

The Original Helicopter Moms: Toni Morrison's Tragic Maternal Love and the
Healing Greek Polis

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Abstract

I entered into this academic endeavor with the intention of exploring the multiple representations of love within Toni Morrison's works. With a through reading of a significant number of her novels, I noticed that many of her characters, particularly mothers, chose to display their love for others through violent actions, a repetitive correlation wrought with tragic Greek undertones. Exploring both of these sources, yet another parallel unfolded when examining the healing power of the community in repairing various wounds inflicted through harmful maternal interactions. With these findings, I was able to explore how the communities within both Morrison's *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved* relate to the ancient Greek concept of the polis and its ability to heal through initiation and acceptance.

Introduction

When reading the various works of canonical author Toni Morrison, an examination of the different representations of love present can be contradictory for some, as her characteristic writing style is unflinching when discussing the more brutal aspects of society. With plots that include such harsh acts as incest, murder, and infanticide, manifestations of love between characters can be lost on casual readers, requiring those that wish to explore a deeper interpretation to accept a more fluid and flexible understanding of what it means to love, and what that love looks like. While all of Morrison's works present themselves as exceptional studies of harmful relationships, her two novels *Beloved* (1987) and *Song of Solomon* (1977) will be the main focus of this thesis, as all three of the atrocities listed above can be found within these stories, particularly when studying the interactions between mother and child.

Recognizing the dramatic representations of harmful maternal love in these two novels, it is easy for the reader to be reminded of the tragic events of Greek myth, ranging from Medea's murder of her children to Oedipus' accidental incest with his own mother. This connection will play a vital role within this thesis, as we can draw upon the similarities between Morrison's novels and Greek tragedy to understand how a mother's love for her children (combined in some cases with a debilitating pride) can become a damaging force for almost all parties involved.

With these tragic and harmful maternal representations, Morrison has also chosen to heal those inflicted with a communal pathology—yet another aspect of *Beloved* and *Song of Solomon* that retain ancient Greek connotations. All three

communities—that is, the two communities found in *Beloved* and *Song of Solomon* and the social public of ancient Greece—value inclusivity and require individuals to abandon of their own autonomy to be accepted within their ranks. Through an acceptance of these values, Morrison’s characters harboring developmental and psychological wounds from previous maternal interactions are saved, displaying an importance of community within her novels, an emphasis that contains strong Grecian connotations. Through a severance of these overpowering mother and child relationships and an allowance of the victims to be saved through communal interactions, Morrison’s novels embody the Greek ideas of the polis and the “human family,” where personal pride is nonexistent and a selfless attitude towards community is praised. Examining both *Beloved* and *Song of Solomon* with a strong focus on these elements of Greek tragedy, readers can fully understand the harmful qualities found within certain manifestations of maternal love, damages that can be counterbalanced through the the positive human polis’ ability to heal through initiation and acceptance.

Maternal Love Gone Astray: Sethe, Medea, and Ruth

Within *Beloved* and *Song of Solomon*, two representations of harmful maternal love are depicted. All of the acts conducted by the two mothers in these novels—Sethe in *Beloved* and Ruth in *Song of Solomon*—are derivative of a love the mother has for her child, sparking a deeper look into these women’s perception of what a healthy maternal relationship looks like. With the help of Morrisonian scholar Terry Otten, we can understand the phrase “tragic love” and its

manifestation in each of these novels, using it to uncover the hidden motives behind each of these women's questionable acts of maternal affection.

Terry Otten's article "Horrific Love in Toni Morrison's Fiction" can help Morrison's readers understand why she represents brutal violence in such beautiful prose. Otten argues that Morrison uses harsh images to help her display a belief that, "even the most noble and innocent assertion of will can generate the most criminality...that even love itself can produce the most devastating destructive power" (652). Making a point to highlight the fact that Morrison was a classics minor in college, Otten links the "horrific love" present in her novels with epiphany in Greek tragedy, claiming that almost all of the brutal actions her characters perform are enacted out of love, bringing with them a truth that is "both troubling and celebratory" (653).

Expanding on this thesis, Otten enters into a close reading of several of Morrison's novels that contain representations of horrific love, including *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*. Incorporating a plethora of quotes from Morrison discussing the motivations of her characters' brutal actions, Otten argues that the purpose behind including various acts of violence in her novels is to help represent the hidden dark side of this emotion. Citing instances in Morrison's novels that include Sethe's infanticide in *Beloved*, Otten states that these examples are warnings addressed to the reader regarding maternal love, and how this love can ultimately be dangerous for the child. Sethe kills the infant Beloved to save her from a life of slavery, and with this terrible crime, Morrison "warns that '[p]arents who simply adore their children and really and truly want the best for them may, in fact, destroy

them. They say to them, 'Your life is not worth living'" (656). His examples are well researched and very convincing, particularly because Otten includes direct interviews with Morrison explaining her interpretation of different murders in her novels.

Focusing on Otten's examination of Sethe's "dangerous love" for her children, a resemblance can be formed between the story of infanticide in *Beloved* and the Greek myth of Medea. Both consist of a mother killing her children out of love, and further, present a mother that does not outright admit the wrong found in her actions. But while both women believe that their acts are justified, it is important to look at the nature of love driving these murders—they are different, thus creating contrast between the two literary characters. While Sethe's act of infanticide is motivated by the love for her children, Medea's actions are in response to her romantic love being rejected. This contrast is important to understand when comparing these two characters, as it helps us recognize Morrison's capability of adapting common themes found within Greek myth to display the possible danger of maternal interactions.

In the beginning of *Beloved*, Morrison establishes Sethe as a protective mother before the reader is knowledgeable of her act of infanticide. After Denver rudely dismisses a former friend of hers (Paul D) that has come to visit, Sethe, rather than reprimanding Denver for her behavior, apologizes for her instead. Paul D is unsatisfied by this quasi-apology, stating that Sethe cannot continue to protect Denver by constantly apologizing for her; she has to let Denver grow up and make her own choices, reaping the consequences. With this critique, Sethe becomes

defensive of her parenting ability, stating that she will never stop shielding Denver, even when Denver is grown. This protective instinct is taken further when Sethe states: "I'll protect her while I'm live and I'll protect her when I ain't" (54).

Foreshadowing Beloved's rise from the dead, Morrison shows the strength of Sethe's maternal love in this statement. Reaching beyond the confines of death and life, Sethe's love for her children is deeper than anything in this world or the next, establishing its presence within the novel as an almost unstoppable force.

While instituting a deep love undeterred by death, this example of Sethe's protective parenting also shows the overbearing control Sethe's has over her children. Rather than letting them make their own decisions, Sethe seems to be making Denver's choice to apologize for her, a domineering action that can be used to explain her murder of Beloved. When asked about the murder, Morrison has stated that it "was the right thing to do, but [Sethe] had no right to do it" (*Interview*). With this statement seemingly validating Sethe's murder of Beloved because it was "the right thing to do," Morrison blurs the lines between maternal protection and maternal overpowering. It is only through outside observers, like the reader and Paul D, that Morrison is able to display the grievance in Sethe's actions, thus showing us the "horrific love" examined by Otten and found in many Greek tragedies.

This uncertainty of right and wrong is exhibited when Sethe attempts to explain the reason behind her murderous actions against Beloved to Paul D. After discovering the secret of Sethe's infanticide, once again Paul D questions her maternal activities, becoming a projection for the reader to try to understand her

act. "Circling him the way she was circling the subject" (189), Sethe first explains the pride she has for escaping slavery with all of her children:

I did it. I got us all out. Without Halle too. Up till then it was the only thing I ever did on my own. Decided. And it came off right, like it was supposed to. We was here. Each and every one of my babies and me too. I birthed them and I got em out and it wasn't no accident. I did that. (190)

With an emphasis on the first person and Sethe's accomplishment of singlehandedly saving her children ("without Halle" and "it was the only thing I ever did on my own"), Morrison shows Sethe's personal responsibility for her children's freedom. The personal responsibility that Sethe feels only after she is separated from Halle, mirrors the predominance of the male over the female in Greek society. Within this ancient culture, the father was deemed the true "owner" of the couple's children in the eyes of the law (Garland 44), free to make all decisions concerning childrearing without any maternal consent. Removed from all paternal influence that may have overruled her role as a mother, Sethe finds power in being her children's only caretaker, one that leads to a dominating role in their lives.

The responsibility to "each and every one" of Sethe's "babies" is focused on their safety in the above passage, and her ability to free them from slavery. This responsibility continues in their freedom, cumulating in the scene where Sethe tries to "save" them from a life of bondage when they are found by slave catchers in Cincinnati. Recounting that day, Sethe states that she "flew" from the garden after spotting schoolteacher (her former slave master) coming to reclaim her and her children, asserting: "I took and put my babies where they'd be safe" (193).

Comparing her act of infanticide with her rescuing her "babies" from slavery, Sethe's pride of the love (and newfound "ownership") she has for her children brings about

a controlling act of murder. Rather than letting the children or some other adult decide what executes a “safe” environment for a child, Sethe, taking on the Greek paternal idea of “ownership” of her children, determines it on her own, a misconception that leads to murder.

With this selfish love established as the root cause for Beloved’s death, the reader is now able to understand Sethe’s unwillingness to be parted from her children, even if it means killing them. This reluctance further explains the lack of regret Sethe has for her actions against Beloved, one that mirrors the lack of regret the collective Greek subconscious felt towards the act of infant abandonment—a practice unnervingly common in ancient societies, particularly with female infants. Provoked by the high cost of bringing up a girl and the tough fight for survival in the ancient world, current estimates suggest that the level of female infanticide in ancient Athens was at least 10 percent of all female births, with letters, plays, and inscriptions used as confirmation of the social practice by today’s scholars (Garland 43-44). Like any decision concerning childrearing, the choice of whether to keep the baby was held by the father, the “owner” of the child, with the infant being exposed to the elements if they were deemed unwanted. The legend of Oedipus records this practice through its depiction of an infant being abandoned in a deserted spot following his birth, left to die of cold and a lack of nourishment. The depiction of infanticide perpetrated by the “owner” of the child is also found in *Beloved*, once again connecting Morrison’s modern tragedies with Greek societal influences and commonalities.

Like the Greek populace's acceptance of infant abandonment, Otten notices Sethe's lack of regret for the murder of Beloved, labeling her admission as a "confession without a crime" (Otten 658). Looking at the same passage as above, where Paul D confronts Sethe about the act of infanticide, Otten believes that Sethe possesses no regret for her actions, as she looks upon them as "the profoundest testimony of love" (658). Fueled by a newfound maternal ownership of her children, Sethe has established herself as the ultimate authority concerning every aspect of her children's lives—including whom they apologize to and if they should live. With this overbearing responsibility ultimately driven out of a freedom to love her children to the fullest, without a slave owner or even their own father claiming "ownership," the reader can fully understand the justification behind Sethe's lack of guilt for Beloved's murder—even if they themselves do not agree with the act.

Both Sethe's inability to apologize for Beloved's infanticide and Otten's "confession without a crime" are found in the Greek myth of Medea. Scorned by the abandonment of her husband Jason, Medea commits infanticide on their shared children, proceeding then to accredit these murderous actions to her shame in his rejection. Blaming Jason's insult on her pride for the murders, Medea ignites familiarity with Sethe in the fact that both of these women's actions are a result of controlling pride. Because of this pride, Medea, like Sethe, confesses to the murder of her children, yet finds no fault in the infanticides because she believes that they are an act of passionate love. Her murders are also similar to Sethe's in the fact that they are a highly controlling attempt to force someone she loves to stay in her life. After her confession, Medea flies away from the scene of the crime, once again

creating a similarity between herself and Sethe, who “flew” to the shed to murder her children in an attempt to keep them close to her.

But with these similarities, a large difference between the two stories is revealed when examining the type of love that leads both Sethe and Medea to commit these crimes. While Sethe’s actions are fueled by her pride in procuring sole responsibility for her children, and her commitment to keep their safety at all costs, Medea’s murders are a result of her injured pride from a failed romantic relationship—an act of spiteful retaliation. Sethe’s infanticide is purely a maternal response enacted to the extreme while Medea lacks any sort of maternal responsibility when she kills her children out of malice. With this action, she seems to replace the love she may have had for her children with a lust for vengeance against Jason.

With this acknowledgement of the different types of love and pride present in these two seemingly similar stories, one can recognize that the love within is directed towards different subjects. While the women display elements of Otten’s “horrific love,” the horrific crimes they commit are a result of a different type of passion, helping us differentiate between the two. With this difference, we can understand the amount of complexity Morrison’s adaptation of Greek tragedy adds to well-known myth. While sympathy towards Medea is almost non-existent for the reader, Morrison leads the reader of *Beloved*, through an explanation of Sethe’s maternal pride and controlling characteristics, to question the right and wrong of maternal love, and the multi-faceted levels found within it.

Not Your Average Love Triangle: Ruth, Dr. Foster, and Milkman

Morrison's adaptation of a Greek myth is not uncommon: throughout history tragic stories and popular heroes have been modified and analyzed. One of the most popular pieces of work inspired by Greek myth is Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytical Oedipus complex theory, famous for its exploration of a child's attraction towards his or hers parent of the opposite sex, and the child's jealous distain for the other same-sex parent (Colman paragraph 1). This theory mirrors the actions of the tragic Greek hero Oedipus, where he unknowingly marries his mother and murders his father in a fit of blind rage.

Pre-dating his 1900 *The Interpretation of Dreams*, where the Oedipus complex was first publicly introduced, Freud, in a 1897 letter to a friend explained the popularity of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, which records the tragic happenings of Oedipus' story (Morgenstern 778). Freud believed that the tragic play maintained its popularity throughout the years because of humanity's underlying Oedipal complex: "[W]e can understand the gripping power of *Oedipus Rex*...Everyone in the audience was once a budding Oedipus in fantasy and each recoils in horror from the dream fulfillment transplanted into reality" (Masson 272). Through Freud's understanding of *Oedipus Rex*, we can look at Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, discovering an Oedipus complex manifested in the character of Ruth towards her father. Upon his death, Ruth proceeds to transplant her Freudian feelings to her son Milkman, creating a different type of maternal love in *Song of Solomon*, one that lacks the controlling intensity of Sethe's love in *Beloved*. This lack of intensity leads to a dissimilar type of maternal harm inflicted upon Milkman—rather than a physical wound, Ruth's love

for Milkman is more psychologically harmful, transforming him into a selfish and egotistical adolescent incapable of humane sensitivity.

The most noticeable Oedipal feelings present in *Song of Solomon* are between Ruth and her father, Dr. Foster. A prominent figure in the African American community of Detroit, Dr. Foster is the only black doctor allowed to practice on white patients, a fact that helps him make a comfortable living for him, his wife, and only daughter. Ruth presents the typical Freudian childhood attachment to Dr. Foster when she recounts her childhood to Milkman, stating: "I had no friends, only schoolmates who wanted to touch my dresses and my white silk stockings. But I didn't think I'd ever need a friend because I had him. I was small, but he was big. The only person who ever really cared whether I lived or died" (124). With this passage, Morrison provides a sympathetic explanation for Ruth's childhood affections to Dr. Foster. Without any friends, siblings or a mother (she dies early in Ruth's childhood) to channel her love towards, Ruth attaches to the only figure that cares for her in her life—her father.

This undeterred devotion begins to unnerve Dr. Foster in Ruth's adolescence, when he begins to "chafe under her devotion." Her "steady beam of love" becomes "unsettling," because she "never dropped those expressions of affection that had been so loveable in her childhood." Sexualizing this relationship, Morrison includes the fact that, at sixteen, Ruth still insisted that her father kissed her goodnight "on her lips," a kiss that produced "an ecstasy [Dr. Foster] felt inappropriate to the occasion" (23). With Ruth's sexual attraction for him becoming more evident, Dr. Foster agrees to the first offer for Ruth's hand from Macon Dead, in hopes that she

will transfer some of her Oedipal sexual affection to her new husband—thus ending Ruth’s “inappropriate” and “unsettling” feelings for himself.

In the early years of Ruth and Macon’s marriage, Dr. Foster’s marital plan seems to work, as they conceive two children, First Corinthians and Magdalene. Their sexual encounters still convey Oedipal undertones though, as Morrison describes them giggling during foreplay, “as when children play ‘doctor’” (16). Mentioning both Ruth’s father’s profession and likening Ruth and Macon to children, Morrison continues the Oedipus complex into Ruth’s adulthood, even in her intimacy with her husband. This short attraction is punctuated when Dr. Foster and Macon disagree over the fact of the doctor delivering Milkman’s two older sisters, an action that Macon disapproves of: “[w]e had some words between us about it, and I ended up telling him that nothing could be nastier than a father delivering his own daughter’s baby.” Acknowledging that “he was a doctor and doctors not supposed to be bothered by things like that,” Macon still objects to Ruth having “her legs wide open” in his presence, claiming: “he was a man before he was a doctor.” Disregarding his wishes, Dr. Foster delivers both daughters, an action that makes Macon believe that “they’d ganged up on me forever” (71). Fully realizing that he would be forever the outcast in the relationship between Ruth and her father, Macon develops a jealousy towards the doctor that, like Oedipus, leads him to the murder of Dr. Foster.

Attributing Macon with Freudian Oedipal feelings of jealousy towards his father-in-law, Morrison channels the Greek myth when Ruth accuses Macon of her father’s death. Explaining to Milkman the reason behind her visiting Dr. Foster’s

grave, Ruth states: "I know [Macon] never told you that he killed my father...because [he] took my attention away from him" (125). Like Freud's Oedipus complex, Macon develops jealous feelings for a parent of the same sex, albeit not his own. Like *Oedipus Rex*, Macon channels this rage into murder, taking Dr. Foster's medicine away that could have potentially saved him from his illness. Like marriage creating a family out of two formally separate lives, Ruth's Oedipus complex has expanded to include her husband, leading him to harvest a jealous, murderous intent towards the doctor. But it is not until the evening of Dr. Foster's death that Macon fully realizes Ruth's quasi-incestuous relationship with her father, a discovery that finally severs the two from any marital connections.

Recounted to Milkman by Macon, the story of Ruth's interaction with her father's corpse the night of his death propels her attraction to Dr. Foster from the unnerving to the disturbing—a common emotion often associated with Freud's Oedipus complex. After hearing news that the doctor had passed, Macon enters his room to find Ruth, "naked as a yard dog, kissing him. Him, dead and white and puffy and skinny, and she had his fingers in her mouth" (73). Like Dr. Foster's delivery of his grandchildren, Morrison sexualizes Ruth's grief for her father, adding an unsettling element in her nakedly sucking on the doctor's "dead," "puffy," and "white" fingers, a dirty action that likens her to a "yard dog." Fully realizing the Freudian feelings Ruth has for her father, Macon is left to wonder what kind of sexual activity the two engaged in when he was alive, an idea so disgusting he contemplates killing her as well. Persuaded to let her live only through the threat of imprisonment, Macon channels his disgust by ignoring, insulting, and occasionally

beating Ruth. With this estrangement, Ruth loses every male source for which she could channel her Oedipal tendencies towards, leading her create a person she can reignite her male attraction with—Milkman.

With Milkman's conception, the Oedipal complex found within *Song of Solomon* is flipped—rather than the child concentrating their affection towards their parent; it is the parent concentrating their affection towards the child. Morrison displays Ruth's Freudian feelings towards Milkman in a yet-again disturbing series of interactions between the two, that are eventually revealed to be the reason behind Milkman's odd nickname. Transcribing her love for her father to Milkman, Ruth breastfeeds him in her father's old study, surpassing infancy and continuing to do so every day, even as his legs "dangle almost to the floor" (13). Having Milkman suckle her like she suckled her dead father's fingers, Morrison adds sexual tension to the scene where she describes Ruth "call[ing] her son to her": she smiles when she unbuttons her blouse, and describes her afternoons breastfeeding as "secret indulgences," with "part of the pleasure it gave her [coming] from the room in which she did it" (13). Locating this hyper-sexualized maternal act within Ruth's father's study, Morrison has Ruth project her Oedipus complex, once thought lost with her father's death, onto her son. Like her contemporary twist on the myth of Medea, Morrison has also placed a contemporary twist on Freud's Oedipus complex, through another reiteration of a relationship between a mother and her child.

Transferring her devotion from her father to her male child, Ruth's maternal interactions prove to be harmful for Milkman, albeit more developmental than

Sethe's physical controlling love. Spoiling her child through the need to maintain the Oedipal connection between the two at all costs, Milkman hardly develops a true relationship with Ruth, leading him to learn all of his life lessons through his greedy father Macon Dead. Soon after Milkman begins to work for him collecting rent money, he subconsciously adapts Macon's creed that the most important thing in life is to: "own things. And let the things you own own other things. Then you'll own yourself and other people too" (55). Macon asserts that a materialistic approach to self-ownership is needed for life fulfillment, with full contentment not only brought about by an ownership of material objects, but also through an ownership of other people. With no maternal presence to counteract Macon's slave/owner materialistic approach to relationships, it is no wonder that many scholars have identified Milkman in the beginning of *Song of Solomon* as a "spoiled brat" with an "underdeveloped moral sense" (Harris 89); a "narcissist" with his "growth suspended" (Carr Lee 49). This stunted growth is the harmful side effect of Ruth's self-fulfilling relationship with Milkman that leads to her weak parenting—the anti-thesis of Sethe's dominating childrearing.

While different, these two maternal relationships contain elements of Greek tragedy that are harmful to all those involved, whether their wounds be physical, psychological, or developmental. Considering these relationships, we can now explore the way Morrison seems to repair the wrong inflicted by these distorted versions of maternal love—a process that calls for a healing love brought about by the communities of both novels.

Healing the Wounds: The Greek Polis and Morrison's "Human Family"

Before focusing on the healing properties possessed by the communities of *Beloved* and *Song of Solomon*, we must first take a step back and answer the predominating question as to why Morrison chose to repair her characters within these two novels through communal bonds. With this question, an investigative approach exploring the similarities of the ancient Greek polis and the African American communities in Morrison's novels is necessary, as both deemed communal relationships necessary for the individual community member. By establishing the importance of the community in these two seemingly separate populations, we can explore why the polis is vital in healing wounds caused by the harmful maternal loves in both *Beloved* and *Song of Solomon*.

The concept of the polis formed in ancient Greece during the eighth and seventh century BC, accelerating in strength and influence until it was common in the Greek city-states in fifth century BC. Ancient Greece was divided into independent city-states, and the polis was formed through the different populations of those city-states, their autonomy from outsiders highly guarded and protected. The primary features of the polis within these states were their small size, local self-determination, and a sense of community and respect for the law ("Polis" paragraph 1). Because Athens established itself as a democracy around 500 BC, the citizen was an important part of that particular polis. This Athenian polis shall receive a special concentration in this section, due to the fact that a high majority of tragic plays were composed in Athens during the fifth century BC ("Ancient Greeks" paragraph 1).

With a membership within the Athenian polis, obedience to the law was particularly stressed, with an expectation of the citizen to cooperate fully with the city-state's constant subordination of the legal system and religious and family structures (Holt 661, Zelenak 70). This was done through an overarching expectation ingrained within society that the individual be useful to his community, disregarding many personal rights and giving the polis considerable power to regulate aspects such as funerals, child rearing, and education (Holt 661-3).

Part of the polis' disregard to autonomy can be attributed to the Greek community's constant state of war, both foreign and domestic (Garland 45, Zelenak 70). From the founding of democracy in 500 BC, the Greek states engaged in constant battle with each other and surrounding countries like Persia, the primary conflict being between the two largest Greek states, Athens and Sparta ("Ancient Greeks"). This constant conflict only ended with Athens inevitable defeat by Sparta, the conclusion of the almost-30-year Peloponnesian War in 404 BC.

This perpetual fighting had a profound affect on tragedy, as the plays were often performed in a carnival setting, allowing the public a much-needed release from the constant worries of fighting. This setting, according to Philip Holt, allowed for communal conflicts otherwise repressed by a fear of upsetting the polis to be discussed, if only through characters' interactions and the chorus' interjecting thoughts. Holt even adapts the Freudian term "wish-fulfillment" in describing these spectacles, stating that they fulfilled wishes and wants too wild to be indulged in in real life, including ominous actions found in Morrison's novels such as incest and murder. Adapting hints of Freud's psychoanalyst philosophy, Holt explains that

“[s]uch deeds have a sinister allure, an attraction combined with repulsion. They are powerful but also forbidden” (689). Allowing for the audience to separate these atrocious actions into a realm of myth, far away from the real world, these tragedies helped them find safety in their own everyday life—a feeling that was of high demand in their war-ridden lifetimes.

The unstable communities found in Greek tragedy can be found in *Beloved*, perhaps helping us understand why Morrison chose to include various atrocious actions heavy with tragic undertones in her novel. In *Beloved*, Nancy Jesser states that Morrison has created a world “shot through with white power,” with the evil of slavery evading every border established by the African American community to keep it out (338). This term of “evading evil” can also be applied to the destructive influence found within the Greek political system, which was riddled with conspiracies, gossip, and murder. Like the African American community of *Beloved* trying with no avail to keep the toxic influence of slavery out of their lives, the Greek community also continuously made an effort to maintain peace in their everyday interactions. But like the dominating schoolteacher who disrupts the community of ex-slaves through his hunt of Sethe and her children, the overwhelming threat of outside conquerors also disrupted the Athenian community. To maintain peace, the Athenian government intruded upon Greek family structures to further the needs of the greater community, as they believed that autonomy could lead to civil disagreement within the polis and subsequently the fall of the city-state. After all, how can a community be strong to adversary outside influences when they themselves are in conflict?

With this idea, we can look at the communities of *Beloved* and *Song of Solomon*, and their interactions with the individual characters who have been harmed through different toxic maternal influences. These individuals possess characteristics that were discouraged in the Athenian polis, the most predominant of them being a prideful autonomy. Like the Greek polis, who regarded communal relationships as superior to individual self-rule, the communities of *Beloved* and *Song of Solomon* also believe that citizens must abandon their self-sufficiency to produce a functioning community, a “human family.” With this knowledge of the Greek polis, we can fully understand the communal responsibility found within Morrison’s novels, one of which being a healing influence for characters damaged through maternal interactions.

Following this more modern approach to the Greek concept of the polis, a study conducted by psychologist C. Fred Alford can be used to explore the themes of deadly love and the “human family” in Morrison’s novels. In his year-long study, Alford met with a self-selecting group of an average of 12 prisoners at a maximum-security prison, with those participating having the free will to leave or stay at any time during the study. Throughout the year, Alford noticed a theme between the men and women who turned up week after week: Most had killed or raped a relative or love one, and expressed a longing for those that they had killed. Within these sessions, Alford, a professor of political philosophy with an emphasis on classical psychoanalytic studies, observed that the “men and women...seemed to come straight from the *dramatis personae* of Greek tragedy” (127). In the following summary of the experiments and observations conducted in his research exercising

a strong tragic Greek lens, Alford explains these inmates' motivation for killing through Greek philosophy and themes found within Greek tragedy. It is his focus and definition of the role of the polis in both Greek tragedy and these inmates' crimes that are of interest to this thesis, as they can be directly related to the communities found in *Beloved* and *Song of Solomon*.

Alford tries to understand the violent crimes of his patients through the "perspective of the polis," where he defines the polis in Greek tragedy as a "community whose citizens share the suffering of being human in a world that was not made for the human being." Alford believes that in ancient Greek times, "there was nothing more desirable than to be pitied, for to be pitied is to be part of the "human family." This desire to be included within the "human family" is contrasted with the taboo attached to pity in today's society, where "it is virtually an insult to pity someone" (133). In surrounding pity with offense, Alford states that society stripped the inmates of a social outlet to express their pain and become part of a community, leading them to "inflict it instead, as though it were something that could be moved from person to person" (134).

Using this modern day outlook on pity, an explanation can be formed as to why so many of Morrison's characters are adverse to the one solution that ultimately saves them in the end—acceptance into the collective polis. They, like the participants in Alford's study, see the polis' pity as a sign of weakness, spurred by their various manifestations of pride. With the idea of the "human family" in mind, we can now investigate how the poleis in *Beloved* and *Song of Solomon* first react to

those who reject the idea of acceptance and further on, use their communal strength to heal their wounds inflicted through harmful maternal interactions.

In *Beloved*, Sethe's inability to be pitied, prompted by her maternal pride and subsequent rejection from the African American community of Cincinnati, leads to her inevitable downfall at the hands of resurrected Beloved. With this downfall, which is harmful not only to Sethe but also for her remaining child Denver, the only hope for redemption pends on the community's help. Since her first days in 124 with Baby Suggs, Sethe's interactions with the polis have dictated a sum of her happiness, a theme further explored by Denver later on in the novel. With these many interactions between the individual and the community, Morrison has established a powerful relationship within *Beloved* between the individual and the community she is a part of.

The powerful love found within the African American community of Cincinnati can be first detected by evaluating the strong relationship Sethe's mother-in-law Baby Suggs has with this community. When Sethe first arrives at 124, she is welcomed into a "cheerful, buzzing house where Baby Suggs, holy, loved, cautioned, fed, chastised and soothed" (102). Using motherly verbs to describe her communal interactions, Morrison shows the reader that Baby Suggs is a central figure in the community, even a spiritual leader with the "holy" preceding her name. This love stems from Baby Suggs' decision that "because slave life had 'busted her legs, back, head, eyes, hands, kidneys, womb, and tongue,' she had nothing left to make a living with but her heart" (102). Directly quoting Baby Suggs' citation of all of the body parts that had been "busted" by slavery, Morrison highlights the fact that

her heart still remained, making her love unique in the fact that her heart is the soul survivor of many grueling years in slavery. Surpassing the longevity of even some of the strongest features in the human body—the legs, back, and head—Baby Suggs' heart deserves the superlative that comes before it repetitively throughout the book: "great." It is with this "great heart" that Baby Suggs channels the maternal love that she had felt for her eight children, seven of which she had never known, towards the community she becomes a part of "at once" (102). Abandoning the hope that the one child that she knew, Halle (Sethe's husband), is still alive, Baby Suggs adopts the community as her surrogate ninth child, whom she "caution[s], feed[s], chastise[s] and sooth[s]." Her house, 124, becomes a familial home for all that need comfort, creating a sort of holy aura around both the home and Baby Suggs herself.

Using this somewhat religious affiliate, Baby Suggs increases the level of nourishment provided to her "human family" from physical comfort to spiritual awareness during her quasi-religious sermons in the Clearing of 124. Taking her "great heart" to the Clearing, she guides the company that surrounds her onto a path of self-respect and self-love by ordering them to express themselves in ways never allowed in slavery. Children laugh, men dance, and women cry, finally culminating in a speech by Baby Suggs ordering them to love their flesh; "love it hard" (103). By teaching her community to love the very thing that enslaved them from birth—their flesh, Baby Suggs provides an opportunity for them to finally love others without the restraint slavery had forced upon them.

The passage above gives new meaning to Alford's interpretation of the polis in Greek tragedy, and its ability to share "the suffering of being human in a world

that was not made for the human being" (133). In *Beloved*, "the suffering of being human" can be translated as the suffering of being African American in a world that saw them as less human, akin to animals only good for labor and breeding. Sharing their traumatic memories of slavery, then teaching the community to release the grudge held against the skin color that brought them so much pain, Baby Suggs shows them that they are in fact human, even if the world that they are subjected to live in is not ready to accept them as so just yet. Recognizing this, the community is then ready to acknowledge human emotions that they might have quelled under slavery: love, joy and grief.

But with this emotional recognition, Morrison also allows for the community to recognize another sentiment that they might not have experienced in slavery—envy. This envy is triggered by an emotion that both the Greek polis and Morrison place at a high level of fault: pride. As shown above, both Medea and Oedipus kill dear love ones as prideful responses to rejection (Medea) or anger (Oedipus). Both of these characters are consequently ostracized from their communities, mirroring the African American community of *Beloved's* rejection of Sethe, Denver, and Baby Suggs after they detect a prideful demeanor coming from 124.

Like the authors of Greek tragedies and the Greek polis, the community in *Beloved* sees pride as one of the most fatal of human flaws, scrutinized as even worse of a crime than the infanticide Sethe performs to save her children from slavery. This argument can be ascertained by a close look at the order of events bringing about Sethe, Baby Suggs, and Denver's estrangement from the community that so loved any person residing in the communal dwelling of 124. One would

guess that the community would have shunned these women after Sethe's violent rampage that killed her daughter, but it is a makeshift feast, thrown by Baby Suggs and Sethe, that triggers the community's outrage.

After feeling overjoyed by the safe arrival of Sethe and her baby, Stamp Paid, in a labor of love that leaves him with "shredded clothes, bleeding hands, [and] welted face and neck," picks two buckets of blackberries to celebrate. From these two painstakingly picked buckets of blackberries, Baby Suggs decides to spread Stamp Paid's joy and love to the community by throwing a feast for "ninety people who ate so well, and laughed so much, it made them angry" (160-161). Disjointing the reader with this odd reaction to an otherwise enjoyable evening, a modern reader is reminded that this community is unlike our own. With this confusion, we enter into a realm of myth that is occupied by Greek tragedy, where an act of love is greeted with anger rather than a modern community's kind sentiments, a perplexing response similar to the dramatic overreactions of Medea and Oedipus.

Instead of a fond memory of a fun night spent with friends, "rocking with laughter, goodwill and food for ninety," the community begins to look upon the evening with anger: "[t]oo much, they thought;" even turning upon their beloved leader Baby Suggs and chastising her for her attempts to be anything but an ex-slave. In their effort to bring Baby Suggs, holy, down to a more human level, the community places their undertakings of suffering and hard work as slaves above her own: "Loaves and fishes were His powers-they did not belong to an ex-slave...who had not even escaped slavery-had, in fact, been *bought out* of it by a doting son and *driven* to the Ohio River in a wagon..." (163). Morrison's emphasis on the words

“bought out” and “driven” in this communal internal narrative begins the process of Baby Suggs and her family being rejected by the community. Reflecting upon the validity of Baby Suggs claim as an ex-slave, the community first questions her leadership position (“[l]oaves and fishes were His powers”), and then proceeds to question her inclusion within the community at all.

In the community’s eyes, Baby Suggs had never felt the pain of slavery to the extent that they had, and because of this, her spiritual healing is degraded. After all, how could she teach them to overcome their past obstacles of slavery, from the grueling working conditions to the treacherous escape to freedom, if she did not experience them herself? Demeaning her and the church-like 124 from their holy stature, the community is then able to judge the women of 124 for their “reckless generosity on display.” Like Paul D chastising Sethe for her overbearing childcare, the community becomes angry at the thought of these women loving their community in excess, retaliating by marking them with, in their opinion, the very worse of the deadly sins: pride.

This feast thus begins with the good intentions of distributing communal love to all, and ends in bitter resentment that spreads throughout the community: “It made them furious. They swallowed baking soda, the morning after, to calm the stomach violence caused by the bounty, the reckless generosity on display at 124.” Marking the ill turn of events from the evening before, Morrison turns the celebratory meal into a cause for illness, foreshadowing the violence that is to come from this “reckless generosity” on display through stomachs upset by anger. The scent of the warm meal lovingly prepared by Suggs is then replaced with the “scent

of disapproval” protruding from the town the morning after, so potent that it can be sensed miles away by Suggs gardening at 124 (162-63).

Because this communal disapproval arrives the day after the feast, even before Sethe has performed her crime of infanticide, Morrison shows a hierarchy of pride within the ranks of sins committed by the community in Cincinnati. This suggestion—that pride may be an even more horrific act than infanticide—is confirmed by the gathering of witnesses that observe Sethe’s arrest after killing her child. Rather than focusing on the atrocious act just committed, the crowd only condemns Sethe for the fact that she assumed a proud posture when being escorted to jail by the sheriff. Noticing physical attributes of pride, the community chooses to not comfort Sethe in her time of need, something that Morrison suggests they would have done if not for Sethe’s body language:

Was her head a bit too high? Her back a little too straight? Probably. Otherwise the singing would have begun at once, the moment she appeared in the doorway of the house on Bluestone Road. Some cape of sound would have quickly been wrapped around her, like arms to hold and steady her on the way. (179)

Recognizing the crowd’s intention to wrap their song around her, “like arms to hold and steady her on the way,” even after the murder of her child, then making them retract this thought after witnessing Sethe’s pride when being arrested, Morrison shows the reader that while infanticide for the intention of escaping a life of slavery can be forgiven, pride is one sin that cannot be pardoned in the community of *Beloved*. This communal forgiveness of Sethe’s murder contains associations with the ancient Greek polis acceptance of infant abandonment, once again establishing a connection between Morrison’s works and the community that produced so many tragic plays.

Establishing this hierarchy of sins, Morrison then attributes some of the blame for Beloved's murder to the community, thus maintaining the "human family" of the polis even after their estrangement from the women of 124. Standing in the garden the morning after the feast, Baby Suggs realizes that the community is angry with her because she has overstepped with the size of the party, a fact that she recognizes by smelling the disapproval wafting towards 124 from town. But, along with this "disapproving odor, way back behind it," Baby Suggs also smells another thing: "dark and coming. Something she couldn't get at because the other odor hid it" (163). In the paragraphs proceeding this foreshadowing, Morrison reveals to the reader that this "dark and coming" odor belongs to schoolteacher, who has tracked Sethe down at 124 and has come to take her and her children back to slavery.

Because their disapproving scent masked schoolteacher's arrival and prevents Sethe from escaping, one may argue that the community is as much at fault for Sethe's act of infanticide as Sethe is herself. This revelation helps relate the community found in *Beloved* with the Alford's "human family," who collectively share feelings and thoughts through communal experience. Instead of the love, joy, and grief that they experienced in the Clearing during Baby Suggs' sermons though, this community is now sentenced to feel the feelings of blame and regret over Beloved's death by Sethe, binding them to 124 even if they may reject the women living within years after the unspeakable crime.

Eighteen years after the African American community severed ties with the women of 124, this shared connection resurfaces at the end of the novel, allowing for Denver to repair the fragmented relationship between 124 and the community.

This opportunity hinges on Denver's ability to abandon the one emotion that began the separation between the two: pride. Starving from Beloved's usurping appetite that goes unchecked by her mother, Denver is forced to venture to the house of her former teacher Lady Jones to ask for help. Lady Jones helps her find a position with kind abolitionist siblings in town, and goes even further by urging the community to contribute to the ladies of 124 by donating food to the women in need. Gifts of food soon begin to show up in the yard of 124, first anonymously then with notes of paper attached accrediting the giver. With these donations, Denver begins to establish relationships within the community when she returns the dishes the food was provided in to their owners, along with a quiet "Thank you." By allowing the community to provide her and her family with food, Denver confirms the Greek notion that "there was nothing more desirable than to be pitied, for to be pitied is to be part of the 'human family'" (Alford 133). Denver is accepted into the community by checking her pride, distancing herself from the controlling gaze of her mother, and accepting help from others. This allows for them to focus on her more redeeming qualities—her youthful innocence and willingness to please—than the stigmatic pride of her mother that had haunted her for so long (290-300).

With this acceptance, Denver discovers her independence from her mother through her new job, and the continuation of her lessons with Lady Jones. In this development, we can see how a distance from the mother can be good for the child, as it allows for the community to help nourish (both literally and allegorically) her without past maternal control.

This sudden kindness from the community comes as a surprise to both Denver and the reader, but Morrison has a way of explaining the community's reason for such compassion when she states:

Maybe they were sorry for her. Or for Sethe. Maybe they were sorry for the years of their own disdain. Maybe they were simply nice people who could hold meanness toward each other for just so long and when trouble rode bareback among them, quickly, easily they did what they could to trip him up. (294)

Personifying “trouble” and attributing him with characteristics of schoolteacher, who road quickly towards 124 so many years ago on horseback, the community begins to atone for their sin of not alerting Sethe of his arrival by doing what they should have done all those years ago—“trip him up.” They also seem to want to repay Baby Suggs for the feast they had been so quick to condemn, through their donations of food to the ladies of 124. With this newfound bond established between Denver and the African American community, Morrison is then able to elevate the power of the polis in *Beloved* above that of a nourishing commodity. It assumes the role of an almost holy force that helps heal Sethe of past wounds inflicted by her regrettable maternal actions, spurred through feelings of both pride and love.

In making the community of *Beloved* exorcise the harmful Beloved from 124 and baptize Sethe anew, Morrison displays to the reader that the communal ties in the novel are more powerful than anything in the physical world they live in, perhaps even on the same level as heroes of Greek myths that occupy an heavenly realm. After hearing Denver's account of Beloved's forceful takeover of both Sethe's body and 124, the community decides to “rescue” Sethe from the terrible presence of Beloved, of which they had “properly blown up” into a “sin moving in on the

house, unleashed and sassy” (300-302). Even before they have set eyes on her, the community has elevated her terrible presence into one that must be stomped out—an “unleashed” monster that still retains some “sassy” attitude that one might find in a teenager her age. She is already a mythical monster—half adolescent woman, half uncontrolled animal—in their eyes and in their conversations, and for both Sethe’s and the whole community’s own wellbeing, she must be defeated.

Placing Beloved’s presence in the realm of myth, the 30 women prepare for the battle at 124 by arming themselves with an artillery of devices:

Some brought what they could and what they believed would work. Stuffed in apron pockets, strung around their necks...Others brought Christian faith-as shield and sword. Most brought a little of both. They had no idea what they would do once they got there. (303)

Like Hercules out to slay the three-headed giant Cacus, and Oedipus out to conquer the Sphinx, the women don their weaponries for combat—shields and swords of the Christian religion that may defeat this foe. Even their blind bravery—not knowing what to do once faced with Beloved—emulates a Greek hero, who almost always enters into battle against a monster without a plan. On their arrival at 124, their greatest fears are confirmed: Beloved is in fact a monster of mythical proportions, a “devil-child” who “had taken the shape of a pregnant woman” with “vines of hair twisted all over her head” and a “dazzling” smile (308). References to Medusa, with her head full of snakes, and the beautiful sirens of the *Odyssey*, fully transforms Beloved into a mythical monster the community must defeat. And by resorting back to the song they learned all those years ago from Baby Suggs, the community both casts out Beloved and saves Sethe through their baptism of music.

Hearing the ladies singing from inside 124, Sethe and Beloved come out onto the porch and witness, in Sethe's opinion, the rebirth of the famous Clearing ceremonies that Baby Suggs conducted during her cherished days in the community, before her unspeakable crime. Singing in unison, the women cast a spiritual spell over Sethe:

[I]t was as though the Clearing had come to her with all its heat and simmering leaves, where the voice of women searched for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words. Building voice upon voice they found it, and when they did it was a wave of sound wide enough to sound deep water and knock the pods off the chestnut trees. It broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash. (308)

Looking for the right "combination" of sounds to cast away Beloved, one is lead to assume that these women are searching for the healing powers experienced in the Clearing during Baby Suggs' communal sermons. They finally find this sound, one that, like the slave labor that busted the back of Baby Suggs, breaks the back of the hateful words they had whispered about Sethe's for all those years. Building upon this newfound communal affection, the collective strength of the community becomes a force "wide enough to sound deep water and knock the pods off the chestnut trees," godly in its natural movement and so deep that it reaches even the darkest depths of the oceans. Sethe, a lowly human being, is no match for this tidal wave of communal power, and thus succumbs to it, letting herself become "baptized in its wash." Here her sins are washed away, and like a helpless child, she trembles from the wave of song and redemption. By excusing Sethe's murderous actions targeted towards Mr. Bodwin through their explanation of a spiritual possession, Morrison also hints at Sethe's slow acceptance back into the community's ranks. Exorcising this spirit out of Sethe through their singing baptism, the community is

ready to forgive Sethe of her past pride, and perhaps accept Sethe's forgiveness of their abandonment so many years ago.

After the women in the Clearing run her off, the community addresses the task of what to do with Beloved's memory. By first choosing the form she is to be remembered as—either woman or monster—and then whether they are to pass on her story or not, Morrison grants the community the final authority in determining the legacy of Beloved's haunting of 124. The first task, determining her mythical or earthly quality, is dictated through the gossip in the town that Paul D overhears right after the confrontation in the Clearing: "Baby ghost came back evil and sent Sethe out to get the man who kept her from hanging. One point of agreement is: first they saw it then they didn't." Explaining Sethe's failed attack of Mr. Bodwin as a possession by the evil Beloved, it is clear that the community has cemented Beloved's role as a monster in their stories. She is no longer a woman or even the unleashed teenager that they had expected to find when preparing for battle at 124, but a full-fledged monster, a magical "it" that is capable of possession and sudden disappearance. The last sighting of her comes from a child that claims he spotted something behind 124: "cutting through the woods, a naked woman with fish for hair" (315). Fully acclimating the snake-like locks of Medusa, Beloved has evolved into a mythical creature along the ranks of Bigfoot or the lochness monster—a monster that only imaginative children claim to see, deep within the woods where no reliable person can confirm their stories. It is with this placement of Beloved within the likings of unreal figures that the community has the ultimate victory over her, a final swing of their sword to defeat the monster for good.

In the final chapter of *Beloved*, Morrison shows the reader what the community decides to do with Beloved's legacy once they have degraded her from an actual living thing to a monster only occupying myth. She becomes "disremembered and unaccounted for," and they "forget her like a bad dream," as "[i]t was not a story to pass on" (322). Retaining the inhuman "it" to describe her, the community chooses to fully dispose of her memory, not even passing along the folktales of her existence that they had formulated right after her defeat. She is too much like a haunting nightmare that they would rather forget, so she finds herself excluded from both their communal stories passed down from generation to generation and from their own memories. Along with rescuing both Sethe and Denver from the harmful affects of Sethe's love, the community within *Beloved* is also the ultimate deciders as to what history will be remembered, elevating them from mere polis status to that of spiritual leaders and influential authors.

Breaking the Body to Heal the Wound: Milkman's Journey to Shalimar

Like *Beloved*, the community found within *Song of Solomon* has the same aversion to pride, and the transformative powers proficient in humbling the prideful. It is through an enforced humility that *Song of Solomon's* protagonist Milkman Dead is, like Sethe and Denver in *Beloved*, able to join the "human family," with the community repairing the harmful side effects Ruth's love had on Milkman's adolescent personality. With this familiarity comes difference though, as the community that ultimately rescues Milkman is not found in *Song of Solomon's* initial setting of Detroit. Rather, it is found in Milkman's journey South in a quest for gold. By establishing this difference, we can then understand why the methods of

humbling the two characters are different, albeit both resulting in a transformation through their inclusion within each novel's polis.

As explained above, Ruth's Oedipal love for Milkman drives him away from her maternal influence, directly into the control of his father. With this paternal relationship, Milkman is separated from the African American community of Detroit, as his father's stigma as a man that rejects an inclusion within of the polis is also attached to him. This outsider status is shown in the scene where Milkman is thrown out of a popular bar because the owner has ill relations with his father (57). With Milkman's segregation from the community in place at the very beginning of the novel, Milkman, unlike Sethe and Denver in *Beloved*, has no possibility to be accepted into the polis of Detroit. This forces him to travel elsewhere to be transformed by communal love, far away from the materialistic culture Macon has established in Milkman's town and home life.

To start Milkman on this path to self-discovery, a powerful incentive must be presented to sever him with the comfortable life that he has established in Detroit, with multiple sexual relationships and monetary wealth. This incentive comes in the form of a promise for more wealth, as Milkman and his friend Guitar learn that his aunt Pilate might have buried a sack of gold in the wilderness of her old home in Danville, Pennsylvania. Describing Milkman as "energized" by this "hunger" for gold (219), Morrison shows how desperate he is for easy riches, traveling at first by plane then bus to the town, a journey that ultimately leaves him exhausted (226). This exhaustion is important, as it initially starts the wearing down of Milkman that the wilderness of Danville and subsequently the town Shalimar later take advantage

of to strip him of his pride. Building upon the exhaustion of the trip, Morrison then places Milkman in a struggle with the wilderness, a fight that ultimately devalues his material possessions, making him vulnerable to the town of Shalimar's intervention and his acceptance of the polis' all-important pity.

Hiking up a mountain to a cave that might house Pilates' gold, Milkman realizes that, for once in his life, his material possessions are of no use to him in accomplishing his concluding purpose. Inappropriately dressed in a city suit, but encouraged by the smell of money, Milkman falls in a river and becomes soaking wet only minutes into his search, ruining his expensive leather shoes and cigarettes. After stripping off layers of ripped clothing that have only become a hindrance to him, he finally arrives at the cave, only to be disappointed after a thorough search produces nothing. Things get worse when a footpath to the cave is discovered only after Milkman has made his difficult journey up to it on the untamed side of the mountain, making him so angry and disgusted that he gets tears in his eyes. He chucks his cigarette lighter into the woods, and continues back to the base of the mountain, this time on the footpath that he had initially overlooked (249-253).

Through this destruction of both his material goods and emotional hopes by the wilderness, Milkman slowly realizes that a self-reliant attitude may not be the best in accomplishing his goals, shown through his decision to follow the communal footpath back down the mountain rather than his own failed path up the mountain. This decision, along with the tears of anger at his inability to find the gold, marks the beginning of Milkman's journey to humility, a journey propelled even further through his interactions with the community of Shalimar, Virginia.

Hungry and exhausted from his unsuccessful romp in the woods, Milkman travels even further south to the town of Shalimar, Virginia, where Pilate lived before Danville, Pennsylvania. Within this town, Milkman's various interactions with the townspeople further strip him of his debilitating pride. From the moment of his arrival in Shalimar, Milkman seems to be at odds with the community, a fact that Trudier Harris notices and comments on in her book examining the communal interactions in *Song of Solomon*. Harris gives the reason for the community's pursuit of humbling Milkman when she states that they perceive Milkman's wealth as a danger and insult to themselves (99). This aversion to outsiders mirrors the ancient Greek polis' hostility to those that are not part of their own city-state. It is only through an initiation by the men of Shalimar that Milkman is able to join ranks within the polis and gain acceptance into their "human family."

Milkman's slow road to acceptance begins with Shalimar's adolescent males' attack on his masculinity, one of his primary sources of pride. To do so, they target the most masculine of physical traits—his endowment below the belt:

"Maybe the pricks [of Northern men] is different" The first man spoke again.
"Reckon?" asked the second man.
"So I hear tell," said the first man.
"How different?" asked the second man.
"Wee little," said the first man. "Wee, wee little." (267)

Channeling the quick temper of Oedipus, who kills a stranger after a short altercation while traveling, this verbal sparring quickly turns into a physical battle, as knives are drawn and Milkman and the men engage in a fight. This conflict is shortly broken up by the older men in the community, leaving Milkman with a cut on his face and in "his pretty beige suit" (268). Mirroring the emotions brought about by

his search for Pilate's cave in the woods around Danville, this fight leaves Milkman angry and tired, although it does little in the effort to humble him. To accomplish this task, the older gentlemen of Shalimar must intervene, taking advantage of his worn out state to finally decrease the amount of personal pride he might have.

While tiring, the fight does not produce a significant change in Milkman's attitude, leaving him "frozen with anger" (269) at everyone in the town. Morrison confirms this failure when she states:

[N]ow that the young men had had their chance, with unsatisfactory results, the older men would take over. Their style, of course, would be different. No name-calling toilet contest for them...They would test him, match and beat him, probably, on some other ground. (269)

Although vague as to what the desired "results" of the town are, Morrison makes it clear that the immaturity of the younger men's "toilet contest" will not help advance Milkman into a person susceptible to humility and change—he needs real men to make him a man, to "test," "match," and "beat him" into submission to the polis. The "other ground" needed to beat him is again found in the wilderness, away from any materialistic wants or petty grudges in town, and the test is revealed to be a hunting trip. Taking advantage of Milkman's fatigue and his injured pride brought about by the fight, an older man, Omar, invites him on the trip. Sensing a way to gain back some masculinity he lost in the fight, Milkman accepts, even though "he had never handled a firearm in his life" (270). Omar's tactic of asking Milkman when he is the most vulnerable foreshadows the mental game the older men use to "test," "match," and "beat" him, a different style than the younger men but capable of producing much more satisfactory results.

This method—targeting Milkman’s mind rather than his physical body—is more calculated than a quick fight but will finally strip Milkman of the pride he brought to the South, allowing for him to be accepted into Shalimar’s “human family.” And although this mental game may be different from Sethe’s holy baptism in *Beloved*, Morrison still places the two humblers—the singing women in *Beloved* and the hunting men in *Song of Solomon*—in highly powerful positions. This superiority is demonstrated by Morrison’s choice of associating of the women with Greek heroes and bestowing the men with god-like names, an observation made by Catherine Carr Lee (55). By establishing these two groups as important figures within the communities they are a part of, Morrison shows the reader that it is not a menial task for one to be accepted into a communal polis—it takes authority, and once more, a type of ritual that strips them of their pride. For Sethe, this came in the form of her quasi-baptism; for Denver, the acceptance of the community’s nourishing donations. In *Song of Solomon*, Milkman’s ritual comes in the form of a hunting trip, where he is stripped of any former reminders of his past life in Detroit.

Establishing the older men’s superiority over Milkman, Morrison has these god-like figures make quick work of eradicating him of his pride. She displays their power early on by exhibiting the ease of which they finally separate Milkman from his material possessions the wilderness of Danville had targeted to destroy. Meeting the men at King Walker’s station, King, channeling the authority given by his name, directly orders for Milkman to be outfitted appropriately for the hunt (271). Fully abandoning his nice suit and leather shoes, Milkman is dressed in army fatigues and mud-caked brogans by the older men. This strip detaches him from the immature

Milkman, a product of Ruth's Oedipal maternal love, that arrived in Shalimar earlier before flaunting his expensive clothing and car with an arrogance that lead to his first altercation with the younger men in town.

After the older men deprive Milkman of the small amount of authority he had through his materialistic possessions, they continue on their task to "test," "match," and "beat" (269) him by leading an exhaustive hunt through the woods, circling for hours with no end in sight. Milkman becomes very tired and clumsy, struggling to keep up with the pack of men, finally falling behind and losing them completely when he decides to "surrender" to his fatigue and sit and rest (274-75). This act of submission, along with his accepting acknowledgment of the men's eventual mockery ("let them laugh if they wanted to"), marks a change in Milkman's prideful demeanor, as he finally accepts defeat and the humbling ridicule of others. With this recognition of failure, Milkman is able to inwardly reflect upon the decisions that have lead to him to this moment—lost in a rural wood, dressed in lowly clothes and reliant on the goodwill of others to rescue him from the wilderness.

Sitting in the woods, darkness newly fallen, Milkman begins to "wonder what he was doing sitting in the middle of a wood in Blue Ridge country" (275), a pondering that is quickly answered when he realizes that it was both his "ignorance" and "vanity" (276) that has lead him there. Comprehending this, he begins to reflect upon other parts of his life that have been filled with both ignorance and vanity, becoming overwhelmed by the guilt of his past. He first recognizes his sense of entitlement and selfishness that were imparted upon him through Ruth's spoiling when he thinks: "[n]ow it seemed to him that he was always

saying or thinking that he didn't deserve some bad luck, or some bad treatment from others." With this recognition, he then becomes ashamed of his treatment of Hagar, "whom he'd thrown away like a wad of chewing gum after the flavor was gone," and his expectance to always be "given what he wanted" (276-77). Like Oedipus' recognition of the pride that brought about his father's murder, Milkman's reflection on his past deeds leads to his regret of them in the present moment. With this acknowledgment, along with his final acceptance that his maternal goods "would be of no help out [in the wood]," Milkman is finally rid of the unfavorable characteristics his mother's love fostered. Stripped of the identity he brought from Detroit, a new and humble Milkman can accept the pity of the polis and a role within Shalimar's "human family."

Milkman's acceptance into this new family is shown to be successful after the older men find him in the wilderness alone. Milkman helps them capture and kill a wild bobcat, an action that relates Milkman to the men on a masculine level. The men then relentlessly ridicule Milkman when he explains the seemingly random shots he fired earlier as a result of him tripping over his gun, bonding them further through actions that invoke brotherly-affection. Rather than meeting these teases with the defiance and dispute of his former proud self, Milkman admits that he was "scared to death," alone in the wilderness, even encouraging their taunts through his repetition of this humbling fact and laughing: "laughing too hard, loud, and long" (280). Through his willingness to become the "butt" of their "good-humored humor," Milkman shows the reader that he has finally become humble and devoid of the pride he possessed upon first entering the community of Shalimar. It is with this

humility that Milkman is finally accepted into the “human family” of Shalimar, an action confirmed through Milkman’s ceremonial washing after the hunt.

Like Sethe being “baptized” of her former self through the song of the community in *Beloved*, Milkman is also washed clean of his pride through his encounter with Shalimar’s quasi-prostitute Sweet after the hunt. Recommended by the older men as a place to rest after they return to King Walker’s station, Milkman immediately asks for a bath upon meeting Sweet at her home. This request separates Milkman from Sethe in the fact that he seems to recognize his impurity, while Sethe’s baptism begins with her unknowing. Commencing his bath, Morrison evokes a semblance of the holy women washing Jesus’ body after his crucifixion when she describes Sweet washing his “sore feet, his cut back, his neck, his thighs, and the palms of his hands” (285). Through a subconscious reference to Jesus’ torn back and the nails driven through his palms during crucifixion, Morrison, like Sethe’s baptism, uses religious imagery to restore Milkman. Following his lovemaking with Sweet, Milkman’s final transformation is complete when he returns her favor and bathes her, showing the reader that he is far removed from the former Milkman that abused the love of Hagar. This is not the selfish boy that discarded his past lovers like used toys, rather the reader finally is able to witness Milkman’s transformation into a real man, one that came about through his separation from his past toxic influences in Detroit and the communal efforts of the polis of Shalimar.

Conclusion

Milkman’s ability to grow, brought about by a division between him and Ruth, is reminiscent of Denver’s developed sense of maturity after leaving her own

mother's gaze in *Beloved*. With this familiarity, we can see a commonality unfold within these two books, developing a larger discussion concerning the role of both the mother and the community in childrearing. Within *Beloved* and *Song of Solomon*, we are presented with three versions of harmful motherhood, the first being a controlling maternal presence that ultimately stunts the child's (Denver and Milkman) adolescent maturity. The second is an example of motherhood that is physically harmful to the child (*Beloved*), with the third being an example of the harmful effects this style of childrearing can have on the mother herself (Sethe). Wrought with tragic Greek undertones, these relationships between mother and child function as those communal plays of the past, giving modern readers a cautionary warning as to the damaging effects overbearing parenting can have on both the child and the mother.

But with these depictions of a maternal love manifested in harmful actions, Morrison brings redemption to those characters that abandon their personal pride and accept the pity of the polis. With this acceptance comes an initiation into the "human family"—a communal structure that possesses healing powers of wounds past inflicted through the guise of maternal love. Once again we draw upon ancient Greek ideas of community and polis, and its importance in times of conflict. With this string of connections between Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, *Beloved*, Greek tragedy and the polis, a new idea of communal childrearing is indorsed, one that creates separation between the mother and her child, allowing for that said child to flourish independently with support and love from the larger human family.

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