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MOTHERLOVE IS A KILLER: SULA, BELOVED, AND THE DEADLY TRINITY OF MOTHERLOVE

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For those of us who both love and fear The Child—because of the work we do—but who would be lovers only, if we could, I propose and defend a plan of life that encourages one child of one’s own, which I consider a meaningful—some might say necessary—digression within the works.

—Alice Walker, “One Child of One’s Own: A Meaningful Digression Within the Works,” In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens

...unless carefree, motherlove was a killer.

—Toni Morrison, Beloved

What makes these two statements different from one another? The former sentence is cautionary, and offers in the form of a lifeplan a remedy for the difficulties of motherhood. The latter sentence is equally cautionary, but it offers a less optimistic brand of caution. Although Morrison’s assertion is like Walker’s in that it presents motherhood in an unconventional light, it poses more of a threat to the traditional view of the sanctity of motherhood than Walker’s assertion does. Indeed, Morrison’s statement, like the novel from which it comes, has considerable shock value because it is not a widely held belief. We find Morrison’s statement disturbing not only because it challenges the traditional view of motherhood, but also because it doesn’t challenge it. By suggesting that the traditional care-giving of motherhood can be a destructive force, Morrison’s sentence both denies and affirms the popular perceptions of motherlove. This leitmotif of motherlove as killer propels the action in both Morrison’s 1973 novel, Sula, and in her 1987 novel, Beloved, as she presents a trinity of motherlove’s lethal possibilities: motherlove as a destructive force that ‘kills’ by burdening a mother in the realm of the material, motherlove that ‘kills’ by burdening a mother in the realm of the emotional, and motherlove that—quite simply and literally—kills.

This trinity gives Sula much of its poignance. The novel chronicles the interaction of three generations of the Peace family—mother Eva, her children Hannah, Eva (called Pearl), and Ralph (called Plum), and Eva’s granddaughter, Sula—and focuses on the bond of friendship that Sula shares with her best friend, Nel. Although the special connection that Sula and Nel share forms the crux of the novel, the relationships that the Peace women have with their children are highly significant, as they reveal motherlove to be economically and mentally lethal. When Eva’s husband of five years, BoyBoy, leaves her to raise the three children on her own in 1895, we see at once the financial and emotional pressure that childrearing places upon disadvantaged African-American mothers. This strain is especially apparent in the passage in which Eva, trapped in a cabin in the middle of winter with no food for her children, considers her options for supporting them:

She would lie in bed with the baby boy, the two girls wrapped in quilts on the floor, thinking. The oldest child, Hannah, was five and too young to take care of the baby alone, and any housework Eva could find would keep her away from five-thirty in the morning until dark—way past eight. The white people in the valley weren’t rich enough to want maids... She thought also of returning home to some of her people in Virginia, but to come home dragging three young ones would have been a step one rung before death for Eva. (32-33)

Caring for the children alone is not only painful for Eva; it is logistically difficult, as well. Before she accepts any job, Eva must carefully consider the effects that the employment may have upon her children. In fact, the very existence of her children bars Eva from most jobs, as they are too young to be left alone during standard working hours. This has a markedly negative emotional effect upon Eva, a woman whose pride is highlighted throughout the novel. She misses her family, but cannot use them as a resource because she is too proud to go home to them with half-starved children in tow. Thus we see the full extent of her dignity, but we also notice that she must subjugate it so that her children may survive—demeaning herself by “scroung[ing] around and beg[ging] through the winter”
(33), and by "hir[ing] herself out to valley farms" (33) to do heavy labor. Her love for her children drives her to do things she would not ordinarily do in order to keep her family alive. Thus, motherlove attacks the most outstanding quality of Eva's personality, her pride.

The relentlessness of this assault upon her personal dignity and upon her senses is best illustrated by a trial of motherhood that pierces the Peaces' already miserable winter. When, in mid-December, Plum develops severe colic, Eva first begs help from her neighbors, then desperately tries to heal Plum herself. When, "[a]t one point, maddened by his own crying, [Plum] gag[es], choke[s], and look[es] as though he [is] strangling to death" (32), Eva "resolve[s] to end his misery for once and for all" (32). She runs her finger around the edge of the lard can, rushes Plum to the outhouse and

...[sleep within its darkness and freezing stench she squatted down, turned the baby over on her knees, exposed his buttocks and shoved the last bit of food she had in the world (besides three beets) up his ass. Softening the insertion with the dab of lard, she probed with her middle finger to loosen his bowels. Her fingernail snagged what felt like a pebble; she pulled it out and others followed. Plum stopped crying as the black hard stools ricocheted onto the frozen ground.

And now that it was over, Eva squatted wondering...what she was doing down on her haunches with her beloved baby boy warmed by her body in the almost total darkness, her shins and teeth freezing, her nostrils assailed. She shook her head as though to juggle her brains around, then said aloud, "Uh huh. Noo," There upon she returned to the house and her bed. As the grateful Plum slept, the silence allowed her to think. (33-34)

The exigencies of motherlove have thrust Eva into an unthinkable position. Her son's illness, its remedy, and her family's prospects for the remainder of the winter stun Eva into denial.

But when Eva says, "Noo," it is not only because she wants to negate the harsh reality that has her family in its grip, but also because, like a good mother, she wants to rescue her children from that harshness. Motherlove, however, still dogs her cruelly: in order to obtain economic security for her children, Eva must commit yet another shockingly selfless act. Her emotional self already ravaged by the rigors of motherlove, Eva must now mutilate her physical self.

Two days after the accident in the outhouse she left all her children with Mrs. Suggs, saying she would be back the next day.

Eighteen months later she swept down from a wagon with two crutches, a new black pocketbook, and one leg. First she reclaimed her children, next she gave the surprised Mrs. Suggs a ten-dollar bill, later she started building a home on Carpenter's Road, sixty feet from BoyBoy's one-room cabin, which she rented out.(35)

Although her pride will make her deny it forever afterwards, she has allowed her leg to be severed by an oncoming train so that she can collect a $10,000 insurance policy awarded to her in $22 monthly payments which give her the means to support her family. The destructive power of motherlove has ravaged Eva's body and has turned her into a community oddity, a woman whose love for her children is so strong that it has become dangerous.

This danger reaches its acme when Eva kills one of her children. Eva murders her son, Plum, who has returned home from World War I addicted to heroin, in order to save him from self-destruction. After tolerating months of Plum's stealing and physical and mental deterioration, Eva takes action. She visits his room one night and finds him in a stupor induced by his perpetual intoxication:

Plum on the rim of a warm light sleep was still chuckling. Mamma. She sure was somethin'. He felt twilight. Now there seemed to be some kind of wet light traveling over his legs and stomach with a deeply attractive smell. It wound itself—this wet light—all about him, splashing and running into his skin...

Eva stepped back from the bed and let the crutches rest under her arms. She rolled a bit of newspaper into a tight stick about six inches long. Lit it and threw it onto the bed where the kerosene-soaked Plum lay in snug delight. Quickly, as the white flames engulfed her, she shut the door and made her slow and painful journey back to the top of the house. (47-48)

The parallels between this passage and the passage in which Eva saves Plum's life by relieving him of colic are striking. Plum feels that being dosed with kerosene is "[s]ome kind of blessing"(47) that has come to assure him that "[e]verything is going to be alright"(47). When he is a colic-stricken infant in the outhouse, his mother's benediction allows him to sleep "gratefully"(34); as a heroin-addicted adult, another maternal benediction gives him the reassurance that enables him to "s[i]nk back into the bright hole of sleep"(47). Once again, Eva provides for him through even the most extreme circumstances: she rescued the child Plum from death, and she must deliver the adult Plum to death in order to save him from the drug addiction that is worse than death itself.

But Eva also kills Plum in order to save him from the indignity of upsetting natural law, the order which dictates a gradual separation of the child from its mother as the child grows to adulthood. When Eva attempts to explain Plum's murder to her daughter Hannah, she says that she killed Plum because "he was trying to get back into my womb"(70). Indeed, his heroin addiction so debilitates Plum that he regresses to a childlike state, and so his murder is truly an infanticide. Thus we see that, because Eva's love for her children is so strong and because she has been forced to do many shocking things in order to maintain them, killing Plum seems to be both her natural right and the only proper thing to do.

Seth Garner, the protagonist of Beloved, also views infanticide as a child-salvation that is the only option worth considering. In the case of Eva and her children, the responsibilities inherent in the first two parts of the trinity of motherlove inform the last—literally lethal—part. But in the case of Sethe, a Kentucky slave who survives a nightmarish and partially botched escape to Ohio, motherlove's deadly manifestation informs the aspects of motherlove that are material and emotional burdens. Like Eva, Sethe kills her second-youngest child—a daughter who, in an act reflective of Sethe's motherlove, is posthumously named 'Beloved'—and attempts to kill her other children in order to save them from a fate worse than death: slavery.

When slave-catchers come to the Ohio homestead of Sethe's mother-in-law, Baby Suggs, in order to reclaim Sethe and her children, Sethe's reaction is swift and tragic, but consistent with the demands of motherlove. As she
recalls later, the solution seemed to her to be “simple”:

she was squatting in the garden and when she saw [the slave-catchers] coming... she heard wings. Little hummingbirds stuck their needle beaks right through her headcloth into her hair and beat their wings. And if she thought anything, it was No. No. Nonono, Nonono. Simple. She just flew. Collected every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful, and carried, pushed, dragged them through the veil, out, away, over there where no one could hurt them. (163)

We understand that Sethe’s homicidal mission is also a mission of mercy, even though the slave-catchers see only the carnage of a scene in which “two boys ble[e]d in the sawdust at the feet of a nigger woman holding a blood-soaked child to her chest with one hand and an infant by the heels in the other” (149). As Sethe explains later, owing her children herself was “a selfish pleasure I had never had before...I couldn’t let any of ’em live under [slavery]” (163). Just as Eva does during the colic incident that drives her to amputate her own leg to feed her children, Sethe chants “Nonono” to herself as she thinks of the fate that awaits her children if she does not act to save them.

And, just as sacrificing her leg for her children makes Eva an object of disgust who is cast onto the fringes of her community, so murdering her child makes Sethe a pariah in the community of ex-slaves in which she and her surviving children live. Most of her neighbors object to Sethe’s infanticide because they believe that she had no natural right to kill her daughter. “You saying God give up?” Stamp Paid, the local Underground Railroad engineer who helped Sethe escape into Ohio, asks Baby Suggs when Baby tries to defend Sethe. “Nothing left for us to spill but our own blood” (179) ? Others are put off by the murder because it is indicative of a depth of love that slavery and acts of racial violence have made hazardous for African-Americans.

This latter group of people are well-acquainted with the materially lethal manifestations of Sethe’s motherlove: they are not, for example, disgusted by Sethe’s gory tales of her escape from slavery and of being beaten while pregnant because these physical hardships are inflicted upon the African-American community by whites. What these people do object to is what they perceive as the arrogance and fool-hardiness of Sethe’s attempt to take control of her life by giving her powerful motherlove free reign. Such strong motherlove has the potential to kill the spirit, as Sethe’s lover Paul D notes when he thinks to himself that Sethe’s stubborn insistence upon loving her children so fiercely is

[risks...very risky. For a used-to-be slave woman to love anything that much was dangerous, especially if it was her children she had settled on to live. The best thing, he knew, was to love just a little bit; everything, just a little bit, so when they broke its back, or shoved it in a crocker sack, well, maybe you’d have a little love left over for the next one...(45)]

Paul D is right: the potency of Sethe’s motherlove is dangerous. When it manifests itself as literal murder, it makes her surviving daughter, Denver, afraid of her, completely estranges her from her sons, Howard and Buglar, and obliterates the life-force of Baby Suggs. Thus, Sethe’s motherlove, like Eva’s, is both a positive and a negative force that destroys many of Sethe’s emotional supports.

In Eva Peace and Sethe Garner, Morrison presents cases of two markedly dissimilar African-American women living in two decidedly different time periods who are both plagued by the deadly trinity of motherlove. Why, one may ask, does motherlove have such negative possibilities where African-American women are concerned? Perhaps it is because African-American women have traditionally been exposed to life at its harshest. We must remember that Sethe says that motherlove is a killer “unless carefree” (132, my italics). In the case of the escaped slave and the turn-of-the-century rural African-American, life was not carefree; neither, then, was motherlove. For Eva and Sethe, it is the fact that life is not carefree—that reality is so terribly bleak—that makes motherlove take on deadly proportions.

We see this connection between the severity of life and the lethality of motherlove in the scene in which Eva Peace learns that, although she has literally sacrificed body and soul in order to support them, her offspring are unaware of the full extent of her love for them. Sethe must withhold some love from her children because she has learned that the position of African-American women and their children is precarious, but Eva must withhold some love from her children because she has neither the time nor the energy to give it. Because Eva must work hard to support her family—and because the Peaces are, ironically, wont to find that their existence is far from peaceful—she has no time to lavish traditional displays of affection upon her children. Eva has to work for the survival of her offspring at the expense of having fun with them, as she tries to explain when her daughter Hannah asks her whether or not she loved the children when they were younger:

“Mamma... I know you fed us and all. I was talkin’ bout something else. Like. Like. Playin’ with us. Did you ever, you know, play with us?”

“Play? Wasn’t nobody playin’ in 1895. Just ’cause you got it good now you think it was always this good? 1895 was a killer, girl. Things was bad. Niggers was dying like flies.....

“I’m talkin’” bout 18 and 95 when I set in that house for five days with you and Pearl and Plum and three beets, you snake-eyed hussy. What would I look like leavin’ ’round that little room playin’ with youngins with three beets to my name?....

“Yeah? Well? Don’t that count? Ain’t that love? You want me to tinkle you under the jaw and forget about them sores in your mouth? Pearl was shittin’ worms and I was supposed to play ring-around-the-rosie?”

“Then Mamma, they had to be some time when you wasn’t thinkin’ bout...”

“No time. They wasn’t no time. Not none. Soon as I get one day done, here come the night....” (68-69)

The rigors of improving her family’s existence have led Eva to adopt a severe manner that distances her children from her. The struggle for survival has given Eva’s love for her children a hard edge which has nearly destroyed her relationship with them. Eva’s motherlove has taken on a double-edged destructiveness: it drives her to sacrifice herself in order to maintain her children economically, and in so doing absents her from them so that their love for her is diminished.

The fact that it is Eva’s attempts to support her children that estranges them from her is significant. As we see in Jacqueline Jones’ Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow, in both the ante-bellum and post-bellum periods, most working African-American women and their children had no refuge from a relentless and often grim reality. When Jones writes about slavery, she describes a world in which adult African-
Americans had no leisure time (13), in which labor started at an early age and precluded the play usually associated with childhood (13), in which African-American women were driven and beaten like men while slave-master's wives were spared all possible unpleasantness (16-19), and in which pregnant African-American women whose productivity lagged were accused of shamming illness and fatigue "playing the lady at [their masters'] expense" (19).

We see the effects that the mercilessness of a harsh reality can have upon motherlove in Beloved. Although Jones says that the havoc that slavery wreaked upon personal familial relationships made many slave women "descend into madness" (36), Sethe considers madness a luxury that is available to her husband because he is a man and to her mother-in-law because she is now childless, but not to her; she has children to look after. Sethe is forced to go without dreams, without rest, without escape from the truth of her life, as we see when she is loath to "permit herself" (84) to faint during the difficult birth of her daughter Denver. Although Morrison implies that such mental strength was required of all ex-slaves—when Paul D asks Stamp Paid "How much is aigger supposed to take?" (235), Stamp replies "All he can" (235)—it is especially demanded of Sethe, a mother who loves too much and too completely. Sethe constantly tries to beat back the bleakness of life, waging a losing battle with her mind in an attempt to lose or reconstruct her memories.

...She shook her head from side to side, resigned to her rebellious brain. Why was there nothing it refused? No misery, no regret, no hateful picture too rotten to accept? Like a greedy child it snatched up everything. Just once, could it say, No thank you? I just ate and I can't hold another bite? ...But my greedy brain says, Oh thanks, I'd love more—so I add more. And no sooner than I do, there is no stopping. (70)

Although Sethe has found a philosophy of life in the belief that "the future is a matter of keeping the past at bay" (42), the severity of her existence and the hunger of her memory hamper her efforts to rebuild her life. For Sethe, there is no respite from hard reality, and this reality is made even more painful when it reacts with her motherlove, as Sethe reflects:

No crack or crevice available. She had taken pains to keep [memories] out, but knew full well that at any moment they would rock her, rip her from her moorings, send the birds twittering back into her hair. Drain her mother's milk—that they had already done....driven her fat bellied into the woods—they had done that. (188)

Sethe tries to exercise both the lingering image of her milk being drained by her master's nephews in the ultimate insult to her motherhood and the memory of how she escaped form Kentucky on foot, alone, and heavy with child, but she cannot. In the case of her motherlove, Sethe's memory is her enemy. For Sethe and Eva, motherlove cannot be carefree; thus, it becomes a killer.

Why are there so many painfully shocking images and motifs in Sula and Beloved? Perhaps because Toni Morrison endeavors to present the lives of African-Americans in as realistic a manner as possible in both novels. In so doing, Morrison creates images that capture truth so unflinchingly that they have considerable shock value. Morrison conducts extensive research before she writes her novels, as anyone who is familiar with the sensational and tragic life story of escaped slave Margaret Garner, Sethe's real-life prototype, knows. The conventional-yet-unconventional view of motherhood that Morrison presents in Sula and Beloved is substantiated by the positions of Walker and other modern womanists, and the reality from which such views may have evolved is chronicled in Jones Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow. Even the most shocking of Morrison's images have their real-life counterparts in African-American history: as Anne Moody, Myrlie Evers, Louise Merriwether and many other African-American women have written, whether in the rural South or the urban slum, certain elements of American society prey upon African-American children, causing their mothers considerable anxiety. Likewise, infanticide among African-American slaves was not unusual, and there are many recorded accounts of enslaved women battering their children's heads against the sides of slave ships during the Middle Passage in order to spare them from lives of servitude. Morrison has an obvious commitment to the realistic presentation of African-American life—past and present—and is thus very much attuned to the African-American experience. This is what makes reading Sula and Beloved such rich and painful experiences, and what makes the trinity of motherlove as killer that each novel illustrates so poignant and complex.

Notes


2Toni Morrison, Beloved (New York: Plume, 1987).
