

Abort the
matriarchy?: failed
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Abortion is often a taboo subject that does not appear in American Literature. Yet, Toni Morrison and William Faulkner use abortion in their works to critique women's agency in motherhood in a patriarchal system. William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* takes away the power of the patriarchy by denying the impregnated Dewey Dell agency over her current state. While Toni Morrison does not completely disarm the patriarchy in *Paradise* as Faulkner does, she proves through characters, such as Arnette, that abortion becomes a bargaining tool in an assertive patriarchal system that no longer serves as the protector of women but the abuser. Through the use of their maternal characters and abortion, Faulkner and Morrison condemn the patriarchy, the power of motherhood, and women's agency over their own bodies in patriarchal systems.

In William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, Addie Bundren is a woman frustrated with her sexuality and forced into maternity by her patriarchal counterpart. Addie says that she did not even want the children but, "when [she] knew that [she] had Cash, [she] knew that living was terrible and that this was the answer to it" (Faulkner 171). The children become a "violation of her aloneness", a curse put upon her by Anse. The only child in which she finds solace is Cash, but other than him, Anse denies her positive identity as a mother during her life. Addie might have escaped the patriarchal system in her death, but Dewey Dell, a child in which Addie claims is solely Anse's, perishes within it. Unfortunately for the Bundren women, babies essentially represent sadness, an obligation, and even death to the sense of one's self. Addie felt this way about her children, and Dewey Dell seems to realize this, too, as she searches for a cure for her condition. Dewey Dell seems to know

the expectations the patriarchy has of her, but like Addie, she does not truly wish to enact on them. Like Addie, her sense of self has been stripped away, and she has been conditioned to thinking of herself as little more than a sexual object or house servant. Dewey Dell is always described in primal, even animalistic terms. “ Squatting, Dewey Dell’s wet dress shapes for the dead eyes of three blind men those mammalian ludicrosities which are the horizons and the valleys of earth”(Faulkner 164). This description depicts the way the men in the Bundren patriarchy, Anse in particular, look at women as not beautiful or feminine but just birthing vessels.

Stripped of agency, Dewey Dell is viewed only as an object, no longer even a person. She is abused by her father and brother’s lack of acceptance of her sexuality and thus condemned by it. Within her family of men, Dewey Dell feels shame and embarrassment not only in her impregnated state but in her sexuality, itself. The patriarchy of her own family seems to take advantage of her sex, but so does the father of her baby. After taking advantage of Dewey Dell, Lefe gives her ten dollars to get an abortion and abandons her. She is left feeling deceived, pregnant, and hesitant of the power of men. In the middle of the novel, Dewey Dell talks about a dream, which seems to represent her feelings about sex with Lefe. She reflects on her remembrance of this dream: “ When I used to sleep with Vardaman I had a nightmare once I thought I was awake but I couldn’t see and couldn’t feel the bed under me and I couldn’t think what I was I couldn’t think of my name I couldn’t even think I am a girl... Vardaman asleep and all of them back under me again and going on like a piece of cool silk dragging across my naked legs”

(Faulkner 121). These feelings of loss of control are a direct representation of

how she felt in the field with Lefe. It is evident that Dewey Dell's thoughts have become consumed by her sexuality and newfound fear of men. This fear is justifiable as she seeks abortion, and the "pharmacist" claims to have medication for her, but all he does is rape her. She attempts to abort three separate times but patriarchal figures thwart her each attempt. The final patriarchal stroke of violence against Dewey Dell occurs when Anse takes away the abortion money; thus, stripping her of all agency forcing her into indentured servitude in the Bundren patriarchy.

In Morrison's *Paradise*, almost every family in Ruby is controlled by a powerful father figure possessing hegemonic authority, like Anse in *As I Lay Dying*. Rather than serving as the protector of women, men become their abusers. Morrison shows that men who feel insecure about their status of manhood in the patriarchal system will act violently to regain possession of masculine strength and power. Take, for example, K. D.'s abuse of Arnette who suffered his blows and became pregnant with his child. When representatives of the town meet to discuss the assault on Arnette, it is a group of men, including K. D., who try to determine the appropriate course of action. When the men come to a conclusion, Arnette's father is asked if his daughter will agree to the terms. He says "I'm her father. I'll arrange her mind" (Morrison 61). Because Arnette is left out of the meeting, this scene makes clear the patriarchal system of Ruby, in which women are denied a voice, remaining possessions of the men. Arnette attempts the miscarriage in order to try to escape the patriarchal hold that K. D. has on her, but the patriarchy of the Convent fails her.

When Connie denies her an abortion, Arnette responds by “ bash[ing] the out of [her baby]” (Morrison 250). Like Dewey Dell, Arnette associates motherhood with grief, pain, and suffering at the hands of the patriarchy. She abandons her role as a maternal figure, “ revolted by the work of her womb,” and instead tries to go to college to escape, but K. D.’s grasp is too tight on her (Morrison 249). Although submission provides her safety, the emptiness of life consumes Arnette and is met with little resistance. At her wedding, Arnette reflects that her fiancé, K. D., is “ all she knew about her self- which is to say everything she knew of her body was connected to him (Morrison 148)”. Arnette’s identity has been stripped away and replaced by the ideals in which the patriarchy wished to instill in their women folk.

Through characters such as Dewey Dell and Arnette, Faulkner and Morrison condemn the patriarchy at the hands of a patriarchal system. Both women fail to obtain agency in maternity or even abortion, resulting in their submission to the patriarchal systems in which they are indentured to. Morrison constructs a patriarchal system that demonstrates its flaws, promoting womanist ideals as Faulkner seems to construct his system in an attempt to say that women will always be subject to the patriarchy. Within the patriarchal systems of *As I Lay Dying* and *Paradise*, abortion can either become an escape or a condemnation to the system in which strips them of their agency and identity.

Works

Cited Faulkner, William. *As I Lay Dying*. Vintage International, 2005.

Morrison, Toni. *Paradise*. Vintage International, 2014.

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