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AUTHOR: Heather Moulton

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(R)evolution:
The Emergence of the African American Female Hero
By,
Heather Lynne Moulton
California State University San Marcos
Literature and Writing
Dedication
This document is lovingly dedicated to
Nancy Rae Bracken,
my hero.
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Introduction
Demanding, Defining, Discovering a Hero

"For, as I take it, Universal History, the history of what man has accomplished in this world, is at bottom the History of the Great Men who have worked here."

Thomas Carlyle, On Heroes, Hero-Worship, & the Heroic in History, 1840.

I demand a hero. Where can I find her? I look in magazines, and immediately notice I am not a tall, long-haired blonde who measures "thirty-six, twenty-four, thirty-six." I turn to movies where I repeatedly see the female body exploited and female characters reduced to trite, stereotypical "damsel in distress" roles. I search for my model on television, only to discover that while I laugh at the antics on my favorite sitcom, or anxiously await the latest installment in reality TV, I know "those people" in no way reflect me or my life. At last I turn to my bookshelf. Great heroes like Odysseus, tragic heroes like Hamlet, and comic heroes like Huck Finn all exist on my

1 Carlyle leaves little room for women as creators of, or even participants in, history when he further states, "They were the leaders of men, these great ones; the modelers, patterns, and in a wide sense, creators, of whatsoever the general mass of men contrived to do or to attain; all things that we see standing accomplished in the world are properly the outer material result, the practical realisation and embodiment, of Thoughts that dwelt in Great Men sent into the world: the soul of the whole world's history, it may justly be considered, were the history of these" (3).
bookshelf. I also encounter Thomas Carlyle’s “Great Men” who have assisted in forming a history that excludes female participants: Aristotle, Socrates, Moses, Jesus, Dante, Milton, DesCartes, Washington, Jefferson, Einstein, etc., to name only a few.\(^2\) But where am I? Where is my model of a hero? How can I be a hero if I don’t know what she looks like, how she behaves, or from whence she came? I dig deeper and perceive my model: angered by her husband’s betrayal, she throws her children from a rooftop; she has snakes in her hair and one glance turns men to stone; after she is raped, her rapists cut out her tongue and cut off her hands so she remains silent in her trauma; she refuses to follow the Word of a “superior” male entity, thereby causing the downfall of all humanity; later, she gives birth to a male savior, the only one who can save humanity; she is a virgin; she is a whore; she is insane; she is dead.\(^3\)

\(^2\) I have included in this truncated list only “great men” associated with Western ideals. Otto Rank, a disciple of Freud who eventually forged his own theories, includes in his register of “Universal Heroes,” the Hindu hero Karna, Norse legend Siegfried, and the Buddha (14-63).

\(^3\) Much of this introduction is taken from an original paper, written for Dr. Susie Lan Cassel, May 30, 2001. This ambiguous list refers to various images of women throughout history, including images found in classic literature, folklore, and Biblical literature. The specific sources in order:

a. Euripides, Medea. Toward the end of the play, Medea, betrayed by her husband Jason, resolves to murder her children. Her words, translated from the Greek (courtesy of http://classics.mit.edu/Euripides/medea.html):

My friends, I am resolved upon the deed; at once will I slay my children and then leave this land, without delaying long enough to hand them over to some more savage hand to
I am a white American woman, considered “second in command” in the hierarchy of dominant culture, preceded only by white men, and eventually followed down the hierarchical ladder by African American men and African American women. If I, as a white woman, cannot relate to the aforementioned “heroic” models, all of whom were “created” by (for) the dominant culture, to what model do African American women aspire?

butcher. Needs must they die in any case; and since they must, I will slay them-I, the mother that bore them. O heart of mine, steel thyself! Why do I hesitate to do the awful deed that must be done? Come, take the sword, thou wretched hand of mine! Take it, and advance to the post whence starts thy life of sorrow! Away with cowardice! Give not one thought to thy babes, how dear they are or how thou art their mother. This one brief day forget thy children dear, and after that lament; for though thou wilt slay them yet they were thy darlings still, and I am a lady of sorrows.

b. The Medusa. From Greek mythology: Medusa was one of three Gorgon sisters. As punishment for her beauty, Aphrodite turned her hair to snakes. Men cannot look upon her face without turning to stone.

c. Though originally from Ovid’s Metamorphosis, the raped and mutilated woman I had in mind was Lavinia from Shakespeare’s Titus Andronicus. In Act II, Scene iv, Demetrius and Chiron enter with Lavinia. Demetrius mocks Lavinia in her condition (a condition which they have forced upon her): “So now go tell, and if thy tongue can speak,/ Who ’twas that cut they tongue and ravish’d thee.” Chiron adds, “Write down thy mind, betray thy meaning so,/ And if thy stumps will let thee play the scribe.” In further painful mockery, Demetrius leaves Lavinia with these words: “She hath no tongue to call, nor hands to wash,/ And so let’s leave her to her silent walks.”

d. From Genesis, Eve disobeys the Word of God and eats of the Forbidden Fruit from the Tree of Knowledge. She has often been blamed for humanity’s loss of innocence.

e. From the New Testament, through Immaculate Conception, Mary gives birth to the son of God, Jesus. He is the Savior sent to redeem humanity from Eve’s mistake.

f. The Virgin/Whore trope. In literature, women are classically viewed in two extremes: as Virgins (like Mother Mary) or Whores (like Mary Magdalene).

g. The Insane/Dead trope. In much nineteenth century feminist fiction, the only options for women were death or insanity. I will further expand on this issue in Chapter 1.

4 I recognize the problems of limiting my “hierarchical ladder” to two ethic groups; however, I have restricted my argument to whites and African Americans in order to keep this document a manageable length. I in no way mean to disparage the contributions of writers from other ethnic groups.
I examine the idea of a female hero in twentieth-century African American literature written by women. Through varying definitions of what constitutes a hero, from the Homeric model to the *Oxford English Dictionary* to the turn-of-the-century (nineteenth to twentieth) introduction of a heroine, the traditional idea of an American hero is embodied in the white male; in the late 1800’s and early 1900’s, in reaction to their male counterparts, white women attempted to, in a successfully tragic manner, incorporate a female hero (or heroine). African American women also began writing in the 1800’s, in the form of slave narratives like *The History of Mary Prince* and *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. These texts, published in 1831 and 1861 respectively, establish the ability and integrity of former slave women to participate in the somewhat exclusive field of writing. Despite the marginal space in which women could participate in the field, the African American female hero evolves in numerous ways: as an early heroine, she represents a reaction against and springboard from the traditional white male hero.

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5 Due to their autobiographical nature (versus the fiction texts I plan to explore), these narratives will not be a focal point in my argument.
and the nineteenth century white heroine. Later, she returns to African roots and rises as a mother hero; finally she abandons her white mentors, fully embraces her African heritage and manifests herself as a conjure woman evincing an original space unconnected to Western culture.  

**Defining Heroes**

To fully explore the role of a hero in literature, I must first examine the definition of the term. *The Oxford English Dictionary* traces the definition to the Homeric model which consists of "A name given (as in Homer) to men of superhuman strength, courage, or ability, favoured by the gods." Alternative definitions provided by the OED include, "A man distinguished by extraordinary valour and martial achievements; one who does brave or noble deeds; an illustrious warrior" and "A man who exhibits extraordinary bravery,

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6 My interpretation, examination, and reading of heroes stem exclusively from the Western tradition. The American Literary tradition is influenced by the European literary canon – meaning the majority of the authors were white males. I argue that African American female heroes evolve out of and away from the Anglo-European tradition, but acknowledge that they are not (cannot be) entirely excluded from its authority.
firmness, fortitude, or greatness of soul, in any course of action, or in connexion with any pursuit, work, or enterprise; a man admired and venerated for his achievements and noble qualities.” The *OED* tersely defines the heroine, or female counterpart to the hero, as “a female hero,” or “A woman distinguished by exalted courage, fortitude, or noble achievements.” The female hero has no prodigious affiliation with Homer. In fact, according to scholars such as Carlyle, Freud, Rank, and Lash, women cannot be heroes, or even act heroically, unless their actions derive association from men, or they are acknowledged exceptions used to further prove the rule. Historian and author John Lash states,

The hero is undeniably *he*, the male of the human species. Gender is an issue here, for ideally the hero incarnates masculinity in its best, most noble aspects, even though he is potentially equal to the worst of which his sex is capable . . . . The hero has no exact counterpart in the opposite sex, and heroines who act in the matter of the

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7 While Penelope (from Homer’s epic *The Odyssey*) may be viewed as heroic for her loyalty to her husband, Odysseus, she is not expressly mentioned or even implied as a heroic model, contrary to the way the *OED* reveals Homer, which implicates Odysseus as the model hero.
hero are wild anomalies in world mythology and racial
lore.... (5)

The “wild anomalies” to which Lash refers include: Camilla in the
Aeneid, who “may as well be a man”; the Valkyries from Germanic
legend, considered “a formidable match for any man”; Rosie the
Riveter, an icon of World War II, when women were encouraged, for a
short time, to perform men’s work; and Joan of Arc, who, disguised as
a man, became a military leader and contributed to several French
victories during the Hundred Years’ War (86-87). He designates these
women as unqualified heroes (meaning not heroines or female heroes)
because of their masculine qualities, Joan of Arc being a partial
exception because of her “two distinct feminine traits: her virginity
and her susceptibility to ‘intuition’ in the form of mystical voices” (86-
87). These exceptional women do not change the dominantly
masculine definition of a hero.

If being a hero means being a man, or at the very least
masculine, can women find solace in being heroines? Not really, until
the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a heroine only proves
herself heroic if she somehow affiliates herself and her actions with
men. Rachel Brownstein demonstrates that “the very image of a heroine [is that of a bride] . . . The man’s love is proof [and validation] of the girl’s value, and payment for it . . . Her worth made real by being approved” (xv). The paramount example of this emanates from the birth of the prototypical hero: Jesus. Mary is heroic, not because of any action she took, but because figuratively speaking, she is the bride of God and the vessel for the Christian Messiah. Similarly, Meredith Powers asserts,

  Women are props in the hero’s drama, as with Psyche and Atalanta, they are displaced souls in conflict with the restrictions of patriarchal culture who in myth learn lessons meant for all the world. Women are functionaries, backdrops in a mythology which insisted, sometimes with notable aggression, on the metaphoric centrality of the hero. (4)

Mary may represent the archetypal idea of a heroine as a progenitor of heroes, but never a hero herself, but she has sisters originating in all
developed civilizations, past and present.\textsuperscript{8}

Most scholars agree that the desire for a hero originates with earliest man. Lash hypothesizes, “From the age of \textit{homo erectus}, around 750,000 B.C.[E], countless unnamed heroes must have arisen for humankind to have survived the perils of prehistory” (34). Assuming heroes have always existed, and continue to emerge today, leads me to conclude that some part of the human condition insists upon a heroic figure, someone greater than ourselves who sets the standards we hope to achieve within ourselves. Theoretically, both men and women desire such a mentor, but historically male heroes (or male authors/authorities) have overpowered, suppressed, and excluded heroines. The fault of the male model is not located in the definition, but in the fact that it excludes half of the population. \textit{All} people need, both consciously and unconsciously, heroes for motivation, guidance, and inspiration.

\textsuperscript{8} Like Jesus’ miraculous birth, most heroes have suspicious, mysterious, or miraculous births. See Otto Rank’s list in \textit{The Myth of the Birth of the Hero}; he gives an abbreviated description of fifteen hero’s births from various civilizations, including Sargon, Moses, Jesus, Karna, Romulus, Hercules, and Lohengrin.
Naturally, when discussing the human psychic (unconscious) need for heroes, I must turn to and begin with the father of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud. He expounds:

Not for a moment are we in the dark as to why a great man ever becomes important. We know that in the mass of mankind there is a powerful need for an authority who can be admired, before whom one bows down, by whom one is ruled and perhaps even ill-treated. We have learnt from the psychology of individual men what the origin is of this need of the masses. It is a longing for the father felt by everyone from his childhood onwards....

Freud’s definition of a hero differs slightly from other scholars in that the great man is an authoritarian figure to whom others bow down before rather than look up to. However, the implications are the same if we assume that all people inherently aspire to be that authority.

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9 Many scholars now criticize Freud’s idea of the father-figure as hero, including Otto Rank, a student of Freud’s. The editor of Rank’s Myth of the Birth of the Hero, Philip Freund, states in his introduction that Rank thought “[t]he cult of Freud was colored too much by the personality of Freud himself, a patriarchal figure who in youth had been the victim of an Oedipus complex...; for Freud had been the adoring child of a young mother nearer in age to her son than to her husband – Sigmund Freud’s father had been old enough to be his grandfather instead” (viii). In other words, Freud’s own desire for a father/hero to whom he could relate exhibits itself in his psychology.
This cognitive desire also assists in shaping and defining the hero. As stated by Freud, the hero appeals to the masses; he is from the people, but he excels where “normal” men fall short. Lash insists, Both morally and physically, the hero is nevertheless of the human species, not superior to it, not beyond it. Even if his earliest prototypes are partially divine, the hero is, in his prime, fully human rather than superhuman. A rare configuration of traits and a striking style of action mark him as having arete, excellence. In excelling and exceeding himself, the hero becomes a model of higher potential for his clan, his race or nation, even for humanity at large. (5)

Heroes are not, nor should they be, gods. Hercules and Jesus were “partially divine,” but they lived and worked among common people, offering themselves as models within reach, not as gods with unattainable attributes.

While all of the above-mentioned scholars insist that heroes result from the human psyche, they limit their definitions to male heroes. This presents a multi-layered problem. Either women are
excluded from the delineation of the term “human”; or, as Meredith Powers alleges, “the subliminal implication is that heroism, that innate conception of the human psyche is possible only for men” (3). Powers insists on reexamining and redefining psychology and mythology through contemporary fiction:

Contemporary fiction, especially that written by women, provides a forum which is not interested in perpetuating the sexist constructions of aesthetics, one which is specifically interested in explicating the stories of heroines. Contemporary women writers allow their female characters the voice which was denied mythological women, and at the same time retell stories of heroines who first appeared as unsatisfying profiles in ancient narrative. (10)

Dwelling on past exclusion from mythology and hero development is futile; instead, as Powers argues throughout her text and implies in the subtitle, *The Archetype and Her Reemergence in Modern Prose*, we must locate the archetypal heroine (“she is maternal and nurturing but
subordinate to neither her children nor their father” (15)) and relocate her in modern literature.

**Introducing Heroines**

Heroines, or the feminine version of heroes, have always existed, even if they have not been recognized as such. Unfortunately, because traditional history and literature has been recorded by men, with few exceptions, heroines have been long been ignored and neglected. I found one of the exceptions in Euripides, a Greek playwright living around 480 or 485 B.C.E. Among the patriarchal fathers of tragedy and epic, Euripides may be considered a feminist, or at least a man sympathetic toward women’s place in a masculinist society.

Euripides focused on women through the same lens [as he would a male hero: the individual man as protagonist, his conflict existential, his agony expressible through tragedy] and recognized that much of the existential conflict inherent in their [women’s] lives came from the oppression of a society which celebrated male citizens by
demanding self-destructive obeisance from women.

(Powers 112)

Euripides recognized that male success, power, and heroism originate from the oppression of other, seemingly lesser people, namely women. Medea, the title character of Euripides’ play, embodies his most famous and tragic heroine. Medea “kills her children [a paternal right in Greek society] to make Jason [her husband] suffer, but also to keep them from a life of insults . . . . In this ruthless act she breaks most of the ancient tribal bonds, yet with it she refuses the new feminine ideal of powerlessness and despair” (Powers 115). The theme of tragic mother-love, like Medea’s infanticide, while based partially on mother-love and not uncommon in literature, was made most famous in the modern period through the character Sethe, the hero of Toni Morrison’s Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *Beloved*.¹⁰

¹⁰Powers asserts, “Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* is another story of a chthonic mother. Her central character, the archetypal goddess figure, is Sethe, an American slave who, in the tradition of Medea and Hecuba, is motivated by profound love and absolute outrage to seize the last and only power left to her, the power to horrify” (186). The *OED* defines “chthonic”: “a. Dwelling in or beneath the surface of the earth.” The definition most closely related to Powers’ exhaustive use of the term comes from the 1882 C.F. Kearny reference, “The chthonic divinity was essentially a god [(in Powers’ case, a goddess)] of the regions under the earth; at first of the dark home of the seed, later on of the still darker home of the dead.” Powers’ argument settles around the attempt to trace heroine’s origins to the “great goddess of Near Eastern matriarchal religion” (9).
After Euripides, heroines made sporadic appearances throughout the ages; Chaucer’s Queen Cleopatra and Shakespeare’s Lucrece qualify as “good women” in Norma Lorre Goodrich’s text *Heroines.*

Renaissance heroines, women of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, include Marlowe’s Dido, renowned in legend for founding Carthage, Spenser’s female knight Britomart, Queen Elizabeth I, who fought her way to the throne and once ascended continued to fight because of her gender. Finally, in 1792, Mary Wollstonecraft published *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, a controversial text in which Wollstonecraft establishes why women lack heroic characteristics and how to absolve this issue. Heroic women in fiction reemerge in British

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11 Of Cleopatra, Goodrich states, “For love of Anthony, who was ‘so dere’ (v. 701), she died. Such women in Chaucer’s view, which is around the turn of the century in 1400, were “as good as Christian saints” (19). Of Lucrece, Goodrich demonstrates, after being raped by the King, Lucrece kills herself: “In sacrificing her own life, Lucrece was found by later Roman historians to have abided by the principal beliefs of their Roman civilization because she placed devotion to husband and children first” (23). For the playwrights, both women are heroic because they die either because they cannot live without, or to save the name and reputation of their men. Chaucer’s Wife of Bath from *Canterbury Tales* is often considered heroic by modern critics because of her ability to tell her own story and really control her own life. Shakespeare’s Cordelia from *King Lear* also constitutes a heroic figure based on her unconditional love and eventual death for her father (symbolically reminiscent of Christ).

12 Dido, of Homeric legend, receives brief heroic credit because she independently founds a city; however, in the end, she commits suicide when Aeneus, her lover, leaves her. Similarly, Britomart is truly a heroic figure similar to Joan of Arc; she is an appointed knight who upholds the nobility of Chastity. She is a powerful figure, as she rescues the male knights from an Amazon Queen, brings order to Britain and then, as is proper (and heroic to Spenser, the author of *The Faerie Queen*), returns power to the men. The *Encyclopaedia Britannica Online* explains the prejudice Elizabeth faced: “Gentlemen were trained in eloquence and the arts of war; gentlewomen were urged to keep silent and attend to their needlework. In men of the upper classes a will to dominate was admired or at least assumed; in women it was viewed as dangerous or grotesque.”
literature in the 1800’s when the Brontes, Austen, Eliot, and Woolf began publishing. In America, heroines became the focal point of feminist literature in the late 1800’s and early 1900’s. Harriet Beecher Stowe, Louisa May Alcott, Sara Orne Jewett, Willa Cather, Edith Wharton, and Kate Chopin, to name only a few feminist writers, created and published viable heroines.\textsuperscript{13}

How do these turn-of-the century women differ from classic heroes and influence the female heroes I intend to examine? In her text, \textit{Unlikely Heroines}, Ann Shapiro explains,

The heroines of these novels are called “unlikely” because on the surface they do not appear to be heroic in the classic sense. They are slave women and housemaids, rural matriarchs and dissatisfied wives, factory workers and middle-class professionals. But if they are different from the heroes of American literature, they are also surprisingly similar. They do not hunt whales [Ishmael, from \textit{MobyDick}], or raft on the Mississippi [Huck Finn],

\textsuperscript{13} These authors were not considered “feminist” at the time they published - Hawthorne considered them a “d----d (sic) mob of scribbling women” (Shapiro 1). They were deemed feminist upon their “rediscovery” in the 1960’s and 70’s.
but they exhibit the same urge to break with tradition, the same rejection of conventional values, and the same desire for adventure.\textsuperscript{14} (4)

The nineteenth-twentieth century heroine’s urge does not (cannot) stop at the mere “break with tradition”; she must create her own heroic voice, identity, and tradition outside of the shadow of men. In the nineteenth century, women overwhelmingly accomplished this goal through death and/or insanity. Like Shapiro, Powers offers a definition of the reemerging heroine:

In contemporary fiction she tells her own story, revealing her own connate ethics, explicating her own motives in her own voice, a voice which Daphne and Danae and even Medea were denied. This new articulate heroine seduces the reader to question long accepted conceptions of divinity and righteousness and offers illumination on her enigmatic mythological predecessors. Her heroism

\textsuperscript{14} The works Shapiro specifically references include: \textit{Uncle Tom’s Cabin} (Stowe), \textit{The Silent Partner} (Phelps), \textit{Work: A Story of Experience} (Alcott), \textit{A Country Doctor} (Jewett), \textit{Pembroke} (Freeman), and \textit{The Awakening} (Chopin). I believe her idea of the heroine can also be applied to Perkins Gilman whom I include in my study.
returns to us a conception of the lost divinity, the ancient goddess of the Near East, that indiscriminately nurturing mother. (11)

I find Powers’ comment on the “indiscriminately nurturing mother” somewhat ironic for the nineteenth century women that comprise my study; part of the cause of the madness and rebellion in Perkins Gilman’s and Chopin’s heroines is caused by being mothers. Perhaps the nurturing mother is meant to be a nurturer of self, versus the selfless nurturing of men and children normally expected by women. The limited power substantiated by the “nurturing mother” trope leaves little room in which to encompass either heroine or hero.

In much modern literature, “hero” and “heroine” is often interchanged with “protagonist”; however, for the intent of my argument, I distinguish a hero as someone (male or female) who has “noble qualities” or performs “noble achievements,” and those qualities and achievements better the hero and his or her community,
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social setting, or culture. Concurrently, Miller summarizes this concept of a hero; however, like Carlyle, and numerous others, the definition is limited to men:

...the hero, imagined as a great man, is conceived as one who lifts, or forces himself into a dominant place in his society and epoch and then compels that society and time into new, even unique historical patterns; in the process he will in all likelihood push aside older, outworn representations of the principle of power and authority....

Accomplishing such a goal may be relatively simple for the (white) male hero, as he has always had access to community, social setting, and/or culture. However, for the (white) female hero, specifically,

15 Michael Kreyling, in the introduction to his text, *Figures of the Hero in Southern Narrative,* makes a similar statement, “by hero I do not mean protagonist, for nearly every narrative makes use of a protagonist. Nor do I mean leader or an event-making individual.... In many instances,... the heroic figures in the narratives I discuss are indeed leaders in the public world of power... and recreated for fiction” (4). I diverge from his definition because African American women have only recently (within the last century, in contrast to the millennia men have had in this position) been involved in the “public world of power.”

16 In his introduction, Miller acknowledges his limited delineation of the hero as male; I do not believe he intends to be misogynistic, rather, he appears realistic and even somewhat regretful regarding the boundaries forced upon a hero. The “numerous others” who offer a definition of an exclusively male heroic figure include, but are not limited to: Freud, his “great man” theory is influenced, almost verbatim, by Carlyle; Rank (see footnote #2); Joseph Campbell (Meredith Powers highly criticizes Campbell for his mis-treatment of women in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces;* not one of the faces is female or feminine).
turn-of-the century heroines who had limited access outside the
domestic sphere, executing heroic endeavors proved difficult and often
yielded only death or insanity. For an African American woman, who
as a result of slavery does not even have access to personhood, an
attempt at heroism seems daunting and relatively hopeless. However,
I demonstrate that African American women can and do emerge as
heroes; originally, these heroes mimic the white female model of a
hero, but through time, African American authors such as Toni
Morrison, Paule Marshall, Ntzoke Shange, and Zora Neale Hurston
manifest powerful and original female heroes in the form of mother
figures and conjure women.
Chapter 1
The Development of the 19th Century Heroine

"To have no heroes is to have no aspiration, to live on the momentum of the past, to be thrown back upon routine, sensuality, and the narrow self."


"Women, wronged in one way or another, are given the overwhelming beauty of endurance, the capacity for high or low suffering, for violent feeling absorbed, finally tranquilized, for the radiance of humility, for silence, secrecy, impressive acceptance. Heroines are, then, heroic.


If what Charles Horton Cooley says stands correct, that “to have no heroes is to have no aspiration, to live on the momentum of the past,” then I can make two assumptions: first, American women lacked aspiration until the nineteenth century; or, more likely, women did aspire to have heroes (or be heroes), but because of the patriarchy in which they lived, women were denied and forced to live “on the momentum of the past.”¹⁷ That momentum, of course, promoted the

¹⁷ Of course, women with heroic qualities did exist during the development of America. However, because, the history of the country was recorded by men, men’s names and accomplishments have been forever canonized, leaving little room for notable women. A few American women (very few compared to the hundreds of men) managed to establish their intellect among the “Founding Fathers.” Anne Bradstreet (1612?-1672), “was a writer of both poetry and prose, and with her writing she tested the tolerance of the Puritan community. Puritan men believed that women should be silent and modest and ought to leave intellectual pursuits (such as writing) to men, whose wits were supposedly stronger . . . . [Bradstreet insisted] those who doubted female wits should look to Queen Elizabeth, who . . . as ‘argumentative enough to make you mute’” (Elliott 116).
idea of woman always in relation to the men in the family, exclusively as wife, mother, daughter, or sister, never as a heroic figure. Taking a cue from their foremothers (Bradstreet, Adams, and Rowson), white American women in the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century broke from the past and gave life to heroines, tragically realistic women who aspired to and desired financial, creative, and intellectual independence and freedom. However, authors and heroines discovered such freedom was not so easily attained; instead, many of the heroines found autonomy from the patriarchy through death and/or insanity, creating a new realm of heroism that later generations would enhance, develop, and attempt to remedy. In this chapter, I focus primarily on two authors: Kate Chopin (1851-1904) and Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860-1935). I examine how their

Abigail Adams (1744-1818) is remembered not only as the wife of America’s second president, but as “one of America’s most distinguished letter writers . . . . A woman of independent judgment, and a partner and friend to her husband, Adams expressed her views frankly in her letters, especially her conviction that the status of women needed to be improved” (Elliott 460-461). Furthermore, Adams hoped that in the aftermath of the American Revolution, the government would “remember the ladies” and put an end to the almost absolute power over wives that husbands were allowed by law” (Elliott 461). Phillis Wheatley (1753-1784) is an even more notable exception, as she was “the first published African-American poet, [and] received both national and international recognition” (Elliott 560). Susanna Haswell Rowson is described as “Feisty, independent, determined, a woman of wit, talent, and sensitivity, [she] achieved fame and professional success as an actress, dramatist, poet, novelist, and teacher . . . . Rowson demonstrated resourcefulness and independence in a period of history that encouraged female docility” (Elliott 670).
respective texts, Chopin’s “The Story of an Hour” and *The Awakening*, and Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wall-Paper” and *Herland* establish the model of a turn-of-the-century white heroine and how this model inspired African American women to first mimic and eventually devise their own female heroes.

Although women’s voices have struggled to be heard throughout history, Mary Wollstonecraft revolutionized the feminist movement in the eighteenth century by providing the theory that literature presents women with a heroic model. In 1792, after one month of writing, she published *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*. The argument Wollstonecraft presents in *Vindication*, that women are essentially trained to be submissive, rather than born that way, remains powerful, even after two hundred years: “For according to her argument, it was not only that women were ill prepared for their duties as social beings; false expectations of life condemned them to an empty and, in all probability, embittered existence” (Tomaselli xxv). Traditional society prepares women to fulfill subordinate roles without concern for personal satisfaction or independence; women are criticized if they
deviate from their assigned stations or express discontentment.

Wollstonecraft acknowledges the lack of a heroic model available to women, specifically in literature, arguing that the novels women were encouraged to read and enjoy perpetuate women’s submissiveness and "sentimentality." The model for eighteenth century women, promoted in education and sustained in novels, advanced the idea that "Women subjected by ignorance to their sensations, and only taught to look for happiness in love, refine on sensual feelings, and adopt metaphysical notions respect in that passion . . . [are led] . . . shamefully to neglect the duties of life" (Wollstonecraft 281).

According to Wollstonecraft, the model available in fiction for eighteenth century women is detrimental to women; not only does she "advise [her] sex not to read such flimsy works," she posits that the works themselves must change (283). Her fiery prose attempts to move women to action and toward independence of thought.

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18 The word "sentimentality" refers to Wollstonecraft’s criticism of novels that promote and enhance women’s “delicacy.” In *Vindication*, Chapter 13, she writes, “Some Instances of the Folly Which the Ignorance of Women Generates; with Concluding Reflections on the Moral Improvement that a Revolution in Female Manners Might Naturally be Expected to Produce,” Section II. Wollstonecraft states, "Another instance of that feminine weakness of character, often produced by a confined education, is a romantic twist of the mind, which has been very properly termed sentimental.” Wollstonecraft offers numerous other instances of feminine weakness, and the causes of it, throughout the text.
Nineteenth-century feminism extends Wollstonecraft’s argument and further develops it through fiction. While sentimental novels still reigned, authors like Chopin and Perkins Gilman offered new non-stereotypical, three-dimensional female heroes who reflected many women’s thoughts and lives and challenged the patriarchal concept of women. Chopin and Perkins Gilman’s heroes were either criticized or ignored as heroic models by the dominant male culture until the (re)discovery of their texts during the women’s movement of the 1960’s. Since that time they (and other authors, such as Wharton and Cather) have been acknowledged as powerful feminist authors and foremothers in the creation of heroes.

Kate Chopin’s ironic short story “The Story of an Hour,” published in 1894, introduces the nineteenth-century prototypical heroine and foreshadows a reoccurring theme in Chopin’s writing: the idea that women can only attain freedom and autonomy through death.

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19 “Sentimental novels” would include works by Charlotte Bronte or Louisa May Alcott. The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory explains a sentimental novel is “A form of fiction popular in eighteenth century England. It concentrated on the distresses of the virtuous and attempted to show that a sense of honor and moral behavior were justly rewarded.” Loosely defined, a sentimental novel is any work in which the heroine (or rarely, the hero) must overcome insurmountable odds in order to attain a happy ending; in addition, the heroine must always remain “ladylike” and have high morals. A sentimental novel appeals to one’s passion versus one’s intellect.
The story, only two pages long, introduces Mrs. Mallard, a woman with a heart condition who receives word that her husband has been killed in a train wreck. While Mrs. Mallard suffers sorrow at her husband's loss, she also recognizes her potential future of liberty due to her husband's death. Chopin writes,

She did not hear the story as many women have heard the same, with a paralyzed inability to accept its significance. She wept at once, with sudden wild abandonment, in her sister's arms. When the storm of grief had spent itself she went away to her room alone. She would have no one follow her. (Chopin 536)

In her room, Mrs. Mallard begins to assess her newfound situation: she is a widow, no longer a wife defined and controlled by her husband. She declares in a whisper, "'Free! Body and soul free!'" (Chopin 537) She begins to plan a future by herself, for herself. Mrs. Mallard's exhilaration is short-lived, however. Within moments, "Brently Mallard . . . entered . . . He had been far from the scene of the accident" (Chopin 537). Upon seeing her husband, alive and well, Mrs. Mallard dies. "When the doctors came they said she had died of
heart disease – of joy that kills” (Chopin 537). Ironically, and opposed to the doctors’ assessment, Mrs. Mallard dies because she recognizes her recent freedom will again be exterminated. Her only choice for true freedom, then, exists in death. According to Nancy A. Walker, a professor of English at Vanderbilt University, the power of Chopin’s story lies in the fact that

Mrs. Mallard could be any woman who receives the news of her husband’s accidental death and feels first grief and then an exhilarating freedom. No regional setting exists to suggest that her reaction is the result of cultural conditioning or custom; Chopin instead presents marriage as an institution with the potential to crush individuality . . (146)

This brief “criticism of marriage itself, as an institution that traps women” foreshadows Chopin’s longer, more in-depth criticism of marriage and other patriarchal social structures in The Awakening (Toth 10).

Chopin’s final written work and a seminal text in the development of the turn-of-the-century heroine, The Awakening,
published in 1899, met with harsh criticism primarily from male reviewers. “Men found it [The Awakening] morbid, as well as distasteful, unpleasant, and unclean. They objected not only to Edna’s adultery, but also to her not being a ‘mother woman’” (Caudle and Green 10). Male critics disregard Edna Pontellier, the main character, as a hero because she does not embody stereotypical womanhood.20 Women, on the other hand, “generally liked The Awakening. . . . Women in St. Louis felt that Chopin was being truthful about women’s lives” (Caudle and Green 10). Not only does Edna reflect the reality in women’s lives, she takes action against her restrictive society, thereby demonstrating the inadequacy of True Womanhood, empowering herself, and offering a realistic heroic model for women. Edna’s restrictive, patriarchal society limits her options in her pursuit for autonomy. Her first act of empowerment occurs when she moves out of her husband’s house, only to be ostracized from her community. Edna explains the reasoning behind her move: “The house, the money

20 The concept of “True Womanhood” (based very much on Victorian sentimentality) became popular in the nineteenth century, partially in reaction to the rise of many women’s demands for equality. Ann R. Shapiro describes the “so-called ‘True Woman’” as “an ideal of virtuous femininity . . . . Historian Barbara Welter sums up the ‘attributes of True Womanhood’ as ‘piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity’” (6).
that provides for it, are not mine. Isn’t that enough reason?” (Chopin 105). Edna decides she wants to provide for herself, not only in material goods, but emotionally as well. She engages in two separate love affairs, one of which barely satisfies her; Edna genuinely cares for the other young man, Robert, but realizes that her society, upon discovery of her “wonton ways,” would only further ostracize her. When all her attempted endeavors fail, she takes her own life.

Her eventual suicide raises an interesting question, eloquently posed by feminist critic Carol Christ:

Is Edna a weak-willed woman in the grip of romantic delusions [reminiscent of the women Wollstonecraft criticized], defeated by her own lack of self-consciousness, as some critics have alleged? Or is she, on the other hand, a feminist heroine who defies convention . . . , and valiantly chooses death rather than return to a conventional life that would mean psychic and spiritual death? (80)

Much like Mrs. Mallard in “The Story of an Hour,” in accordance with providing a realistic female hero for the nineteenth century, Edna had
little choice but to die. While Mrs. Mallard dies of shock and
disappointment, Edna commits suicide, thus manifesting Edna’s full
control of her body and personhood, which had been denied by her
husband, friends, and community. Chopin seems to move even further
than merely challenging patriarchal society; she also demonstrates the
challenges women continually face. Christ asserts, “[The] ambiguous
and tragic ending [of The Awakening] seems to reflect Chopin’s view
that the path to women’s liberation is far more difficult and complex
than some nineteenth-century feminists had alleged and requires a soul
stronger than many women possess” (80). This difficult path does not
end with the coming of a new century; late in the twentieth century,
African American women join white women in the realization that one
option for the freedom so preciously coveted and protected by heroes
is located in death.

For some nineteenth-century white women, insanity, or psychic
death, becomes an alternative to actual death. Charlotte Perkins
Gilman’s most famous publication, 1892’s “The Yellow Wall-paper,”
relates the story of one woman’s descent into madness. Elaine
Hedges, a critic and respected Perkins Gilman scholar, asserts that “the
madness that descends upon the heroine in “The Yellow Wall-paper” [is a] deliberate dramatic indictment . . . of the crippling social pressures imposed on women in the nineteenth century and the sufferings they thereby endured. . .” (107). Just as Edna overcame social pressures through suicide, the hero of Perkins Gilman’s short story copes through madness. Meredith Powers, citing Barbara Hill Rigney’s work, *Madness and Sexual Politics in the Feminist Novel*, “points out that psychosis in either women or men can be a sane, self-protective response to life in an oppressive social situation” (167). The madness experienced by the narrator in “The Yellow Wall-paper” is very much caused by an “oppressive social situation.” The woman, experiencing yet undefined postpartum depression, has been confined, under the advice of her physician husband, to a rest cure. Her husband essentially imprisons her in a nursery room and forbids her any activity, including writing or thinking at all. Her excessive confinement, combined with her husband’s insistence that the illness only resides in her mind, eventually leads to the narrator’s madness. In her madness, the narrator gains power over her patriarchal confinement and attains a certain control and freedom in her life. The
last line of the narrative exemplifies her empowerment; when her husband discovers the nursery room in shambles and his wife crawling on the floor, he promptly faints, thereby surrendering his vocal control over his wife. Linda Wagner-Martin, professor of English at the University of North Carolina, states, “Even though the story ends with the protagonist’s madness, it also suggests some ambivalence in that fact that – temporarily at least – her husband is silenced. He is no longer an obstacle to her doing what she intends. . .” (61). The narrator of the text describes the account, “Now why should that man have fainted? But he did, and right across my path by the wall, so that I had to creep over him every time” (Perkins Gilman 20). The narrator no longer finds herself suppressed; by her own admission she now creeps over her husband while he remains powerless on the floor. By her own standards, the heroine is free. However, much like Edna Pontellier and Mrs. Mallard, freedom comes at a high price. Wagner-Martin further explains that even though Gilman’s protagonist did have some [heroic] traits [per Linda Howe cited in Wagner-Martin’s essay], “the heroine demonstrates that she possesses the courage,
strength, inner resources, and power to stand alone, self-supporting and fulfilled, denying the need for parent, husband, lover or friend,” [but] she did not have enough – she was not allowed to understand enough, to cultivate enough skills – to save herself. (63)

While the narrator may not be a completely successful heroine, she did accomplish “a retreat into a world of her own making, a complete separation from the patriarchal existence that used her to be the mother of an ancestral line over which she had no control, and to which – subsequently – she had no value” (Wagner-Martin 63). Like other nineteenth-century heroines, the narrator attains freedom in a non-idealic manner, further demonstrating the limited options for women.

Not all nineteenth-century feminist texts ended in death or insanity. Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *Herland*, published in 1915, offers a solution to the death/insanity resolution. Perkins Gilman’s criticism of the patriarchy and “Utopian romance” articulates a world populated only by women (heroines), where motherhood has become a religion, into which stumble three men who comprise varying degrees of misogyny (Wilson 174). Terry Nicholson represents one extreme of
patriarchal society; he is a “man’s man, very much so, generous and brave and clever” who expects to be “King of Ladyland” and worshipped as the phallocentric god he believes himself to be (Perkins Gilman 134, 135). Approaching the other end of the spectrum is Jeff Margrave who “idealized women in the best Southern style. He was full of chivalry and sentiment and all that. And he was a good boy; he lived up to his ideals” (Perkins Gilman 134). In other words, Jeff, in truly genteel fashion, has placed women on an unrealistically high pedestal reminiscent of True Womanhood. The narrator, Vandyck Jennings, straddles the middle-ground, understanding the positions of both his friends, but accepting of and willing to change before the principles and ideals of Herland.

The principles found in Herland are based on Perkins Gilman’s early commitment to “‘improve the world;’ [she wrote Herland] to give form to her ideals: [to] achieve a society where women are autonomous and self-actualizing” (Hall 161). An academic advisor at Michigan State University, K. Graehme Hall explicates the power within Herland: “[Perkins Gilman’s] many contrasts between life in Herland and in the United States during the early twentieth century
show the failure of the American system to allow women full humanity” (161). In contrast to women in the U.S., who were restricted from many social, academic, and political spheres, all the women occupying Herland participate in these spheres and are heroines of varying degrees.\(^{21}\) The narrator, Vandyck, upon learning the history of the women and seeing their cohesive society admits,

> As I learned more and more to appreciate what these women had accomplished, the less proud I was of what we, with all our manhood had done. You see, they had no wars. They had no kings, and no priests, and no aristocracies. They were sisters, and as they grew, they grew together – not by competition, but by united action.

(Perkins Gilman 170)

As the women explain their 2,000-year history (herstory), which much like Western Christianity begins with a miracle, naturally the narrator (Vandyck) and reader draw comparisons to the 2,000-year history of

\(^{21}\) I say “heroines of varying degrees” because, while Herland is ideal in many ways, not all of the women are equal. Some girls who show “bad qualities” are “appealed . . . to renounce motherhood,” or if they have children, they are forbidden from raising and educating them (187, 188). However, while motherhood is the supreme heroic act, these “lesser” women can still be considered heroines for their accomplishments in other fields and for other talents.
the Christianized Western World. Feminist and scholar Susan Gubar demonstrates, “The satiric critique generated from the utopian reconfiguration here means that the better Herland looks as matriarchal culture, the worse patriarchal America seems in contrast” (193).

The history of Herland begins with female liberation, the heroic attainment of freedom. After a natural disaster slaughters most of the men, the slaves of the country “rose in revolt, killed their remaining masters even to the youngest boy, killed the old women too, and the mothers, intending to take possession of the country with the remaining young women and girls” (Perkins Gilman 167). However, “this succession of misfortunes was too much for those infuriated virgins. There were many of them, and but few of these would-be masters, so the young women, instead of submitting, rose in sheer desperation and slew their brutal conquerors” (Perkins Gilman 167). Such action seems like a plea from Perkins Gilman to her turn-of-the-century sisters to cease being submissive, throw off the shackles of the “conquerors,” become heroes, and gain autonomy and independence for themselves, from themselves. She implies that no one (especially
the dominant men of society) will give women their freedom without a fight.

The fiery prose of white feminists, which attempts to textually secure that autonomy and independence, was not the only available literature by women in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries. In 1892, Frances Harper published *Iola Leroy, or Shadows Uplifted*, one of the first novels by an African American woman. While the style and romance of the text mimics many Victorian and American turn-of-the-century white texts, the story is unique and powerful because “... until Harper’s novel, no African-American female character had been treated as worthy of such idealization [to be a heroine] in the nineteenth-century women’s fiction tradition” (Andrews xi). *Iola Leroy* is a novel of origins for African American women. “The title character ... confronts challenges to her moral and social ideals reminiscent of those that the heroines of popular white women’s fiction had to contend with;” however Iola, an African American woman, faces and overcomes the double bind of being a

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22 *Our Nig* (1859), by Harriet E. Wilson, is the first novel published by an African American woman.
woman and a former slave, thus creating a new heroic model and lending inspiration for future African American writers (Andrews xi).

While white women and African American women had in common the similar desire to escape patriarchal bondage, their actions toward such an end differed. One of the main separations between white women’s fiction and African American women’s fiction at the turn-of-the-century occurs because authors like Chopin and Perkins Gilman developed heroines restricted by and searching to escape from the patriarchal concept of marriage; Harper, on the other hand, embraces Victorian sentimentality, with some modifications, and promotes the idea of heroic freedom and growth through marriage. Claudia Tate, in her essay, “Allegories of Black Female Desire; or Rereading Nineteenth-Century Narratives of Black Female Authority,” explains why Harper and other African American women would utilize a traditionally white, patriarchal notion like marriage to create a heroine. Tate cites John Bouvier’s *A Law Dictionary Adapted to the Constitution and Laws of the U.S.A* and *Judicial and Statutory Definitions of Words and Phrases* to explain that “marriage is the foundation of the family and indeed the very foundation of society,
without which there would be neither civilization nor progress 
(Judicial 4390-93)” (102). Slaves, being considered subhuman, 
uncivilized, and savage, were not permitted to legally enter into the 
institution of marriage. While slave couples may have performed 
mariage ceremonies among friends and family, these “marriages 
existed outside of civil law[;] they also existed outside of Western 
concepts of morality, civilization, and human progress” (Tate 102). 
Tate claims that within American culture, the right to marry, combined 
with the right to vote came to represent civilization, or humanity:

for black people, voting and marrying were the signs of 
the race’s ascent into manhood and womanhood. To vote 
and to marry, then, were two civil responsibilities that 
nineteenth-century black people elected to perform; they 
were twin indexes for measuring how black people 
collectively valued their civil liberties. (103) 

The heroine’s choice to marry in Iola Leroy is heroic because the act 
itself benefits the community by demonstrating the humanity and 
civilization of a race once considered inhuman and uncivilized.
Iola’s marriage appears even more heroic, and deviates from the traditional ending of many sentimental novels, because while sentimental texts often climax in marriage, Harper spends no more than a small paragraph on the ceremony. Leading up to the marriage and through the courtship Harper focuses on and promotes the mutual respect and intelligence between Iola and Dr. Latimer, a far cry from the domineering and babying antics of the husbands which the heroines so desperately longed to escape in The Awakening and “The Yellow Wall-paper.” William L. Andrews, in his Introduction, further explains the schism between white sentimental heroines, white feminist heroines and Iola Leroy:

Basing her heroine’s moral superiority on her dedication to the welfare of black people rather than on her superficial affinities with whites [Iola chose to affiliate herself with African-Americans; she could have passed for white] was Harper’s way of arguing that even the most talented and privileged of black women had to conceive of their traditional responsibilities to family as embracing the entire black community. Thus even when Iola decides
to marry, it is with the understanding that she and her African-American husband will return to the South to "labor for those who had passed from the old oligarchy of slavery into the new commonwealth of freedom." (xi)

The progression of heroines is interesting: Chopin and Perkins Gilman responded to the unrealistic idealism sentimental heroines found in marriage; Harper seems to respond to the incongruity of the white feminists in finding freedom only in death or insanity. However, perhaps the ends justify the means. After all, all three authors had the same ambition: to "write a good, strong book that would be helpful to them," whether that "them" be African American women or men in newly gained freedom or white men and women learning a new way of living that allows women full humanity (Harper 197).
Chapter 2
Mother Love:
The Mother Figure as Hero in African American Literature

*Helmer:* First and foremost, you are a wife and mother.
*Nora:* That I don’t believe anymore. I believe that first and foremost I am an individual, just as much as you are.

*Henrik Ibsen, A Doll’s House, 1879*

In Chapter 1, through *Iola Leroy*, I demonstrated how African American women found strength and power in the institution of marriage; such action was quite contrary to the restrictiveness and subjugation white women found in marriage. Furthermore, nineteenth-century white women found themselves confined by the expectations and the actual raising of children derived from motherhood, which was very often the intended result of marriage. Just as African American women found acceptance and power in marriage, they also attempted to procure heroes among mothers; though not always successful, the heroic and even non-heroic mothers of this chapter demonstrate the advancement of African American women in literature and heroism.

Put simply and biologically by the *OED*, a mother is “a female parent; a woman who has given birth to a child.” But what are the implications, responsibilities, expectations of mothers? And how did
these implications, responsibilities, and expectations come to be? As with most terms and concepts, the definition of mother varies between eras and cultures. However, most scholars agree that while maternal variations may exist, the basic idea of a mother originates in the “primordial image or archetype of the Great Mother . . . not any concrete image existing in space and time, but an inward image at work in the human psyche” (Neumann 3). The primordial archetype symbolically manifests herself in the form of the Great Goddess referred to and studied by German psychoanalytic scholar Erich Neumann, American academic Meredith Powers, and African philosopher Diop. All three theorists demonstrate that the Great Mother/Goddess existed in human’s earliest religions and assisted in developing “the basis for both culture and the tribe”23 (Powers 13). Furthermore, Diop “emphasizes the preeminence of the prehistoric Mother Goddess in Africa, and that women, the inventors of

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23 Powers explains that the mother figure as goddess actually developed at the time hominids separated and evolved from their primate brethren. “The most common primate social organization is based upon the mother-children community . . . . The result is a social organization which is matriarchal . . . . as hominid became Homo sapien, this social formation remained, rooted in the mother-child relationship . . . .” (12-13).
agriculture, were the organizers of these earlier civilizations” (Christian 213). When prehistoric people shifted from a hunter-gatherer society to an agricultural society, the mother, representative of fertility and bringing forth life, became divine. Joseph Campbell explains, “And so we can say that in the Paleolithic period, just as in the much later age of the early agricultural societies of the Near East, the female body was experienced in its own character as a focus of divine force, and a system of rites was dedicated to its mystery” (qtd. in Powers, 13).

So what changed? The most powerful religions for the last several thousand years are based on father gods versus mother goddesses. Goddesses still existed in ancient civilizations though they became secondary to male gods.24 With the arrival of Western religions, namely Judaism and Christianity, women remained

24 For example, in Egyptian civilization Isis and Hathor were powerful goddesses, but the primary god was Amun-Ra (also called Atun or Ra). In Babylon (also Assyria, Sumer, and Mesopotamia), the world was created by “Tiamat...the first mother, the primordial goddess,” but she was conquered by one of her male offspring, Marduk (Leeming and Leeming 25). Similarly, in Greece, all goddesses came from or answered to Zeus.
important as mothers, but ceased to serve any goddess function and were mandated to the position of men’s counterparts. Nineteenth-century scholar Johan Jakob Bachofen and modern critic Barbara Christian offer theories explaining why an even more powerful God/Father overruled the powerful Goddess/Mother.

Bachofen’s theories that “expounded the view that the mother-child bond is the common denominator in cultural evolution” were originally scorned by his contemporaries (Powers 16). His contemporaries clung “to the theory that the patriarchal family was the first social institution” (Powers 17). However, as Powers points out, “Although he did hold that matriarchy preceded the ascendance of patriarchal culture, he was no feminist” (17). Powers explains Bachofen’s theory regarding why cultures began matriarchally, but eventually advanced to patriarchal domination. “He viewed matriarchy as a necessary and inferior stepping stone toward the ultimate fulfillment represented by the patriarchal status quo; he assumed, as so many cultural analysts have, that history has always

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25 In Judaism and Christianity, Eve is considered the mother of all living things. Christianity purports that Mary is the mother of the Messiah. More important than their motherhood, Eve and Mary are mostly remembered for their sons.
been essentially progressive” (17). If nothing else, Bachofen was somewhat of a social Darwinist, believing that humans, like animals, progress through survival and domination of the fittest. Physiologically speaking, men are generally larger than women, thus providing warriors and soldiers to protect land and property against any invasion.

Similarly, Christian demonstrates that the increasing invasion of Africa by nomadic tribes elevated the need for warriors. Sons became warriors; women (mothers) provided sons.

The value given to sons . . . indicates the ambivalent status of women. Daughters are not as valued, since their primary destiny is to become mothers . . . . In having her identity prescribed as mother, the woman’s life is preordained. Being a woman, that is, a mother, means that she must play a subordinate role in the society and must be submissive to her male kin. Marriage and motherhood were the significant events in her life, an assumption strengthened sometimes by myths that focused on how women, the original rulers, abused their
authority, transgressed against God or the well-being of society, and hence had to be contained by men. (17)

Consequently, great warriors require a great leader. Being a warrior leads to and comes from bloodshed and killing—the very opposite of what a life-giving goddess promotes. Thus, new myths and legends are created; women and goddesses may still participate, but ultimately power lies with men and gods.

And what of the Mother Goddess circa the last two thousand years? The widespread induction of Christianity, a religion dominated by male prophets and a male God, insistent on feminine weakness and subordination, quashed her already fading dominion. The Mother Goddess made a brief and highly criticized appearance in Perkins Gilman’s *Herland.* But that text was neither exceedingly read nor appreciated until the 1960’s.

The figure of the Mother Goddess reemerged subtly at first in the form of Mammy during slavery; by the late twentieth century she

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26 Satan appealed to Eve’s weakness and she then persuaded Adam to eat the Forbidden Fruit. Regarding subordination within Christian/Western tradition: before marriage, women obeyed their father’s wishes; after marriage, women obeyed their husbands; if a husband died a brother or son would resume care of the widow and she in turn would obey him.
was fully configured as a heroic figure in African American women's literature. This is not surprising. As Powers asserts, "In her [the Mother Goddess'] initial manifestations is the authentic expression of the archetype of the heroine" (22). In other words, the mother is the original hero. She is particularly strong and effective in African American women's literature because, unlike white American heritage, which always follows the path of the father, maternal lineage is a prominent feature of the African American experience. A child born of a slave woman and white master always followed the condition of the mother. White masters figuratively emasculated African men; they were often separated from their wives and children (thus the children often only knew their mothers) or helplessly watched as their wives were abused. Moreover, in nearly all of the texts I read the protagonist acknowledges her debt to a maternal figure, a mother, grandmother or aunt, for her understanding of herself, her people, and her destiny. Not all African American women's texts demonstrate

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27 A powerful example of such emasculation occurs in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* when Sethe discovers that Halle, her husband, watched, but did not (or could not) act to stop the abuse inflicted upon Sethe, nor did he take revenge for her.
28 For specific examples of matrilineal acknowledgement see any one of the following texts: *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (Danticant), *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (Hurston), *Praisesong for the Widow* (Marshall), *Lucy* (Kincaid), *Sula* (Morrison).
successful mother heroes; however, like the realistic heroines of nineteenth-century white women’s texts, even the failed mothers/heroes assist readers in understanding the difficulty of becoming a hero.

While the heroic mother originated as the Mother Goddess in prehistoric African mythology, her image changed in order to accommodate the real-life experiences many Africans faced, especially the instatement of the European slave trade. Barbara Christian posits that “Mammy is an important figure in the mythology of Africa” that transferred into African American life (5). In contrast to the Southern white view of Mammy as subservient and always happy to serve her master, Christian explains, “Mammy saw herself as a mother, but to her that role embodied a certain dignity and responsibility, rather than a physical debasement, doubtless a carry-over from the African view that every mother is a symbol of the marvelous creativity of the earth” (5). In African American oral tradition, Mammy is the original heroic mother figure. Although usually forced to neglect her own children in favor of nurturing her master’s sons and daughters, her mother love, the unconditional love and desire to protect her children at all costs,
led her to be "cunning, . . . and not at all content with her lot . . . .

Mammies kicked, fought, connived, plotted, most often covertly, to
throw off the chains of bondage" for herself, her children and her
fellow slaves (Christian 5).

As I previously mentioned, not all African American women’s
texts offer examples of successful mother heroes. To do so would be
unrealistic. Like all attempts at heroism, some failure must occur from
which future heroes may learn from and improve. In her text,
*Quicksand*, published in 1928, Harlem Renaissance author Nella
Larsen demonstrates the reality that motherhood can sometimes be
debilitating and lead to psychic, spiritual, and/or literal death. 9

While the mother-illness trope remains present throughout the text,
*Quicksand* mainly focuses on the continual attempts of Helga Crane to
discover her identity and “place” in society. After numerous failures
in both the northern United States and Europe, Helga finds that she has
run out of money, been isolated from family, and left with no means to

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29 Perkins Gilman portrays a similar view of motherhood in “The Yellow Wall-paper.” The
narrator’s “illness” is a direct result of becoming a mother. Though post-partum depression had not
yet been officially “discovered,” the narrator realizes her mental change occurred after her baby
was born; she also experiences extreme nervousness around her child and does not feel fit to take
care of him. She explains, “Such a dear baby. And yet I cannot be with him, it makes me so
nervous” (6).
support herself. In a moment of desperation, she sleeps with a
Southern preacher, decides to marry him and return to the South where
she will “uplift the women and instruct the children of this community
of Southern folk” (Carby 169). Helga intends to be a hero of and for
the women in her community. Ironically, her ambitious plans are
thwarted by the one institution that, at least prehistorically, should
have assisted in her uplift: motherhood. “... Repeated childbirth
degraded and oppressed her. She nearly died giving birth to her fourth
child, and the novel ends with her fifth pregnancy which means her
certain death” (Carby 169).

While Helga may have failed as a heroic mother figure, Larsen’s
text should be read as an example, even a model, reminiscent of
nineteenth-century white feminists, demonstrating the difficult “path to
women’s liberation” (Christ 80). W. E. B. DuBois summarizes
Larsen’s empowering novel:

Nella Larsen . . . has seized an interesting character and
fitted her into a close yet delicately woven plot. There is
no “happy ending” and yet the theme is not defeatist . . . .

Helga Crane sinks at last still master of her whimsical,
unsatisfied soul. In the end she will be beaten down even to death but never will she utterly surrender to hypocrisy and convention. (210)

Helga, like the heroic models before her, is beaten, but not defeated. Though she may not be a strong mother hero, she offers a powerful heroic model because, in the end, she refuses to surrender to the society that has tried to destroy her as a person and woman.

Another striking example of failed mother heroes occurs in Ann Petry’s *The Street*, published in 1946. Through the characters Lutie Johnson and Mrs. Hedges, Petry demonstrates the gruesome reality of an African American woman’s life in the urban United States. Mrs. Hedges embodies a perversion of motherhood; Lutie embodies the good and noble intentions of a mother, but intentions do not make reality and ultimately Lutie fails. Christian explains,

Lutie Johnson . . . is the lost black female, alone and struggling . . . . She is a domestic working in the rich white folks’ home, northern style. She is a mother struggling to protect her child, not only from overt physical danger, but also from the more hidden patterns of
castration and debasement sketched by the concrete plantations of the North . . . . She is struggling to survive, working overtime, no longer bearing the legal status of the slave, but a slave nonetheless in the framework of society. (11)

In other words, Lutie cannot succeed. Regardless of her hope for the success of herself and her son, and the reader's desire for a happy ending, in which Lutie accomplishes the American Dream, Lutie fails in every aspect of her life, and perhaps most significantly, as a mother.

Mrs. Hedges's perversion of motherhood arises when she turns her pseudo-daughter into a prostitute. Mrs. Hedges enlists "a thin, dispirited young thing who never lifted her eyes from the sidewalk" to help her around her home and shop for her (154). Petry implies a mother-daughter bond forms between the two women. "So Mary came to live with her [Mrs. Hedges] and she gradually lost her dejected look. She laughed and talked and cleaned the apartment and cooked. Mrs. Hedges began to take a kind of pride in the way Mary blossomed out" (155). However, one night when a potential suitor comes to visit Mary, Mrs. Hedges, a businesswoman first, decides to enterprise on
the young man’s interest and Mary’s child-like trust. She charges him to visit and/or sleep with Mary. “That was how it started. As simply and as easily as that” (Petry 156). Mrs. Hedges does not stop with Mary; she entices other “daughters” to work for her. And she becomes a mother figure (in the form of a madam) to “her girls”; she offers them a home and shelter from the street that, without her protection, would invariably swallow and destroy them.

Marjorie Pryse, an Associate Professor of English at the University of Tennessee, illustrates the contrast between Mrs. Hedges and the other potential mother hero, Lutie. “The perversion of the mother in the portrait of the madam/madonna Mrs. Hedges finds its ultimate grotesqueness in Lutie – who believes that against all other odds she can protect her son” (127). However, the street proves too overwhelming for her and “for all of her efforts to protect him from the street, Lutie abandons her son at the novel’s end” (Pryse 127-128). The power behind the shock and horror of Lutie’s abandonment (she literally leaves her son in juvenile hall and drives away) and failure as a mother is reminiscent of Edna Pontellier, the unnamed narrator of “The Yellow Wall-paper,” and Helga Crane’s failure. However, I
must question: how much blame can we place on Lutie Johnson when it was her belief in the American Dream that sustained her for so long? The true tragedy of the text and Lutie’s failure occurs because “she [Lutie] fails to recognize the stigma of her race and sex and her consequent disqualifications for achieving her particular version of the American dream” (Pryse 117). Lutie and Mrs. Hedges represent two opposite extremes of potential mother heroes, one seemingly noble and good, the other manipulative and capitalistic. Petry illustrates how, regardless of their status, and partially because they are African American women, they fail as mothers due to the fact that America failed them.

Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*, her third novel, published in 1977, includes a failed and a successful mother hero, thereby transitioning between the heroines of the past and creating a new heroic model for the future. Although the text seems to focus around the main character Milkman Dead and his search for identity, critic Ron David asserts that “Pilate [is] the heart, soul and spiritual center of the book” (90). Truly, Pilate encompasses the prehistoric Mother Goddess; she is respected as a supernatural being, connected to the
earth, a mother not only to her own children, but to her kin and community as well. In stark contrast to Pilate, Morrison presents Ruth (Foster) Dead, the biological mother of Milkman.

Ruth recollects the failed mothers of earlier nineteenth-century white texts. Like the other women, her upbringing and position in society contribute to her incapacity to perform as a successful hero. Christian explains,

As the daughter of the town’s only black doctor, Ruth was bred to [her] narrow existence [first as property of her father, then her husband] so thoroughly that all her passion is directed first to her father who gave her life, and then to the son whom she unnaturally nurses until late in childhood because she needs some physical contact, some connection with Nature. (56)

Ruth appropriates an ideal of motherhood, the mother-child bond, and perverts it to accommodate her own inability to control her circumstances.

Furthermore, the text exposes Ruth’s reasoning for becoming a mother to Milkman as ignoble and selfish, a situation evocative of
Mrs. Hedges’ choices. Both Ruth and Mrs. Hedges considered their own needs, financial or emotional before considering the consequences to their children:

Her son had never been a person to her . . . . He had always been a passion. Because she had been so desperate to lie with her husband and have another baby by him, the son she bore was first off a wished-for bond between herself and Macon, something to hold them together and restate their sex lives. (Morrison 131)

When the son she produced fails to create a bond, she transfers her feelings to Milkman, nursing him until he is “too old” (Morrison 126). Her son does not need the biological nourishment she provides for or forces upon him. Macon “Milkman” Dead III needs spiritual and parental guidance; Pilate, Milkman’s aunt, figurative mother, and powerful maternal entity, provides the said necessary guidance for Milkman.

Although the primary conflict of Song of Solomon lies with Milkman and his desire to discover his identity, Milkman only constitutes one of two main characters. David asserts (and I agree),
Pilate was by every meaningful definition of the term, the Main Character. . . [She] was the standard against which we judged the other characters (and ourselves): an intuitive genius, a passionate humanist, a friend who will visit you even after you die; a mother who will protect you from a bad man without forgetting that the bad man has a mother too. (90)

Pilate is an actual mother to Reba and grandmother to Hagar; she is the spiritual mother for everyone else. Her conjuring brought Milkman to life and the threat of her power kept him alive. Christian explains, “In a most significant way, Milkman is even more Pilate’s child than Macon’s [or Ruth’s] for without her conjuring, he would not have been conceived or born” (55). She mothers the people of her community by selling bootleg liquor (to ease their troubles), as well as holistic medicines, and sound advice when asked.

Pilate proves herself as a mother hero numerous times throughout the text. Pilate very much becomes a maternal warrior when she defends her children; as Pilate considers all people her
children, this seems like a relatively daunting task. However, because she is always earnest and never in vain, she handles her heroic deeds with a grace and power not seen by any other character in *Song of Solomon* or possibly found in any literature. Pilate’s inherent unselfishness confirms her as not only a model of African American female heroism, but as a heroic model people of all cultures can hope to emulate.

One example of Pilate’s maternal heroism occurs when she defends her daughter, Reba, from being beaten by a man. Pilate never forgets her position as a mother, nor does she neglect the fact that the attacker has a mother, too. Pilate stops the attack on her daughter and explains herself to the man:

> You see, darlin, that there is the only child I got . . . .

> Women are foolish, you know, and mamas are the most foolish of all. And you know how mamas are, don’t you?

> You got a mama ain’t you? Sure you have, so you know what I’m talking about. (Morrison 94)

I will revisit her power as a conjure woman in depth in Chapter 3. Her ability to conjure and mother stem from the same root, the Mother Goddess, and therefore often overlap.
Pilate must protect her daughter, but she refuses to brutally harm the man (as he has done to Reba) because she does not want his mother to feel the sadness and hurt Pilate feels. Her deed is heroic because she not only saves her daughter, but she shows mercy to her adversary.\textsuperscript{31}

Like many great heroes, Pilate dies heroically and in the arms of her “son” Milkman. Pilate’s death and her dying words elevate her to the status of a savior. She dies while assisting Milkman in finding his identity (through and because of her, he is saved). Her final words reflect her undying love for her daughter and demonstrate her only regret: her inability to know and love more people (in other words, be a mother to more people). “Watch Reba for me . . . I wish I’d a knowed more people. I would of loved ‘em all. If I’d a knowed more, I would a loved more” (Morrison 336). Pilate’s martyrdom returns African American women to the ideals of the primordial Mother Goddess, who first created, then protected and loved her children.

Pilate is not the only mother hero of Toni Morrison’s texts whose mother love and deeds lead her children to a more fulfilling life.

\textsuperscript{31} Such actions of mercy represented heroism in the legends of King Arthur and other medieval texts. A true knight would always show mercy to one who asks. To disobey this creed would be to lose status as a knight and hero.
Sethe, from Morrison’s Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *Beloved*, published in 1987, exhibits all the traits of a mother hero and encompasses the epitome of mother love.

The novel begins with the ghost of a girl child haunting the house of her family. Although aware that the baby died by having her throat cut, the reader is unaware of the circumstances behind the murder. Halfway through the novel, Morrison clarifies: in an attempt to protect her children from the horrors of slavery, Sethe, the mother, tries to kill them. Of four children, Beloved is the only successful murder. Is Sethe a model of African American female heroism? Sethe believes her deed heroic and Morrison agrees, “It was absolutely the right thing to do . . . . but she had no right to do it. I think if I had seen what she had seen [Sethe was a slave], and knew what was in store, . . . I think I would have done the same thing. But it’s also the thing you have no right to do” (qtd. in Rothstein 195). Because of Sethe’s love for and need to protect her children, Beloved is dead. Much like the heroines of the past (Edna in Chopin’s *The Awakening* and Helga in Larsen’s *Quicksand*), Beloved has gained precious freedom in death;
she will never be enslaved, abused, or exploited by the white patriarchal system that enslaved, abused, and exploited her mother.

Morrison received some harsh criticism regarding Sethe’s actions. In response, she further defends Sethe’s mother heroism, and implies the heroism of all mothers,

One of the nice things that women do... is nurture and love something other than themselves – they do that rather nicely. Instinctively, perhaps, but they are certainly taught to do it, socialized to do it, or genetically predisposed to do it – whatever it is, it’s something I think the majority of women feel strongly about. But mother love is also a killer. (195)

32 Stanley Crouch, in his review for The New Republic simultaneously attacks Morrison’s writing and feminist ideology: “[Beloved] explains black behavior in terms of social conditioning, as if listing atrocities solves the mystery of human motive and behavior. It is designed to placate sentimental feminist ideology, and to make sure that the vision of black woman as the most scorned and rebuked of the victims doesn’t weaken” (201). Crouch reads the text as a political novel, which in some aspects may be true. However, the background of Beloved, and the fact that it is, at least in part, based on a true occurrence, makes Crouch’s already shameful review even more inane. Ron David explains,

In 1851, a slave named Margaret Garner escaped from a plantation in Kentucky and fled with her four children to a town outside Cincinnati, Ohio. When she was tracked down by her master’s slave catchers, Margaret Garner tried to kill her children so that they couldn’t be forced into a life of slavery. Only one of the children died, but Garner said she’d rather her children were dead than made slaves and “murdered by piecemeal.” What struck Morrison was that even after she was imprisoned for the murder of her own child, Margaret Garner believed that she had done the right thing. She refused to allow her children to suffer as she had done. (112)
Sethe justifies the murder of her daughter, and the attempted murder of her other children and herself (she intends to commit suicide) with love. She loved her child so much she would go to any extreme to protect her. Though Sethe’s behavior may be viewed as horrific and irrational, in Beloved’s case, the only protection Sethe could offer was death. Powers eloquently summarizes,

Sethe’s survival, Denver’s miraculous birth, the fact that her children are kept from Schoolteacher and the nephews, Beloved’s death, her sons’ disappearance, her mother-in-law’s misery – all came about because of Sethe’s unquestioning commitment to something larger than herself, to her children. (187)

Morrison’s narrative choices perhaps seem extreme, but nonetheless effectively highlight the crisis entailed in a search for female African American identity and heroism. In contrast to Morrison’s violent and tragic story of mother love, Paule Marshall’s Praisesong for the Widow, offers a powerfully enlightening look into one African American mother/woman’s life. Marshall’s main character, Avey Johnson, encompasses a mother hero and the idea of
one who becomes heroic through questing and journeys;\(^{33}\) the text itself, interwoven with African and African American myth and symbolism, becomes a heroic guide to assist African American women (and men to some extent) in recovering their identities. Abena P. A. Busia, Associate Professor at Rutgers explains,

This novel becomes a journey not only for Avey, but for her readers, for to appreciate the widow’s experiences fully, the reader must journey with her in the same active process of recognizing and reassembling cultural signs . . . By the end of the journey, that life has taken on new meaning, and it becomes a representative journey for all New World diaspora children. (196)

Marshall, Avey, and the text all have the same noble goal: to recover what was lost during the Diaspora, and to present solutions rather than despair for African Americans.\(^{34}\)

Avey Johnson is a realistic hero because she does not arise from

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\(^{33}\) Classic “quest heroes,” typically male, include Hercules, Ulysses, and King Arthur and many of his Knights.

\(^{34}\) Diaspora literally means a scattering or separating of people. The African Diaspora specifically refers to the separation and destruction of family and culture through the slave trade between the United States and Africa.
a space of perfection but rather from an emulative and attainable position. She begins as a lost soul who must struggle and overcome obstacles only to reluctantly attain her status as hero.\footnote{Her struggle toward heroism is reminiscent of Jesus' similar questioning and final acceptance of his position as hero; see the Biblical story of the Garden of Gethsemane.} The story begins with Avey recalling the words of her daughter, Marion, who questions and foreshadows Avey’s imminent struggle. “Why go on some meaningless cruise with a bunch of white folks... What’s that supposed to be about?... Why can’t you be a little imaginative, for God’s sake, a little independent, and go off on your own somewhere. Learn something!” (Marshall 14-15). Marion’s name, a form of Mary, the mother of Jesus, is also significant as a reference to a mother hero. In Catholicism, Mary is known as the Great Intervener; she cannot deny what people ask of her and she relays prayers to Jesus. Similarly, Marion, who recognizes that her mother has lost her identity as an African American woman, attempts to intervene in Avey’s life and sets Avey’s quest in motion.

Avey’s full and true name, Avatara, also foreshadows her eventual rise to heroism. Taken from the Hindu religion, an “avatar”
is an incarnation of a god who comes in bodily form to earth to assist humans who have gone astray. Avey’s name becomes ironic because she is not only the reluctant avatar, she is one of the people in need of assistance. Avatara’s name, significantly the feminine form of avatar, also represents the maternal connection among female heroes and African culture originally associated with the Mother Goddess of prehistoric Africa. Marshall reminds us that African American oral tradition (from which much of the culture stems), “[is] handed down along female lines” (Pryse 4). Avey can only attain her position as hero if she accepts and continues that tradition. Furthermore, Busia notes,

The widow’s name is Avatara, a name given her by her father’s Great-Aunt Cuney in memory of Cuney’s own grandmother . . . . [I]t is the name of the woman from whom Great-Aunt Cuney learned, at Tatem, the story of Ibo Landing, which carries the spiritual burden of the tale, and it is the name given by her to the woman who finally
understands that tale and accepts the mission to pass it on.\textsuperscript{36} (210)

The “spiritual burden” Busia refers to occurs because at age ten, Avey misinterpreted the myth, thereby separating herself from the other matriarchs of her family, the Ibo (Africa) and her heritage. Her burden cannot and will not be lifted until she accepts that she is a daughter and a mother of the Ibo and the tale reflects herself and her people.

Through much trial and tribulation, including a spiritual and physical cleansing, Avey finally reconnects to herself and her people and fulfills her destiny as a hero. On the Caribbean island of Carricou, Avey (re)discovers her heritage in a dance called The Beg Pardon. The dance connects Avey to her Great-Aunt Cuney and her African ancestors. A day before The Beg Pardon, Avey could not answer simple questions regarding her identity or her nation. After the dance, when the same question is asked, “who you is?”, Avey is finally capable of answering:

And as a mystified Avey Johnson gave her name, she

\textsuperscript{36} See pages 37-39 for the tale of Ibo Landing, as told by Great-Aunt Cuney.
suddenly remembered her Great-Aunt Cuney’s admonition long ago. The old woman used to insist, on pain of a switching, that whenever anyone in Tatem, even another child, asked her her name she was not to say simply “Avey,” or even “Avey Williams.” But always “Avey, short for Avatara.” (Marshall 251)

Avey finally realizes what her Great-Aunt always knew: she is destined to be a hero. Christian explains,

That Avey now recognizes herself as Avatara is also essential to the ritual [of becoming an African American female hero], for in African cosmology it is through nommo, the correct naming of a thing that it comes into existence. By knowing her proper name, Avey becomes herself. (158)

Through her name, Avey recognizes her matriarchal and heroic self (she was named for her Great-Aunt Cuney’s grandmother); thus she must pursue heroic goals: the betterment and enlightenment of her people and/or community. As stated in the Introduction, I define a hero “as someone (male or female) who has ‘noble qualities’ or
performs 'noble achievements,' and those qualities and achievements
better the hero and his or her community, social setting, or culture.

Avey plans to begin her journey into heroism with the taxi
driver who will take her to the airport.

Nor would she stop with the taxi driver, but would take it
upon herself to speak of the excursion to others elsewhere
.... As they [persons once like her] rushed blindly in and
out of the glacier buildings, unaware, unprotected, lacking
memory and a necessary distance of the mind ... she
would stop them, tell them about the floor in Halsey
Street and quote them the line from her namesake: “Her
body she always usta say might be in Tatem but her mind,
her mind was long gone with the Ibos.” (Marshall 255)

Like Pilate, the hero and savior of Song of Solomon, Avey decides to
become a savior and hero to her people. Enlisting the help of her
daughter Marion, an avatar from the beginning, they will spread “the
word” (Marshall 255).37

37 Once again, Avey and Marion’s actions are reminiscent of Jesus’ feats of going forth and
spreading The Word of God in order to save his people.
The mother figure as a female hero remains strong in African American literature and tradition. The successful mothers thrive because they do not stop by mothering only their own children; instead, like Pilate and Avatara, their mother love catapults them into the world to teach the values of culture and history in order to protect and ensure a better future.

Despite Pilate and Avatara’s successful navigation of the boundaries connecting motherhood, heroism, and burdens of spirituality, both figures remain inseparable from their Anglo-European counterparts. Only through the figure of the conjure woman does the female heroic model successfully free herself from her position as a deviation of the Anglo model.
Chapter 3
The Conjure Woman:
An Original African American Hero

“Oh yes! Oh yes!
I been conjurin’.
Oh yes! Oh yes!
I been killin’.
No cause, no cause, no cause
In de worl’ . . .”

Conjure Tale, qtd. in From Trickster to Badman, John W. Roberts

My previous chapters introduced and focused on African American female heroes who were modeled, at least in part, on white heroines. This chapter will reveal a truly unique African American heroine: the conjure woman. While the conjure woman may share some traits with the mother hero introduced in Chapter 2, unlike the mother-figure hero, the conjure woman has little connection to or history associated with Anglo American culture; she is derived solely from African mythology (the ancient Mother Goddess) and religion. While her legacy and power changed with the Diaspora, through folk (oral) tradition she brought hope, inspiration, and a sense of community to a seemingly powerless and hopeless slave people.
John W. Roberts, former Associate Professor at the University of Pennsylvania, explains how the Diaspora altered African religion, thereby carving a place for the conjure woman. "... Africans enslaved in America attempted to reconstitute their religious institutions in America. However, the conditions imposed on them by enslavement prevented them from reconstituting their religions in pristine forms" (69). In Africa, priests and medicine-men performed the tasks that in America would rest with conjurers. John Mbiti, former professor of theology and religion at Makerere University, Uganda, notes that, in African culture "the priest's role was basically that of a 'spiritual pastor of the community and nation'" while "the medicine-man role . . . was less directly institutional in that it dealt with individual concerns, 'with illness, disease, and misfortune'" (Roberts 71, Mbiti 1).

In African American tradition, the conjure woman encompasses both roles and often incorporates voodoo into her repertoire. The OED defines voodoo as, "a form of religious witchcraft prevalent among Blacks in the West Indies, especially Haiti, and the Southern United States, and ultimately of African origin." Voodoo practitioners use magic (often associated with nature) and old world wisdom to protect,
heal, counsel, and/or counteract other voodoo magic. While not all conjure women perform voodoo, all conjure women exhibit magical or mystical qualities. The conjure women use said qualities to assist in building community, both physically and spiritually, thus challenging the traditional Western Christian idea that magic equates to mystery and evil and must be eradicated.

Men were also conjurers, however the primary “magicians” were women, partly because of their connection to nature and the ancient Mother Goddess, but also because, according to Marjorie Pryse, “[b]lack women have long possessed ‘magical’ powers and told their daughters stories” (3). Women became the dominant spiritualists in slave culture because they were less likely to be sold (in comparison to male slaves) due to their use by slave owners as mammies and mistresses, and thus constituted a relatively stable entity within the slave community. Rarely is such precious stability located within a matriarchy; this stability elaborates the visionary and ongoing qualities associated with the conjurer.

What particular qualities constitute a person as a conjurer? The ever-skeptical *OED* states, “One who practices conjuration; one who
conjures spirits and pretends to perform miracles by their aid; a
magician, wizard.” Of course, the definition provided by the *OED* is
somewhat problematic as the dictionary represents the pinnacle of
Western tradition. Traditional Anglo-European culture cannot
understand or appreciate a culture that varies from the conventional
Christian point of view and thus relegates conjurers to a position of
childlike ignorance. In order to discover a less cynical representation
of conjurers, we must look to people who understood, and continue to
understand, the literal and spiritual power of conjure women. Charles
W. Chesnutt, author of *The Conjure Woman*, a collection of stories
collected/created as early as 1887, focuses his definition less on the
magical properties of conjure and more on the social aspects:

> The practice of conjure is complexly characterized, . . . it
> combines the occult properties of magic with the this-
> worldly, even businesslike properties of a social
> administration system . . . . But above all conjure figures
> as a recourse, a form of power available to the powerless
> in mortally intolerable situations. (Brodhead 9)
While the *OED* explains that conjurers merely pretend, and the spells cast literally did not alleviate a slave owner’s cruelty, in reality, like the mothers discussed in Chapter 2, conjurers offered comfort and a sense of protection to a people who lived in constant turmoil and chaos. “Moreover,” Roberts explains,

> enslaved Africans enshrined conjurers as folk heroes not because they viewed their actions as a direct threat to the masters’ physical power but because their spiritual attributes and behaviors reflected values that they accepted as the most advantageous to their survival and well-being in a rigid hierarchical social structure in which communal welfare had precedence over individual need.

(95)

Furthermore, conjure tales, or stories relaying the exploits and powers of conjurers, enhanced their legacy, giving them a mythic, hero-of/from-the-people status. These oral tales were often shared in and presented to groups, thus bringing together a disjointed people into a connected community. Roberts elucidates that the conjure tale, even more so than the conjurer, actually held power:
Cloaked in mystery, often distinguished by a striking appearance, possessed of the power of clairvoyance, and steeped in both mystical and practical knowledge of healing and their community, conjurers were repeatedly revealed in conjure tales as individuals of extraordinary powers. (emphasis added, 98-99)

Although conjurers would have existed regardless of conjure tales, the reputation and promotion of their powers gained recognition and strength through the oral tradition. In other words, the tales, moreso than the acts of the conjurers, created celebrities, legends, and heroes; the conjure tales were in and of themselves a potent form of conjuring and heroism that possess the capability of standing alone.

Zora Neale Hurston recognized the power of oral folk tradition and additionally acknowledged the lack of African American women participating in the written transcription of this power. Until 1935 when she published *Mules and Men*, Charles W. Chesnutt was the only African American to document conjure tales. Pryse contends that “Hurston called an abrupt halt to the cultural attitude that excluded black women from literature because it excluded them from other
kinds of power. *Mules and Men* used the power of the written text itself as a form of magic” (11).

And the magic of the conjure tale translates into a powerful act of heroism. Robert Hemenway, in his Introduction, examines how *Mules and Men*, the text, qualifies as heroic because it documents noble achievements for the benefit of the community:

The sayings and songs of *Mules and Men* document a culture. The tales here are *not* the quaint, childish entertainments of a primitive tribe. They are the complex cultural communications permitted an oppressed people, their school lessons, their heroic biographies, their psychic savings banks, their children’s legacies. Black folk tales illustrate how an entire people adapted and survived in the new world experience, how they transformed what they found into a distinctive way of life.

(xxii)

Zora Neale Hurston may also be considered a hero, as she documented the folk tales, not only for her own community, but to share and preserve a culture that had been stereotyped as one without
“significant ideas, expressive forms, or cultural creations” (Hemenway xxvi). Her documentation demonstrates heroism as well; she took “extreme risks . . . to collect the lore” (Hemenway xv). Hemenway calls her a “true participant-observer, willing to subject herself to almost any danger to gather materials” (xv). Hurston not only sat on storefront porches to collect trickster and conjure tales, she partook in voodoo (hoodoo) rituals in order to gain access to conjure culture.

Cheryl A. Wall, in her article “Mules and Men and Women: Zora Neale Hurston’s Strategies of Narration and Visions of Female Empowerment,” explains the importance of hoodoo to the African American community and especially for African American women:

For Hurston, hoodoo was an intrinsic part of that “which the soul lives by”; it was a means by which Afro-Americans could exert control over their interior lives. Metaphysically decentered and clerically nonhierarchical, hoodoo offered some women a more expansive vision of themselves than did Christianity. Within hoodoo, women were the spiritual equals of men. They had the authority to speak and to act. (672)
In short, Wall demonstrates that “hoodoo was particularly empowering for women” (673). Hoodoo offered African American women a chance at authority and heroism denied to them in an Anglo-dominated, Christian society. Hoodoo equalized women, giving them, at least psychologically, power previously offered only to men: they could heal and harm, protect and lead, advise and direct.

In conjure culture, as Hurston discovered, the greatest conjure woman in the United States, considered the “queen of conjure,” was Marie Leveau. Leveau was a hero and eventually became a legend to many people in New Orleans; because of her renowned power, male and female conjurers alike “claimed some knowledge and link with Marie Leveau” (Hurston 200). Leveau’s authority lay not only in her ability to execute hoodoo, but also in her connection to the community. According to David Arbury of Arizona State University, “Marie frequently visited the sick in New Orleans’ prisons, and she was called upon by the city’s elite to combat the Yellow Fever epidemic of the 1850’s . . . . She went to great pains to help the injured, sick, and downtrodden” (2). Her spiritual and physical acts enshrine her as a real-life conjure woman hero. And she remains influential today.
Thousands of tourists and natives visit Leveau’s tomb (in a New Orleans’ cemetery) every year, leaving gifts in hopes of receiving favors from her spirit.\textsuperscript{38}

Unlike Marie Leveau, who was both a material embodiment and later fictionalized conjurer, the conjure women I explore here are fictional. The three title characters from Ntozake Shange’s novel \textit{Sassafrass, Cypress \& Indigo}, and Pilate from Morrison’s \textit{Song of Solomon} exhibit conjure qualities and qualify as noble heroes among their family and community.

The first sentence of Shange’s text introduces the connection between conjuring and women and foreshadows the magic of the novel and the characters within it. “Where there is a woman there is magic” (Shange 3). Furthermore,

If there is a moon falling from her mouth, she is a woman who knows her magic, who can share or not share her powers. A woman with a moon falling from her mouth, roses between her legs and tiaras of Spanish moss, this

\textsuperscript{38} Information about Marie Leveau’s tomb located at www.yatcom.com/neworl/naborhud/stlouisone/marielaveau, provided by Yatcom Communications, 1996.
woman is a consort of the spirits. (3)

The next sentence introduces us to Indigo, a girl with the moon in her mouth and aware of her special connection to her African ancestors, to nature, and to the spirits.

Shange’s text intersperses Indigo’s conjuring with explanations as to why she participates in magic: “There wasn’t enough for Indigo in the world she’d been born to, so she made up what she needed. What she thought the black people needed. Access to the moon. The power to heal. Daily visits with the spirits” (4-5). Indigo not only talks about what she feels her African American brethren need, she writes down her spells, which are never evil, and willingly shares them with others. Indigo demonstrates her heroism as a conjure woman because her magic connects her to her African heritage (conjuring/voodoo originates in Africa/the Caribbean), and she uses her magic selflessly and for the betterment of her race. For example, Indigo calls one enchantment “Numbers for the Prosperity & Furthered Independence of the Race” (42).
Indigo’s voodoo spells engage nature, and present protection and solace, thus linking her to the primeval Mother Goddess. Meredith Powers describes the “goddess as heroine,” and though Powers is not directly referring to Indigo, the goddess comprises many of Indigo’s (and other conjurer’s) qualities. Powers asserts, This goddess as heroine has little interest in personal aggrandizement. She is most certainly a figure outside of or in rebellion against the conventions and restrictions of male society, at least passively in opposition to man-governance and perhaps also the metaphoric centrality of the male in society, but she is not evil, so much as unmovable. (144)

Like Zora Neale Hurston and Marie Leveau, Indigo does not seek “personal aggrandizement.” She chronicles her magic in hopes of preserving and advancing an ancient tradition. Like her conjuring predecessors, Indigo does not stop at mere documentation; she applies her Mother Goddess powers by becoming a midwife on the Gullah

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39 See Chapter 2 pp. 1-6 for a full explanation of the Mother Goddess.
islands, where she more directly connects to her ancestors and gains respect in her trade. Furthermore, Indigo demonstrates the protection conjure offers women by standing immobile against male dominance. When some boys in her neighborhood torment her, she protects herself and reprimands them through conjuring with her fiddle. She calls on the spirits to help her and her voice becomes the fiddle.

Still there was no doubt she’d told them to leave her be & they didn’t. Indigo closed her eyes tight like she was fixing to run or scream; instead she said: “Falcon come in this fiddle. Falcon come in this fiddle. Leopard come in this fiddle. Leopard come in this fiddle. I’m on the prey. I’m on the prey.” ’Fore she knew it, Indigo was so busy bowing the daylights & jungles out her violin, she didn’t notice the two boys duck down on the other side of the fence. When she opened her eyes, she realized she’d stood her ground. (Shange 38)

40 “Located on the Sea Islands of South Carolina and Georgia are communities of people who are the descendants of enslaved Africans. They have a unique culture that is directly linked to West Africa” (www.knowitall.org/gullahtales).
Her internal magic, her connection to ancient African ways, enlightens Indigo and allows her self-knowing and self-preservation. Indigo becomes possessed by her magic (a common occurrence in voodoo culture) and her power exhibits itself externally through her fiddle. She only realizes she defended herself after the moment has passed and the boys have hidden. As a result of her powerful display, Indigo is the first girl in her neighborhood to become a Junior Geechee Captain, a heroic endeavor. Indigo refuses to remain silent and submissive in the face of implicitly dominant males, thus defying “the feminine ideal of powerlessness and despair” (Powers 115). She uses conjure to protect herself and demonstrate the potential strength of all women.

Indigo also adheres to the maternal aspect of the Mother Goddess. In particular, two of her spells involve the nurturing and care one would traditionally associated with motherhood: “Emergency Care of Open Wounds / When It Hurts” and “Emergency Care of Wounds That Cannot Be Seen.” She administers these spells to Mabel, a woman in need of a hero, who has just been beaten by her boyfriend, Pretty Man.
Even after Indigo has grown and ceased to participate in voodoo she retains her connection to the Mother Goddess by becoming a midwife. In the end, she delivers her sister’s baby, bringing the matriarchy and the story full circle.

Indigo is not the only woman in Shange’s novel to participate in conjure. Cypress, Indigo’s sister, joins a dance group called Azure Bosom, an exclusively female alliance which empowers women through dance, just as voodoo empowers women and often involves dance to connect to the spirits. Barbara Christian explicates,

Rooted in the image of the Haitian voodun, Erzulie, Azure Bosom’s dances celebrate female culture, protest the abuse of woman’s body, and free “the coquette from the responsibility of breaking men’s hearts,” allowing “women to linger in their own eroticism, to be happy with loving themselves.”

Cypress does not participate long in Azure Bosom as she feels she

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needs to be a hero to her entire culture, not just the female half. She joins a different dance ensemble called Soil and Soul that “[goes] all over to raise money and morale... for the Civil Rights Movement” (210).

Cypress and Indigo’s sister, Sassafrass, also participates in conjure and it actually saves her spiritually and physically. Her heroism lies with the fact that she represents the abused and broken woman who finds strength, through conjure, to rise again; she becomes a model hero for other women to follow.

Sassafrass and her abusive boyfriend Mitch join a commune called The New World Found Collective, a group of people trying to reconnect to their heritage through old world African religions. Sassafrass desires to be a Santera, which the OED describes as “a priestess of a religious cult, especially santeria.” The people of the commune practice santeria, “an Afro-Cuban religious cult” (OED). Similar to voodoo, santeria involves rituals and offerings to multiple gods or spirits; as in voodoo the connection to the spirits is often gained through dance. Sassafrass cannot become a Santera because
“the bad spirit on her head [Mitch] confounded all her desires”
(Shange 215).

But Sassafrass finds redemption in a mother goddess, Oshun, the Yoruban goddess of love and beauty. During a ritual, Sassafrass becomes possessed by Oshun and finally recognizes her own power: “Sassafrass was in the throes of the wrath of Oshun. How dare you betray me? Her foot stomped. How dare you not recognize my beauty?” (Shange 217). And Oshun, her mother goddess, leads Sassafrass, pregnant with Mitch’s child, home to her own earthly mother where she finds comfort in the matriarchy of her family. The final sentence of the text encapsulates the feminine magic introduced in the first sentence: “Mama was there” (Shange 225).

And then there is Pilate. Pilate, Morrison’s powerful character from *Song of Solomon*, who also embodied the mother hero discussed in Chapter 2, fully encompasses the conjure hero.

Pilate’s connection to the old African religions manifests itself in two ways. First, through her devotion to her family and community (often synonymous terms) connects her to ancient African traditions;
second, her “supernatural” birth and uniqueness of body (she lacks a navel) destines her to be a conjure woman and a hero. Roberts explains,

In studies of traditional African religious practices, it is clear that religious specialists, especially in the medicine man role [which became the conjure woman in America], were frequently consulted to intercede, explain, prevent, and provide counteractants in various situations which threatened the functioning of the community. (73)

People of the community and her family consult Pilate for answers to their troubles, their past, and their future. Her neighbors seek her for natural (and unnatural, in the case of her bootleg liquor) remedies for their physical, emotional, and mental ailments. Her nephew, Milkman, conceived and alive because of Pilate’s conjuring, learns part of his family history through her tale-telling, thus connecting her to the

42 Yorubans are an ethnic group of West Africa.
storytellers like Hurston who used conjure to preserve and protect African (and African American) experiences.  

Because of her unusual, even somewhat unnatural birth and her resulting lack of a navel, Pilate is, as Roberts states, “cloaked in mystery, [and] distinguished by a striking appearance,” thus giving her the corporeal characteristics of a conjure woman (98). Because magic and voodoo is based on internal wisdom and spirituality, Pilate’s magic may not necessarily emanate from her outer features; however, her birth and body certainly foreshadow and symbolize her innate power. Macon, Pilate’s brother, describes her miraculous birth and physical abnormality,  

After their mother died, she [Pilate] had come struggling out of the womb without help from throbbing muscles or the pressure of swift womb water. As a result, for all the years he knew her, her stomach was as smooth and sturdy as her back, at no place interrupted by a navel. It was the absence of a navel that convinced people that she had not  

43 Pilate’s tales introduce Milkman to his heritage, but it is the people of Shalimar, a small, exclusively African American town in the South, and their songs and stories that fully enlighten and resolve the mysteries of Milkman’s (and Pilate’s) history.
come into the world through normal channels. (Morrison 27-28)

People fear and respect Pilate; they rarely question her actions because people acknowledge her as a conjurer. We learn of her reputation among the community when she rescues her daughter from being attacked. The man attacking Reba is obviously an out-of-towner, otherwise,

He would have known not to fool with anything that belonged to Pilate, who never bothered anybody, was helpful to everybody, but who was also believed to have the power to step out of her skin, set a bush on fire from fifty yards, and turn a man into a ripe rutabaga – all on account of the fact that she had no navel. (Morrison 95)

Pilate’s conjuring and voodoo also allowed for the conception and survival of Milkman. Ruth seeks Pilate’s assistance to reinstate physical relations between herself and her husband, Macon. Like Indigo’s spells, and most voodoo magic, Pilate gives Ruth a concoction made of natural elements, “greenish-gray grassy-looking stuff, to ... mix with rain water [and] put in his [Macon’s] food” (125,
The conjuring works and Ruth begets Macon Jr. When Macon discovers the pregnancy, he “immediately suspected Pilate and told [Ruth] to get rid of the baby” (125). Once again, Pilate intercedes with a common voodoo warning:

[Pilate] told [Ruth] not to worry. Macon wouldn’t bother her no more; she, Pilate, would see to it. (Years later Ruth learned that Pilate put a small doll on Macon’s chair in his office. A male doll with a small painted chicken bone stuck between its legs and a round red circle painted on its belly . . . . [H]e must have remembered the round fire-red stomach, for he left Ruth alone after that).

(Morrison 132)

In voodoo and conjure culture, dolls can either connect a person to the spirits, or serve as a powerful reminder of a conjurer’s powers, as in Morrison’s text. Because of Pilate’s magic, Milkman survives and eventually reconstructs the Dead family history.

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44 In Shange’s novel, Indigo has a very close relationship to her dolls; they are her companions. Her dolls are witness to all of her magic and possess a magic of their own: Indigo speaks to them and they speak back. They are also fashioned in a similar manner typical of voodoo dolls, from personal and intricately selected items making them personally powerful to the one who creates them.
Through Pilate, a conjure woman, Toni Morrison seems to set the standards for creating and/or capturing a hero. However, as tradition proves, heroes rise based on the demands and needs of the common people. The conjure woman may be just a stepping stone to more original African American female heroes. From her magic may evolve other female heroes (or even male heroes if both genders can progress). As tradition proves, heroes rise based on the demands and needs of the common people. Years after the publication of *Song of Solomon*, Morrison pushes the proverbial (and traditional) envelope even further with the revolutionary text *Paradise*. 
Many women (white and African American) contributed to the creation and/or reemergence of the female hero in literature; however, I credit Kate Chopin and Toni Morrison for creating models so powerful and awe-inspiring that they (the heroes and the authors) forever changed the mythology of heroism.

**A Goddess in the Garden: Kate Chopin**

Joyce Dyer, Assistant Professor of English at Hiram College in Ohio, explains that in a time of transition (the turn of the century), Chopin’s novel, *The Awakening*, “offer[ed] the promise of new beginnings, but never the false promise that it [would] be easy” (12). Chopin moved beyond even the most radical feminists of the nineteenth century, including Perkins Gilman, to create Edna Pontellier, a fully sentient and sexual being reminiscent of
“Diana/Artemis, Eve, Venus/Aphrodite, and Ariadne” (Dyer 56). Edna exhibits a few characteristics of each of these legendary women. Like Diana/Artemis, she is a hunter, though she hunts for identity and freedom. Like Eve, she longs for forbidden knowledge and is ostracized once she finds it. She symbolizes Venus/Aphrodite when she discovers her own beauty and sexuality. As with Ariadne, she begins as a mortal woman, but eventually rises to immortality. By combining the qualities of past goddesses into one Edna Pontellier, Chopin created a new goddess with a new mythology. But neither Edna, a mortal woman, nor the world was ready in 1899; The Awakening was highly criticized, poorly received, and Edna commits suicide in the end. One hundred years later, Toni Morrison tries again.

Paradise Found

Nearly two thousand years after the Bible and three hundred thirty years after Milton published Paradise Lost, two texts which changed the course (or at least the view) of history, Toni Morrison wrote Paradise. In Paradise, she refashions mythology and attempts

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45 Of Greco/Roman legend, Diana/Artemis was the goddess of the moon, hunt, and woodlands. Venus/Aphrodite was the goddess of love and beauty. Ariadne was a Cretan princess who eventually became a goddess. Of Christian legend, Eve was the first woman.
to reinstate the Mother Goddess hero. Her task is not easy; can two thousand years of patriarchy be brought down in one novel? If the answer is not a resounding “Yes,” the novel is at least the first stone in the pond; other authors and texts may provide the ripples and eventual waves that could permanently restructure the canon. Meredith Powers delineates the arduous obstacle Morrison faces: “Thus the prodigious forces which converged to obscure authentic feminine archetypes in storytelling were eventually elevated by the irrefutable premise of male monotheism, and metamorphosed into the most ungiving authority of all, tradition” (138). Through irony, sarcasm and implicit criticism, Morrison, aware of the white, male, Protestant tradition that binds Americans, rewrites everything. Ron David explains, 

_Paradise_ is a myth about the relationship between myth and truth – or, on a less lofty level, about the relationship between storytelling and reality. It is a myth about how myths are formed, changed and DE-formed [just as the Mother Goddess was deformed into a Father God]. (174)

In _Paradise_, Morrison creates unique and exceptional African American female heroes who encompass all aspects of female
heroism: they die rather than live in oppression; they are mothers in either the communal or literal sense; they are conjure women who become legend as they all survive (or are at least resurrected from) their slaughterhouse-style murder.

**After Eden, What Happens Next?**

Like Chopin’s *The Awakening*, *Paradise* was received with mixed reviews, many of which were negative. Many critics faltered in the overwhelming genealogy of Haven and Ruby, found the characters two-dimensional and unconvincing, thought the theme (or what they believed to be the theme) too trite and problematic to be considered “big-L” literature (although canonical literature usually encompasses some or all of these themes): good versus evil, men against women, young against old, past versus present. And that is precisely the point. Marjorie Pryse asserts,

...[B]ased on magic, oral inheritance, and the need to struggle against oppression, black women writers enlarge our *conventional assumptions* about the nature and

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46 Much of this particular criticism is taken from Michiko Kakutani’s *New York Times* review, January 6, 1998, but it is a fair representation of the overall negative feedback the novel received.
function of literary tradition. Focusing on connection rather than separation, transforming silence into speech, and giving back power to the culturally disenfranchised, black women writers [like Morrison, Marshall, Kincaid, Bambara, and others] affirm the wholeness and endurance of a vision that, once articulated, can be shared – through its heritage, roots, survival, and intimate possession belong to black women alone. (emphasis added, 5)

Morrison’s *Paradise* mocks the idea that white, Western tradition has the only viable mythology and articulates a new mythology spoken (written) by an African American woman, but certainly not limited to the African American culture.

Toni Morrison re-discovers what the white, male tradition attempted to exclude. Pryse concludes, “Examining black women fiction writers’ literary tradition ought to generate at least the same excitement scientists feel when they find a new solar system in the making; we are privileged to have a chance to watch first-hand the process of evolution in the tradition” (22). Pryse’s comments from 1985 seem prophetic in light of Morrison’s *Paradise*. Chopin’s *The
Awakening, was published on the verge of a new century, bringing white women’s literature to a new plateau. Likewise, Morrison’s Paradise, was published in 1997 on the verge of a new millennium.

With this revolutionary text, Morrison becomes the chthonic Goddess who first splinters past notions of heroic models, and from the wreckage creates and strengthens heroes who transcend the dominant ideas of race and gender. The evolution of African American women’s literature continues, and with it new heroes will rise.
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