Good example of the correlation between motherhood and the sexual repression of y...

Family, Mother

Toni Morrison’s Sula and Jamaica Kincaid’s “ Girl” are two texts that explore the African-American woman’s quest for sexual and social autonomy, in that both texts contend that the African-American woman’s construction of a sexual identity is primarily shaped by the women who raise her, as well as societal expectations and traditions. The process by which an African-American mother or mother figure teaches a young African-American female about sexuality is often laden with religious indoctrination, accusations of licentiousness, personal anecdotes about male duplicitousness, and fearful warnings about chastity. Both texts illustrate how the enforced standards and multiple instructions meant to transition a young African-American woman into “ womanhood” are actually hindering that transition. The result is that, while many young African-American women conform to what is expected of them, the majority of them rebel and choose to experience sexual and social autonomy the hard way, through experience.

Sula, in her quest for autonomy, unwittingly becomes the model for the “ modern black woman” which is something her community rejects. For Sula’s community, the concept or actuality of a “ modern black woman” disrupts the community’s core value system. Sula is considered the pariah of her community because she rejects its traditional gender roles. Similarly, “ Girl” is told from the point of view of the daughter, who reservedly listens to her mother’s rants about gender roles and how women are perceived if they do not fit the Caribbean society’s definition of a marriageable woman. The daughter’s weak protests to her mother’s set of instructions suggest that the daughter, like Sula, rejects the prescribed role of a woman. Contrastingly, Sula’s friend Nel, sees the value in what her mother and grandmother have

taught her about gender roles, embracing the rules as an outline for survival. Opting to forego her individuality, Nel succumbs to the idea that ‘ women should stay in their place, birth children, and please their husbands. Nel’s mentality is “ if you can’t beat em, join em.” What she views as a strength is also the source of her weakness.

Nel and Sula have completely different personalities: Nel is modest and quiet while Sula is spontaneous and self-assured. Both want to function in society and to be desired by a man; however, they take divergent paths as to how to deal with wanting protection and companionship from a man. Sula chooses to experience life by traveling outside of her small community, pursuing an education, and dating multiple men. She realizes that she is living in a racist and sexist world, so she does not temper her actions or her experiences; she emboldens them. The women of the Bottom are jealous and fearful of Sula because she is a living condemnation of their unhappy lives of compliance. In contrast to Sula, Nel marries and settles into the traditional roles of wife and mother. Her once carefree spirit, which mirrored Sula’s spirit, buckled under the reproachful gaze of the women in the Bottom. Nel's individualism further disappears when she marries Jude, making his dreams and her mother’s dreams hers: marriage, motherhood, and community status. When Jude leaves her, Nel is left with no identity and regrets her sacrifice and weakness. Nel is left with " no thighs and no heart just her brain raveling away” (Morrison 110-111). A woman’s concept of her sexuality depends on how men respond to her “ womaness.”

Nel, a once vivacious and alluring young woman, curbed her desire to explore life to commit herself to Jude. She reserved her sexuality for him. In

turn, Jude was a good husband at first: provider, protector, friend, and confidant until he became dissatisfied with Nel and cheated on her with Sula. Nel’s confusion to Jude’s rejection is voiced in her plea to Jude for him not to leave her: “ But Jude,' she would say, 'you knew me. All those days and years, Jude, you knew me. My ways and my hands and how my stomach folded and how we tried to get Mickey to nurse and how about that time when the landlord saidbut you saidand I cried, Jude. You knew me and had listened to the things I said in the night, and heard me in the bathroom and laughed at my raggedy girdle and I laughed too because I knew you too, Jude. So how could you leave me when you knew me?” (Morrison). Nel was trying to tell Jude that even though she had physically changed, the essence of the passion she had given him was still there. It was in the hands that cooked for him and in the way she rubbed his back when he was laden with life’s pressures; it was in the children she had birthed for him; it was also in the determination to go through life’s struggles with him. Nel had defined herself and her physical desires through Jude’s concept of sexuality instead of developing one through experience as Sula did. Although Nel was distraught and confused that Jude rejected her “ womaness” for another’s woman’s “ sex,” she exhibited that strength to move on that the mother in “ Girl” had alluded to. Instead, Nel maintained her composure, the true measure of a woman’s ability to control her sexuality, and raised her children without the man she had given her “ womaness” to.

In “ Girl” the mother’s advice to her daughter on how to use her “ womaness” to her advantage is based on the idea that a woman is supposed to use her sexuality to control a man; once a man succumbs to a woman’s

sexuality, he proposes marriage or becomes dominating in order to “ control” the woman’s sexual activity. The mother says to her daughter, “ this is how to bully a man; this is how a man bullies you; this is how to love a man; and if this doesn't work there are other ways, and if they don't work don't feel too bad about giving up” (Kincaid). This agreement to “ bully” each other refers to the nature of doing things for each other not out of love but out of convenience and expected reciprocation. This agreement often complicates the relationship between a man and a woman, in that the woman often times sacrifices more of herself than the man does to maintain the appearance that the man is wholly satisfied with just her. The mother in “ Girl” also teaches her daughter how to deal with a man’s rejection of her sexuality by telling her that it is okay to “ move on” with her life—however, she is not to “ move on” until the man has completely used her up. This usury of a women’s essence is accepted by women and enforced by men, thus robbing women of the right to control their sexuality and their “ hearts.”

The daughter in “ Girl” is not characterized by Kincaid on purpose. The reader does not know the daughter’s name, age, hobbies, or aspirations--anything about her. Kincaid does this to show the reader that this faceless and nameless girl represents all girls. There is a thin line between this girl becoming Sula or Nel. The only thing the reader can assume about the girl is her age, which can be inferred from the “ conversation,” rather listening session the girl is having with her mother. She seems to be between the ages 12-14--around the time most mothers’ give “ the talk” to their daughters about boys--because the mother admonishes her on the ways she

plays marbles. The reader can also assume that the daughter is being raised by a strict Caribbean mother, who worries about what others in the community might say or think about her daughter.

While the daughter is submissive, respectful, and domestic, she interjects twice throughout her mother's rant. The daughter's silence, defensive comment about not singing benna on Sunday, and question about her mother's bread metaphor for sexuality all suggest that she is confused by her mother's " advice." In a way, the girl is a silent Sula in that, she is careful not to disrupt the dynamics of her how she is expected to behave while in her household and in her community. She is just biding her time, until she can leave and experience the world of men on her own accord.

How Sula and Nel approach relationships with men, and how the daughter in " Girl" will most likely approach a relationship with a man, is based on their relationships with their mothers. Society often alludes that the way a woman views a man is based on her relationship with her father. However, I disagree. How a woman views male-female relationships is based on what she was or was not taught by her mother. In " Girl," the mother approaches teaching the girl about " life" by using scare tactics and guilt. Even though the daughter does not seem to even be interested in boys, the mother finds it necessary to lecture her daughter about maintaining a respectable image, concealing and guarding her sexuality. The mother believes that a woman's reputation will cause her downfall or uplift her in the community. She admonishes her daughter for the way " she walks," " how she plays marbles," and " how she appears to other people." During her lecture, the mother bullies and belittles her daughter, calling her a " slut," reminding her

how to iron clothes, sweep the floor, set the table, and just in case she gets pregnant: “ this is how you make a good medicine to throw away a child before it even becomes a child” (Kincaid 306-307). The mother is not interested in lovingly nurturing her daughter into womanhood; the mother orders the daughter into womanhood, while stifling the essence of her womanhood: her perception of her sexuality and her role in society.

Sula reveals a similar construction of motherhood. “ Responding to the interrelationship between gender, class and race, Morrison creates situations which concentrate on the ways in which black women attempt to structure their own social orders but who are limited by their class and race identities” (Hunt 459). Sula and Nel, forge a friendship based on their loneliness and need for the nurturing closeness of a loving mother-daughter relationship. Sula is raised by her mother Hannah and her grandmother Eva. The community regards both women as “ loose” but tolerate them because they both are kind and generous. While Hannah nor Eva pressure Sula about how to “ act like a lady,” they do her a dis-service by not having a conversation with her about how to transition to womanhood. Conversely, Nel’s mother and grandmother constantly reiterate what is expected of Nel, pressuring her to marry a man she does not love. This act removes any sexual curiosity that Nel may have been experiencing, in that as a wife she immediately is expected to attend to her husband’s sexual needs.

Sula’s relationship with her grandmother, Eva Peace, is fragmented and distant because Eva is preoccupied with the motley of people living in her house. Eva rules her house with her will. If there is something that disturbs her sense of order, she gets rid of it. She saves her son’s life only to kill him

later, when she feels he has become a threat to himself and society. She also risks her own life in an attempt to save her daughter Hannah from burning to death. She even raises Sula after her mother's death and supports Sula through her 10 year absence, but never once does Eva tell Sula how to survive or to love. She expects Sula to know, maybe even to emulate her actions. The only time Eva shows any emotion about Sula's decisions is when Sula decides to put Eva in a nursing home. By this time it is too late for Eva. Sula's mother, Hannah, does not teach Sula about womanhood and sexuality because she is too busy with her own. After Sula's father died, Hannah became promiscuous, suggesting that Hannah felt stifled and controlled in her marriage. Hannah loves men, and involves herself in multiple, brief love affairs. Her lovers, some married some not, use Hannah to distance themselves from their scornful and repressive wives. Hannah does not care that she is being used because the usury is mutual. Sula sees her mother's interactions with men and adopts her mother's mentality about them as she pursues her own relationships with men.

Sula is a combination of Hannah and Eva in that she loves men and she is emotionless, calm and sure about her decisions and actions. Just as sure as Eva is about taking the life of her son, never coming downstairs, and jumping out a 3 story window to save her daughter Hannah, Sula is just as calm about her affairs with men, particularly with Nel's husband Jude, and about putting Eva in a nursing home. Sula cannot love because she is damaged by something she overheard her mother say. Sula over hears Hannah say one day that " she loves Sula but she does not like her" (Morrison 57). To a child there is no distinction. This is most likely the moment Sula shut down all of

her emotions, which may explain why she did not react to help her mother when she caught on fire, and just as she watched her mother burn, she watched Eva struggle as she jumped out of the window to try to put the flames out. It seems like early on Sula decided to love herself if no one else would.

Nel was raised by her mother Helene, who was raised by her grandmother Cecil. Cecile is strict and religious. She never talked to Helen about love, marriage, and sexuality. She just arranges Helene's marriage to Wiley Wright. Cecil did not want Helene to follow in the footsteps of her mother and become a prostitute. So Cecil raised Helene with an iron fist. This fist beat down any sense of desire or individuality in Helene. In turn, when Helene has a daughter, Nel, she attempts to raise her the same way she was raised, through nagging, religion, and pressure. Helene wants Nel to become just like her, so she discourages her relationship with Sula and delights in her decision to marry Jude, a “ respectable” man. Nel’s mother is similar to the mother in Kincaid’s “ Girl,” just less abrasive. Helene takes the passive-aggressive parenting approach. When Nel acquiesces to her mother and grandmother’s will, she silently agrees to carry on the tradition of female sexual repression.

The heroine and champion for women of all ethnicities is Sula (Robertson 174). Sula valued friendship over everything she was taught and over every man she loved (Robertson 174). She never surrendered to the expectations of her community, nor did she judge Nel for severing their friendship over a man; as Morrison writes of her, " She was completely free of ambition, with no affection for money, property or things, no greed, no desire to command

attention or compliments — no ego" (Robertson 174). In this sense, the daughter in Kincaid’s Girl could learn a lot from Sula: live your life according to your standards and not the standards of others, which is what Nel realized 25 years after Sula had died. What readers learn from both texts is the importance of mothers fostering open, nurturing, and reciprocal mother-daughter relationship. If the mother-daughter component is damaged, the daughter does not have a “ safe zone” she can turn to as she deals with the fluctuations of love and life. Mother’s teach their daughters out of fear, whereas they teach their son’s out of admiration and understanding. Society enforces two sets of rules to how men and women are supposed to act, and when mothers endorse these stereotypes, they widen the possibility for their daughters to be mistreated by men and society.

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