previous wives of the Needed men – some of this writing interspersed in the family Bible, some in the guise of recipes and grocery lists: all forming the historical records of women’s lives.
She finds the letters of the first Nedeed wife, Luwana Packerville, who being lonely and desperate, writes and answers letters to herself. Nedeed ignores her completely once she has produced the male heir he requires so much. Just as in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Jody Stark refuses to eat Janie’s cooked food apprehending poison in it, Luwana is also denied to cook for her husband and son, once when Nedeed comes to know of a slave who kills his owner by poisoning his soup. Luwana is forced to silence as there is absolutely no one to whom she can speak to. Losing all hope and faith, Luwana like Helga in *Quicksand*, ultimately decides, “There can be no God.”

Next, Willa discovers the history of another Nedeed wife, Evelyn Creton Nedeed, from her recipes and cookbooks. Evelyn Creton had tried desperately to win her husband’s attention by cooking delicious meals for him. When it does not work, she even tries by mixing various aphrodisiacs in the dishes. But when everything fails, out of utter frustration, she starts starving herself by eating little and consuming large doses of laxatives and thus, paving her way to death. The history of the next Nedeed wife, Priscillia McGuire, that Willa discovers, had been a very carefree and animated woman when she was newly married. Her history is brought forth by a series of photographs, wherein, she herself recorded her gradual disappearance from life. The photographs represent her gradual change to a fading personality. All these Nedeed women, in cooperating with their husband’s wishes, had in fact, betrayed their own selves. The life-records of these Needed women show their wasting away under the authority of their husbands, even though these particular women had all the material possessions that mythically should have insured their survival. The Nedeed women’s life stories, though submerged and separated from the lives of other Linden Hills residents are actually identical to the fate awaiting all who embrace the Nedeed way to ‘get over’ in America. A part of this way requires that the Linden Hills residents
"must erase essential parts of themselves if they are to stay in this jewel neighborhood....Each of their lives has been damaged by the pursuit of wealth and power that Nedeed embodies.\textsuperscript{16} That is why, the history that Willa recovers is a different view of marriage which creates women as ghostly absences and naturalizes their namelessness. By reviewing the tragic histories of previous Nedeed wives, Willa is inspired to create her own to prove that she is able to give herself the strength to emerge from the basement. In a conversation with Toni Morrison, Naylor remarked about Willa Nedeed, "I wanted her to learn from those lessons in history."\textsuperscript{17} And that she does. Jolted into action through her reading and remembering, Willa explores her face with her hands, then gazes at herself in a water-filled pan, her mirror, the key to identity and self-knowledge, thereby rediscovering herself: "...(s)he had actually seen and accepted reality, and reality brought such a healing calm. For whatever it was worth, she could rebuild."(268)

Running alongside the parallel narrative of Willa’s self-discovery, is Willie and Lester’s journey through Linden Hills and being exposed to the shallowness of the community. In fact, "Willie represents the ideal figure for exposing and subverting the essentialist illusions of the community as they are manifested in the boundary and signification problems, the ravages of commodification, and the suppression of women."\textsuperscript{18} Willie’s passage through Linden Hills takes on the dimensions of the trajectory of a search for a name – the name of Nedeed’s wife. As Willie makes his way down the hill with Lester, becoming increasingly obsessed with the mystery surrounding this strangely absent name, Nedeed’s wife proceeds on a journey on her own towards this name, unearthing the personal effects of the past Nedeed wives, which were stored away and forgotten. Willa Nedeed reasserts her identity and image and seizes the power of naming from Luther by naming their son ‘Sinclair’ just before
she emerges from the basement. In an interview to Charles H. Rowell, Gloria Naylor says while working on the ending of *Linden Hills*, she had already planned Willa to barge from the basement and confront her crazy husband. But she says,

> [w]hen the time came for me to do that scene, that character (Willa) turned on me: she said she was happy to have been a wife. That’s how she got her identity....What she was going to do was climb up those steps and not tell him ‘get out of my way’, as in some great feminist dream. She was going to climb those steps and start cleaning house....Thank God I had enough sense to go back to the book and let her do what she wanted to do.\(^\text{19}\)

So, we find Willa emerging from the basement with her dead son in her arms and entering the room where Willie and Lester are decorating the Christmas tree for Luther Nedeed. After informing Luther of his son’s death, she brushes past him in a frenzy to clean the other rooms. When Luther tries forcing her to stop, she resists and the three are welded together and even though Luther tries to wrench free, “they breathed as one, moved as one, and one body lurched against the fireplace.”(300) The last scene shows the house burning to the ground with the Nedeeds embraced in a single struggling mass inside, while the entire community watches it and lets it burn, denying the very evidence before their eyes – a final act of hypocrisy and suppression which is certainly the only possible response worthy of Luther Nedeed and his community.

Willa’s death is viewed by critics from different perspectives. Teresa Goddu is of the opinion that “Willa’s self-determination, like all female history....literally goes up in smoke at the end of this book....Willa’s autobiographical history recuperates her past and her self-identity, but it posits no alternative system, no movement beyond.”\(^\text{20}\)

But Christopher N. Okonkwo instead of identifying Willa’s death as a self-destruction or a suicide, takes a different stance where he lends a different meaning to Willa’s death by suggesting that it is like “…the idea of women rallying and intervening as
radical ‘messiahs’ to save other women, and men as well.” Seen in this light, Willa’s death is a suggestion of messianic self-sacrifice for the larger community. As in The Women of Brewster Place, no such action of community bonding closes the plot of Linden Hills, but a similar action based on a sense of female community does take place. An indirect experience of black sisterhood comes through Willa Nedeed’s contact with the previous Nedeed women through their documents. The conclusion of Willa’s journey is no doubt a dead end, but she has brought to an end the Nedeed dynasty. Thus, a kind of sisterhood has been established over time, between Willa and her dead predecessors. In The Women of Brewster Place, the essential bonding between the different members of the community is achieved beyond the limitations of space, but in Linden Hills the bonding is achieved beyond the limitations of time. Willa Nedeed is restored briefly to life and strength only through the recognition of a common bond with the other women of the past.

The ultimate collapse of the Nedeed dynasty brings to mind the fact that those who place individual wealth over collective being can never create a community that endures. The culture of sharing and nurturing in Brewster Place is absent among the residents of Linden Hills because they take no pride in their cultural heritage and most of their efforts are spent in the deliberate removal of the vestiges of black cultural identity in the process of accumulating wealth. They, therefore, cannot create a community. But Naylor’s main objective is not presenting a bleak picture of the Linden Hills community, rather she wants to draw attention to the fact that community bonding is of utmost importance for the African American people’s search for empowerment. In order to lay emphasis on such bonding, Naylor tenderly portrays the genuine friendship between Willie and Lester throughout the novel till the end where they walk out of Tupelo Drive “[h]and anchored to hand....”(304)
With her second novel, Gloria Naylor has presented wider dimensions of the African American community in the 1980s and the problem that she and her contemporaries faced portraying such a community in literature. The changing political and economic scenario resulted in the more pronounced class differences as presented in the Linden Hills community. Naylor not only portrays such a wide variety in her book, but also highlights the importance of a unified cultural identity amidst the multivocality of black experiences.
NOTES


   *[All quotations in this chapter from *Linden Hills* have the same publication details.]*


11. Kaminski, Matthew J. “*Gloria Naylor’s Linden Hills*”. 
    [http://parallel.park.uga.edu/~tengles/identity/kaminski.html]


<www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m2838/is_l_35_ai_74410619/pg_7_26k>
momma  momma
mammy
nanny
granny
woman
mistress
sista
luv
blackgirl
slavegirl
gal,
..................

Teach me to survive my
momma
teach me how to hold a new life
momma
help me
turn the face of history
to your face.

(June Jordan)