

# THE PRIMAL ARCHETYPAL AND MYTHICAL CRONE IN TONI MORRISON'S PORTRAYALS OF THE ELDER WOMAN

## LA PRIMIGENIA ARQUETÍPICA Y MÍTICA ANCIANA/BRUJA EN LAS REPRESENTACIONES DE TONI MORRISON SOBRE LA MUJER MAYOR

MANUELA LÓPEZ-RAMÍREZ

**Author / Autora:**

Manuela López-Ramírez

Independent Scholar

[lopez.ramirez.manuela@gmail.com](mailto:lopez.ramirez.manuela@gmail.com)

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5503-8290>

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**Abstract**

Morrison's portrayals of the elderly woman resonate with images of the wise mythical Crone, a universal image embedded in our consciousness. In pre-patriarchal societies, elder women, Crones, were associated with both life and death. The advent of patriarchy changed how aging females were perceived and their societal roles. They were diabolized, disempowered, and regarded as useless and invisible. However, Morrison's Crones are strong life forces, and an active valuable part of their communities. Morrison revalues their traditional maternal domestic roles, and motherhood and household become, respectively, a transgressive act and a site of resistance and power. With their ancestral spiritual/supernatural/healing properties, her Crones are ancestor figures and moral beacons for their communities. In her oeuvre, Morrison reassesses and reclaims the primordial pre-patriarchal crone archetype to empower and honor old black women and their contributions to the black community.

**Keywords:** Crone; Black; old/elderly; motherhood; home; community

## Resumen

Las representaciones de Morrison sobre la mujer vieja resuenan con imágenes de la sabia y mítica Anciana, una imagen universal grabada en nuestra conciencia. En las sociedades pre-patriarcales, las Ancianas estaban asociadas tanto a la vida como a la muerte. El advenimiento del patriarcado cambió la forma en que se percibía a las ancianas, y sus roles sociales. Fueron demonizadas, su poder arrebatado, y consideradas inútiles e invisibles. Sin embargo, las Ancianas de Morrison son fuerzas vitales y una parte activa y valiosa de la comunidad. Morrison revaloriza sus roles domésticos maternales tradicionales, y la maternidad y el hogar se transforman, respectivamente, en acto y lugar transgresores de resistencia y poder. Con sus propiedades espirituales/sobrenaturales/curativas ancestrales, las Ancianas de Morrison son faros morales para sus comunidades. En su obra, Morrison reevalúa y reivindica el arquetipo primordial pre-patriarcal de la Anciana para empoderar y honrar a las mujeres negras ancianas y sus contribuciones a la comunidad negra.

**Palabras clave:** Anciana; negra; anciana/vieja; maternidad; hogar; comunidad

Inspired by the ancient holy one. She [the Crone] is grandmother, witch and hag. She has been ignored or trivialized because she holds powers that others fear or deny. Power of time and transformation, of death and shadow, of wisdom and pain, of magic and wonder.

Ellen Lorenzi-Prince (*Tarot of the Crone*)

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Amongst the archetypes most frequently associated with women and their life cycle is the Great Goddess, which, in pre-patriarchal societies, was the first Holy Trinity in the form of Maiden/Mother/Crone<sup>1</sup>. There were different three-fold goddesses known to ancient religions as, for example, the Hindu Tridevi, the Greek Charites, or the Greek Horae. Some deities, generally regarded as one, included three main facets, as Hecate. Nonetheless, the

1. According to Carl Jung (1916), the collective unconscious is made up of a set of deep-seated beliefs, knowledge and imagery people are born with. They are inherited from the past collective experience of mankind, and revealed through archetypes, ancestral concepts, signs, symbols or patterns of thought or behavior common to all human beings.

contemporary notion of the Maiden/Mother/Crone figure was popularized by the poet and novelist Robert Graves (1959), who aligned the stages of the female life cycle with the moon phases, New Moon, Full Moon, and Old Moon. The theology of the Triple Goddess was adopted by feminist Neo-Paganism, as a reassessment of femininity.

The archetypal Crone, the third aspect of women's development, is thence a universal «empowering image of biological truth, female wisdom and mother right» embedded in our consciousness, which has existed across cultures and times in mythology and stories (Walker, 1985, p. 144). She embodies the principle of ancient female wisdom passed down from our ancestors, thus becoming a culture bearer and a griot. Crones rule over both creation and destruction, the eternal cycle of life and death, which is necessary for cosmic balance: «[They] gave the blessing of life, followed by the curse of death» (1985, p. 26). They used to be midwives, healers and leaders of their communities, as they had spiritual/magical/supernatural and healing powers.

Notwithstanding, the advent of patriarchy changed how elder women were perceived, and their societal roles. In patriarchal communities, the Crone, the Divine Old Woman, was feared due to her power and leadership. Therefore, Christianity endowed the Virgin and Mother with the pure and «good» qualities of the Goddess, which the Virgin Mary embodies, and the Crone started to symbolize the «negative» and evil attributes. The Crone figure became a purely wicked archetype, the witch or the hag, a stereotype that is still in force today.

Transformed «by the newly dominant patriarchy into minions of the devil» (Walker, 1985, p. 30), wise Crones began to face persecution, as in witch-hunts. From then on, Crones have been disempowered and demonized, as well as regarded as worthless and invisible, particularly those from different ethnic backgrounds. Old women have internalized socially-sanctioned patriarchal damaging and disparaging myths and images that have denigrated and belittled them, having a harmful impact on their lives. Conversely, feminists have appropriated and reclaimed the archetypal image of the Crone as a metaphor to empower the old female, and hence defy controlling social beliefs and values. As Walker asserts, what the Crone used to represent before she fell victim to patriarchal prejudices needs to be awakened, and remembered (1985, p. 38).

In Toni Morrison's literary oeuvre, the archetypal Crone comes to life. Her depictions of the aging female truly resonate with echoes of the primal Crone figure. Morrison tackles European, but also African beliefs about the old woman, who can be identified with crone archetypal images. Through the crone archetype, Morrison reshapes what it means to be an elderly black female, her life experience and its relation with the black ancestral identity, as well as her mission in the midst of the black community. She empowers and reclaims the wise mythical Crone and her crucial communal role.

Thusly, in this article, I delve into Morrison's elder women through the lens of the mythical Crone. I have specially drawn from seminal works of Barbara Walker (1985), Christine Downing (1987, 2010) and Deanna J. Conway (2004), which offer insightful ideas on the Crone. I mainly focus on the following aspects: motherhood, home, and community. I limit my analysis to some of Morrison's aging females in only six of her novels: Mrs. Mac Teer and M'Dear in *The Bluest Eye*, Eva Peace in *Sula*, Pilate and Circe in *Song of Solomon*, Baby Suggs and Ella in *Beloved*, Ethel in *Home* and Queen in *God Help the Child*<sup>2</sup>.

## 2. MORRISON'S CRONES

Mythology and archetypes are cardinal to Morrison's oeuvre. According to Karla Holloway and Stephanie Demetrakopoulos, Morrison's work is a «theology» (1987, p. 160), and her fictional women are ancient and mythic goddess figures deeply linked to both nature and the earth. Indeed, Morrison's strong elder women harken back to the archetypal image of the crone in her wisdom and power. Her representations also show how western African traditional beliefs share common elements with other pre-Christian religions and worldviews (Jennings, 2008, p. 27)<sup>3</sup>. Morrison thereupon reworks and

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2. Other very relevant crones in Toni Morrison's novels are: Therese, the conjure spiritual woman in *Tar Baby*, or Consolata and Lone DuPress, in *Paradise*, with their midwifery herbal medicine skills and supernatural powers.
  3. Patriarchal myths also replaced African goddesses, such as the Moon-Goddess Ngame: «At some time or other, perhaps in the early Middle Ages, patriarchal nomads from the Sudan forced the Akans to accept a male Creator, a Sky-god named Odomankoma [...]. A compromise myth was agreed upon: Odomankoma created the world with hammer and chisel from inert matter, after which Ngame brought it to life [...]. New

rewrites the archetypal goddess mythology and the ancient myth of the crone goddess as rooted and woven into African culture. Her wise Crones acquire a mythical dimension, embodying the ancient archetypal feminine.

Morrison's Crones encapsulate the life cycle of birth, death and rebirth, bringing forth transformation and renewal. They stand in contrast to the colonized black community and to some of Morrison's elderly women, such as the inept and lonely Ruth in *Song of Solomon* or Cee's evil step-grandmother Lenore in *Home*. Morrison's Crones redefine the Black old female Self, and her role in the home and community. As Christine Downing argues in her unpublished lecture presented in the course, «Myth, Literature, and Religious Studies» (2010, as cited in Compagna-Doll, 2017), the Crone also unveils that there is life for women, and a self to be celebrated after motherhood.

Morrison creates powerful, multifaceted and imperfect old women. As she comments,

[she] was just interested in *finally* placing black women center stage in the text, and not as the all-knowing, infallible black matriarch but as flawed here, triumphant there, mean, nice, complicated woman, and some of them win and some of them lose. (Taylor-Guthrie, 1994, p. 231)

The tasks Jill Fiore (2003) assigns to the Crone are mirrored in those of Morrison's aging females: defy conventional roles, establish a female community, serve as elder to the young, and preserve ancestral knowledge.

Morrison's Crones are models of endurance, self-respect and power, strong life forces, and an active valuable part of their communities: «Seen in myth after myth [the Goddess] as an old woman [...] was yet stronger than any god» (Walker, 1985, p. 29). They are living examples of the hardships that old black women have to undergo to protect their families and keep them alive. They are assimilated to images of Priestesses, Queens or Goddesses. In *God Help the Child*, everyone calls Q. Olive Queen. Baby Suggs, known as «Holy», is a Christ-like figure, a sort of priestess: «[T]he image of the tribal Mother or Goddess-Queen that is found in most ancient literature» (Freiz, 2011, p. 89). Circe is equated to the eponymous Greek enchantress/minor goddess. Pilate, when her nephew, Milkman, first sees her, is posed like

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myths appeared when the Akan accepted the patriarchal principle [...] and mothers ceased to be the spiritual heads of households» (Graves, 1959, p. vi).

some ancient mother goddess, «[o]ne foot pointing east and one pointed west» (Morrison, 1978, p. 36), indicating her connection to both life and death. Her missing navel substantiates «this sense of divinity, testifying to her miraculous birth and suggesting even the original earth mother» (Lee, 1982, p. 65).

These Crones are identified with symbols of potency and energy, such as the sun. Queen wears earrings, solar emblems, «golden discs the size of clamshells» (Morrison, 2015, p. 144). The sun as a male power symbol reveals their strength and courage, and hints at gender inversion/blurring. As stated by Downing (1987), in many cultures, the postmenopausal woman is recognized as being both male and female, an androgynous person (p. 44). Some Goddesses, like Kali, epitomize the blending of male and female principles. In *Song of Solomon*, the sun streams «strong and unfettered» (Morrison, 1978, p. 48) when Milkman first meets Pilate who, despite her conventional feminine qualities, bears a man's name and dresses in men's clothing. Another distinctive feature of the Crone is her eyes. In many myths, «[t]he Gorgon's evil eye was attributed to many other manifestations of the Crone, she was usually credited with a piercing gaze from which nothing could be hidden», which men interpreted as a threat (Walker, 1985, p. 66). When Queen dies, one of her «judging eyes» (Morrison, 2015, p. 144), the witch's all-seeing «evil» eye, remains open.

Morrison advocates, through her Crones, for African-American values, rejecting those of the white male-dominated society, such as materialism and the mainstream Western beauty ideals. Pilate's family is depicted in «[t]he image of the three generations of women living in harmony, plaiting hair and singing songs [which] revisions an ideal African village compound» (Wilentz, 2003, p. 147). Their ancestral principles are set against those urban materialistic ones represented by her brother Macon Dead. Circe is an old servant who lives by herself surrounded by Weimaraner dogs in the decrepit Butler mansion. She devotes her life to the eradication of the white master's house and their legacy, symbols of racist materialism. Queen shelters Bride, the lover of her nephew Booker, to whom she transmits true black life values. As Booker says, Bride changes from «one dimension into three—demanding, perceptive, daring» (Morrison, 2015, p. 173), signaling her future as another wise black woman.

Morrison's Crones are also independent females, who have no male partner, and some of them live isolated/alienated at the time of the story. Queen eventually ends up an «autonomous woman, self-empowered and whole unto herself [who] does not need a man to complete her» (Revel, 2008, p. 77). Circe lives on her own in the Butlers' mansion, and Pilate lives estranged from others because of her inexplicable abnormality. These Crones are often wanderers, whose wisdom is linked to their real-life knowledge. Queen, like Circe or Pilate, is «the wise old woman, the agent of change, awareness, insight, knowledge, and good judgment» (Fluck, 2016), who «has been through it all, and now [is] grateful that, at last, Sweet Jesus ha[s] given her a forgetfulness blanket along with a little pillow of wisdom to comfort her in old age» (Morrison, 2015, p. 159).

As envisioned by pre-patriarchal communities, Morrison's Crones are typified as actively sexual, in contrast to the Mammy and grandmother stereotypes<sup>4</sup>. According to Downing (2010), the third stage of the female cycle confirms life, libidinal energy and sexuality after motherhood and menopause. However, patriarchy has regarded the sexuality of older women as inappropriate, «an indication of profound evil, inspired by the devil himself» (Walker, 1985, p. 141). Milkman perceives Circe as a sort of sexual initiatrix capable of giving him an erection when he first embraces her: «Circe is a fairy-tale witch [...] capable of arousing Milkman sexually» (Lee, 1982, p. 68). The one-legged Eva «had a regular flock of gentleman callers» (Morrison, 1973, p. 41), and «[f]ar from being the big-breasted, kind, religious, forever coping, asexual, loving-white-folks mammy [...] is arrogant, independent, decidedly a man-lover who loves and hates intensely» (Christian, 1999, p. 31). In truth, Morrison's Crones counteract the image of the elder woman as devoid of sexuality.

### 3. MOTHERHOOD AND THE HOUSEHOLD

In Morrison's novels, motherhood and the household become, respectively, a subversive female act and a transgressive locus for Blacks' self-assurance and resistance to the racist white patriarchal society. Morrison's Crones

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4. See the next section for more information on the Mammy stereotype.

play major roles through their home-related and maternal spiritual feminine values. As Manuela López-Ramírez writes, «[Morrison] revalues the traditional subservient and limited maternal domestic roles of aging females, and her household is transformed into a transgressive locus where women are empowered» (2020, p. 51).

### 3.1. Motherhood, a Female Act of Power and Resistance

The Crone is the «mother of the world, the One Primordial Being» (Walker, 1985, p. 71). As Paula Gallant Eckard affirms,

[t]he mothers that Morrison depicts in her fiction are given mythic dimensions that elevate them above ordinary realities and that reinforce Morrison's efforts to evolve a mythology of black culture. These women embody the Great Mother, a maternal archetype arising from mother-goddess figures of ancient religions. (Eckard, 2002, p. 35)

Surely, the experience and institution of motherhood, which held a sacred status in primitive societies, is key to the Morrison's fictional old female self and matricentric universe. Actually, through her Crones, Morrison asserts mothering and the matrilinear. Morrison's perspective on motherhood counterbalances mothering as seen by the white male-dominated society. Motherhood becomes an act of resistance at the core of black women's fight against racism and oppression. In African American culture, motherhood is the apogee of womanhood and a site of power for black females. The Crone archetype also exposes that menopause might be the end of fertility, but is also the symbolic representation of achievement and accomplishment beyond that of motherhood (Downing, 1987).

In her renderings of the Crone, Morrison shows «different perspectives on motherhood, thereby confronting simplistic, reductive notions concerning this typical role in women's lives. By providing more complex, variegated, well-rounded depictions of black women's experience, [Morrison's] novels assist thus in the deconstruction of many controlling images» (Ribeiro & Paiva dos Santos, 2017, p. 71). Hence, Morrison challenges socially-constructed normative ideologies of gender, race and age, and states the values of old females, frequently diminished and ridiculed. Morrison contradicts and unmasks societal toxic negative myths and derogatory images about

elder black women originated during slavery, such as the Mammy and the «Matriarch.»

According to Patricia H. Collins (2000), the Mammy image is characterized as a faithful and contented domestic servant, who nurses white children in the master's home. The asexual Mammy is warm, loving and nurturing with her white «family», accepting her subservience and submission. The mammy racial caricature helped justify slavery and maintain race and gender oppression. The «Matriarch», contrarily, stands for the Mother in the Black home, and the cause of the deconstruction of the Black family. Depicted as a Sapphire, she is a domineering black woman who consumes and «castrates» men by aggressively usurping their role as head of the family<sup>5</sup>.

Nonetheless, the true image of the Black Matriarch «praises Black women's resiliency in a society that routinely paints [them] as bad mothers» (Collins, 1990, p. 174). According to Natalia F. Oliveira and Michelle Medeiros, in *Song of Solomon*,

[Lena and Pilate] challenge stereotypes associated with black women as the authoritative matriarch [...] and the careless pariah. They worry about their families, even when their actions are unorthodox. In their own ways, they are both a progressive force, courageous spirits that inspire and help their family move forward without forgetting their past. (2015, p. 161)

In *Eva Peace*, Morrison questions the notion of the Black Matriarch as an emasculating Sapphire. Actually, her husband, BoyBoy, finally abandons her because of his inability to provide for his family. Seemingly, he just cares about drinking, womanizing and abusing Eva.

Some of Morrison's aging females illustrate the disruption of motherhood during the slave era and its aftermath. Morrison discloses the perversity of slavery that breaks the mother-child bond. Baby Suggs could not raise her children. She loses them all, except for Halle, her youngest. Besides, Morrison uncovers how, owing to slavery, traditional forms of childcare and parenting are impossible. As Collins observes, in black communities, «[m]othering was not a privatized nurturing 'occupation' reserved for biological mothers» (1993, p. 45). Taking care of the offspring was a task of the

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5. Daniel P. Moynihan's «The Moynihan Report» (1965) is essential in the perpetuation of the emasculating sapphire stereotype.

extended family and community. Accordingly, in her novels, Morrison often deals with othermothering/communal mothering, which developed from West African community-based lifestyle and communal interdependence (Edwards, 2000, p. 88).

On the one hand, othermothers, especially old black women, provide care for the community's progeny. Andrea O'Reilly contends that other females «are ship and safe harbor to children through the practice of othermothering» (2004, p. 41), by procuring multiple role models for them, supplying guidance, helping to perpetuate traditional African value systems. Collins affirms:

Biological mothers or blood mothers are expected to care for their children. But African and African-American communities have also recognized that vesting one person with full responsibility for mothering a child may not be wise or possible. As a result, «othermothers,» women who assist blood-mothers by sharing mothering responsibilities, traditionally have been central to the institution of Black motherhood. (1993, p. 45)

Morrison's othermothering disrupts and provides an alternative to the patriarchal nuclear family model. Sethe is reared by a crippled black slave, Nan, her surrogate mother, while her real mother is forced to work in the field. Ethel, with her «demanding love» (Morrison, 2012, p. 125), aids and guides young girls, both physically and spiritually, by improving their self-image and developing a sense of self-worth. On the other hand, matriarchs look after the community through the practice of communal mothering, caring and nurturing those who have been victimized. Thereby, they play a paramount role in the survival of vulnerable black people by assisting them to achieve self-definition and resist racism.

Morrison points to the enactment of the Crone as grandmother. Among the Crone's main tasks are to keep family ties and care for the offspring, as in pre-patriarchal societies when they were «religious and secular teachers, universal educators of the young» (Walker, 1985, p. 31). Historically, black grandmothers have had a pivotal role in the African American family and the community, heightening the idea of kinship: «Black mothers and grandmothers are considered the 'guardians of the generations'» (Bernard & Bernard, 1998, p. 47). As family and community matriarchs, they epitomize the courageous women who hold their loved ones entrenched in their families and

black community. As a grandmother, the Crone is genetically prepared to take responsibility for lives other than her own (Walker, 1985, p. 177).

Pre-patriarchal female-centered societies were usually based on matrilineal systems in which the authority descended through the female line. Morrison emphasizes her fictional matriarchal universe and the primacy of the maternal. Her oeuvre revolves around a deeply rooted matrifocal tradition, and her women establish relationships around motherlines. Morrison creates «triadic structures of grandmother, mother, and daughters to illustrate the importance of matrilineal heritage» (Eckard, 2002, p. 34), critical to the survival of black culture and black selfhood. Besides, motherline stories provide daughters with a gender, a family, and a feminine history, transforming the experiences of their female ancestors into maps that will guide them through life (Edelman, 1994, p. 61). These ancestral stories, legends, and myths, transmitted through female oral tradition, empower black women, help them attain self-appreciation and self-reliance, and develop a strong and proud identity.

Morrison neither idealizes nor romanticizes her mother/grandmother figures. She conveys the complexity of the grandmother stereotype, whose love is not always warm. Morrison's grandmothers are nurturing and maternal in their own way, and can have a capacity for evil doing. They may not be successful at parenting. Eva Peace, who raises her children by herself, may appear as a bad mother/grandmother. She does not always feel or show affection in the traditional motherly way. Hers is a preservative maternal love that aims to guarantee her progeny's survival. When Eva's daughter, Hannah, asks her if she had ever loved them, Eva answers that she has done more than that, she has kept them alive. As a Crone, Eva exemplifies the power to create, give birth, and also the power to destroy what she has created. She kills her son, Plum, a shell-shocked veteran, so he can die «not all scrunched up inside [her] womb, but like a man» (Morrison, 1973, p. 72), and watches Hannah burn. Eva's murder can be regarded as an act of mercy: «[C]ertain kinds of destructiveness [by the Crone] were (and are) referred to as 'acts of God'» (Walker, 1985, p. 73).

Both Eva and Pilate—a «primal mother goddess» (Lee, 1984, p. 347)—have troublesome relationships with their daughters, Hannah and Reba, whom they turn into emotional weaklings by making things easy for them,

while their granddaughters, Sula and Hagar, grow up almost wild and get into destructive love relationships. Pilate's intense love proves to be smothering and crippling. To a certain extent, she may be responsible for the death of Hagar, terribly spoiled and «over-mothered», who is incapable of accepting Milkman's rejection. In *God Help the Child*, when Queen was young, she did not care much about her children. Eventually, she lost them to her husbands. She feels guilty that she did not prevent her daughter Hannah from being sexually abused under her care. Apparently, she ignored her complaints regarding her father's fondling.

Some critics, such as Samuels and Hudson-Weems (1990), have blamed failed mothering on the absence of father figures. This notwithstanding, *Song of Solomon* seems to indicate otherwise: Hagar was not as simple as Reba, not as strong as Pilate. She needed «a chorus of mamas, grandmamas, aunts, cousins, sisters, neighbours, Sunday school teachers, best girl friends» (Morrison, 1978, p. 332). So, failed mothering is not just due to father absence, but also to the lack of a female community that can support girls and warn them of the dangers of the Western hegemonic discourses of romantic love and female beauty. Aoi Mori thinks that

[m]odern urban and industrialized life [relegate] black mothers to the margin. Since only those mothers who can locate the basis of their strength in their foremothers can pass on the knowledge of survival to daughters, the absence of mothers unavoidably brings about a weakening of the next generation. (1999, p. 104)

Hagar is raised in an urban environment, away from the rural black female community, which would have helped to instill in her pride for her black female self. Being cut off from a larger, protective and encouraging community of black women makes Morrison's young female characters suffer in varying ways and degrees because of that lack of connection (Dussere, 2003, p. 89).

Morrison's narratives are often matrifocal histories. Actually, most of the writing by African American women, O'Reilly notes, has focused on the mother-daughter relationship and not much has been written on the mother-son relationship (2004, p. 16). However, in *Song of Solomon* or *God Help the Child*, Morrison centers on the mother-«son» relationship, Pilate/Milkman and Queen/Booker, respectively. In these novels, she emphasizes

the crucial role that elder women play in the Black man's quest for identity and manhood. Walker says that «[A] god would be powerless without the guidance of a feminine embodiment of wisdom [the Crone]» (1985, p. 59). Morrison depicts a world in which the main sources of the knowledge the male hero must gain are old females (McKay, 1994, p. 139).

Pilate, Circe and Queen play a Daedalic role to Milkman and Booker. They are an intrinsic part of the young black man's Bildungsroman. Pilate and Circe lead Milkman close to their historical «sites of resistance»—family, community, history—by assisting him in discovering family secrets and passing on to him their ancestral knowledge, the African American myths and legends. They move him away from his father's materialism—transforming his search for gold into acceptance of his African heritage—and help him forge a bond with his African ancestors. Both Pilate and Circe are Milkman's advisors and threshold guardians in his journey of self-discovery, self-realization, and awakening manhood. Circe

initiates Milkman into his own past, showing both the power and the destructiveness of his heritage, and channels his rebelliousness into a quest for his own identity [...]. Like Aeneas, like Ulysses, Milkman needs to look into his, his family's, and his people's past before he can move into the future. (Harris, 1980, p. 74)

As a spiritual guide, Queen also counsels Booker on how to cope with his brother's appalling murder. Like Odysseus, these Crones mentor their «sons» on their identity quest towards a «maleness connected to women» (Mayberry, 2007, p. 73). In the Crone-young man relationship, Morrison redefines black manhood and the hero quest: «[A] successful journey away from the patriarchal notions of traditional masculinity» (Carabí, 2006, pp. 86-87).

### 3.2. Building a Home, a Female Site of Resistance

Since pre-patriarchal communities, women have had the task of building a home for their families, and it is female agency, particularly elderly women's, what makes a space into a true home. Morrison advocates a domestic ideology according to the traditional values of black womanhood. She enhances, as Carolyn Denard claims, the dignity and strength of those aging females who performed the domestic roles. They were capable of keeping

their household together, what Morrison calls the «tar quality» (Denard, 1988, pp. 174-175), which she correlates with their ability to nourish family and community. And yet, in her novels, Morrison also highlights how Blacks' houses are symbols of their traumatized minds and the hostile world they live in. As well, she establishes how Blacks long for a place to call their own, especially since, during slavery, they did not have any.

Morrison's Crones are often the head and spiritual center of their household, generally, as a result of black absent fathers. Through her Crones, Morrison deconstructs the conventional patriarchal home: Her «concept of a subversive household (different from the models carefully designed in the interests of patriarchy) counters the traditional exclusion of women from the socio-political structures of power» (Sempruch, 2005, p. 99). Morrison's Crones face men's authority with spiritual feminine values, and conventional female tasks. In African American culture, what Morrison terms «home-place» operates as a site of resistance:

Historically, African-American people believed that the construction of a homeplace, however fragile and tenuous [...] had a radical political dimension. Despite the brutal reality of racial apartheid, of domination, one's homeplace was one site where one could freely confront the issue of humanization, where one could resist. Black women resisted by making homes where all black people could strive to be subjects, not objects, where one could be affirmed in our minds and hearts despite poverty, hardship, and deprivation, where we could restore to ourselves the dignity denied to us on the outside in the public world. (Lane, 2007, p. 69)

In *Beloved*, Baby Suggs, once freed, successfully remodels and converts 124, the patriarchal home, into a female domain: «[D]omestic space and patriarchal notions of domesticity are radically interrogated by the creation of a radical, magic-realist female discourse space» (Hayes, 2004), and the embodiment of her newly-discovered self. 124 becomes an open safe space and a way station for the black community, fugitives and free blacks, to gather and share food and information. 124 also turns into a community shelter for black people where they can heal the psychological wounds of slavery and achieve personal growth. In 124, Morrison suggests

a space where a warm, communal center could be made [...] a space where women and men can share themselves in the form of their stories [...] where

painful stories can be made bearable [...] where that community can learn to love anything they choose and claim themselves in the domain of that love [...] then the ghosts of patriarchy may finally cease to have power over if not to cease haunting, the house of women's fiction. (Askeland, 1999, p. 176)<sup>6</sup>

As Nancy Jesser (1999) asserts, homes can become places to gather strength, formulate strategy, and rest, even if they do not solve institutional and social ills. They make possible emancipatory struggles and provide emotional and physical sustenance. In 124, «maternal law supersedes paternal law» (Hayes, 2004); nevertheless, Baby Suggs's house is still controlled by the patriarchal law, the Fugitive Slave Act, which allows Schoolteacher to invade her house and seize his slaves.

In *Sula*, Eva is the creator and sovereign of an enormous and very weird house. She tells her daughter Hannah that she stayed alive and overcame all kinds of adversities for her family. It appears that Eva had put her leg under a train to collect insurance. She resorts to self-mutilation in her endeavors to build a life and home for her family. It is Demetrakopoulos's contention that Eva is a portrait of archetypal feminine fortitude and resilience: «[H]er character is one of self protectiveness, gracious regality, magnanimity, deep intelligence, and great courage. And her sharp tongue is salt with wisdom» (1987, p. 61). Circe counteracts the mammy stereotype in her relationship to the white family and home, by turning into «an agent of black revenge» who evens things up: «For Circe symbolically dirties—that is, shames—the once powerful and superior white family, representatives of the prejudiced white culture that has historically shamed blacks by treating them as dirty and smelling objects of contempt» (Bouson, 2009, p. 79).

The Crone is also the keeper of the cauldron (apparently, an innocent household tool), «a dark churning belly-womb [...] a widely acknowledged symbol of the Crone aspect of the Goddess» (Conway, 2004, p. 84). In pre-patriarchal communities, the rounded Cauldron stands for the womb of the Goddess, from which we go out into existence and return to it when we die. It is a sacred symbol of (re)birth, creation and regeneration, but also of

6. In *Paradise*, Morrison also creates a female communal space, an earthly paradise, a sanctuary for abused and neglected women.

death, as in ancient times, it was employed for human sacrifice. Its shape and the fact that women used it made the cauldron especially connected with feminine magic and feminine nurturing attributes. The cauldron was later turned into a chalice or cup, and eventually became the Christian Holy Grail. The female Cauldron/Grail «with its inexhaustible capacity for feeding and supporting life» is the «chief symbol standing in opposition to the male cross» (Walker, 1985, pp. 122, 100).

Being used for brewing (magical) herbal concoctions, it is inextricably intertwined with witchcraft. However, the cauldron is not just a valuable magical tool, but also an instrument of spiritual and physical transformation. It was located in the hearth (kitchen) where the transmutation of ingredients/elements into food takes place, and later is used to sustain and nurture families. In their relation to the cauldron, Morrison's Crones have nourishing abilities linked to the household. When the father of Pilate and Macon Dead was killed, Circe hides, shelters and feeds the orphans. The shape of her simmering pot resembles the hag's cauldron.

#### 4. COMMUNITY: ANCESTRAL AFRICAN HERITAGE AND SPIRITUAL/WITCHLIKE/HEALING POWERS

Pre-patriarchal societies deemed that elder women were «founts of wisdom, law, healing skills, and moral leadership» (Walker, 1985, p. 31). In black communities, females are the true culture bearers. Morrison's Crones, as custodians of the African American culture, have a profound knowledge of African practices (such as singing, music, storytelling). Hence, the life mission of these Crones is to protect and safeguard the ancestral African American knowledge.

Crones are moral beacons for their communities, embodying ancestral properties and the protective power of the timeless African female ancestors. In fact, Morrison coalesces the living-dead ancestor and living elder in an inseparable entity (Jennings, 2008, p. 85). The Crone sees all present, past and future, preserving and perpetuating black ancestral principles and heritage. She defies, rejects and resists patriarchal order, and provides younger generations with an alternative ancestral value system. Morrison's Crones have the role of a *griot*, they bestow their ancestral lore on to younger persons

in the shape of stories so that they might acquire a personal, familial, and community identity (Hunsicker, 2000, p. 49)<sup>7</sup>. Baby Suggs passes her hard-won wisdom through stories to Sethe and her granddaughter Denver, and Pilate «pass[es] on the memory of the names that were stolen and the stories suppressed [during slavery]» (Wilentz, 2003, p. 157).

The Crone, as the «owner of the sacred lore», is also a «mediator between the realms of flesh and spirit» (Walker, 1985, p. 33). Her repository of ancestral knowledge comprises the supernatural, which is at the core of African culture. In «Rootedness,» Morrison expounds that

[With *Song of Solomon*] I could blend the acceptance of the supernatural and a profound rootedness in the real world at the same time with neither taking precedence over the other. It is indicative of the cosmology, the way in which Black people looked at the world. We [...] accepted what I suppose could be called superstition and magic, which is another way of knowing things [...]. And some of those things were «discredited knowledge» [...] because Black people were discredited therefore what they *knew* was «discredited.» (1984, p. 342; author's emphasis)

Morrison's Crones are endowed with supernatural/abnormal attributes and powers, and a special perception of things: «[They] possess mystical powers and a knowledge of the spiritual world that eludes those conditioned by Western logic. They make things happen. They interpret for their people things and events that defy practical reason and understanding» (Adell, 1997, p. 65). Morrison creates mythic characters that have a strong relation with a spiritual or supernatural dimension. Pilate is thought to have the power to step out of her skin, set a bush afire from some distance and turn a man into a rutabaga on account of her lack of navel (Morrison, 1978, p. 105), which Jakub Ženíšek views

as a metonymy of god-like status, which could be derived for example from the well-known religious controversy as to whether Adam and Eve could possibly be portrayed with navels, being the first and original progenitors of humankind [...] could then easily be understood as a rank of distinction, indicating her shamanic or even superhuman status. (2007, p. 131)

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7. Justine Tally discusses the twentieth-century acknowledgment of how black slaves carried with them the knowledge (often discredited) and communal rituals and values that are passed on to future generations (2009, p. 35).

Old witches have been believed to be shapeshifters who could make themselves young and beautiful (Walker, 1985, p. 139): Pilate has unusual skin smoothness, «hairless, scarless and wrinkleless» and the «agility of a teen-aged girl» (Morrison, 1987, pp. 153, 229), and Circe is «a woman older than death», and yet with «the strong mellifluous voice of a twenty-year-old girl» (Morrison, 1978, pp. 239, 262). Queen has the fire-red woolly hair of a witch. Her linkage to fire is associated with destruction/purification, but also to creation and transformation. When Bride first encounters Queen, «the female arsonist» (Morrison, 2015, p. 144), she is going to burn a metal bedspring.

The Crone represents death and endings in her connection with the waning moon. She is called the Lady of the Underworld, and thus she is tied up with the dead. Deanna Conway says that the Crone is the only one who can guide humans into the world of the dead (2004, p. 100). As a spirit, Baby Suggs comes to Denver to encourage her to go beyond 124's yard and ask for help. The Crone can also see both the past and the future. Pilate talks to her dead father and foresees the future. Morrison's mysterious Crones are often worshipped, but also feared. At her deathbed, Queen is reverentially washed and oiled by Bride, and Booker, as «an act of devotion» (Morrison, 2015, p. 167), applies heather lotion to her hands and feet, as in the Christian Feet Washing ceremony.

Morrison vindicates that Blacks' attempts at self-definition can only succeed within a community that supports them, stressing the collective quality of the African Americans' process of «decolonization» (Suero-Elliot, 2000). Only within the community can Blacks achieve individual fulfillment and empowerment. Community values prevail over individualism and materialism. Ruth Ray and Susan McFadden contrast the individualistic way of growth and transformation of the traditional hero's journey with that of «women and minorities [who] tend to value group identity over individualism, finding power and agency in collectivity» (2001, p. 202). Morrison's Crones are sometimes regarded as almost an entity in themselves with the other women of the community, illustrating communal power and solidarity. They sometimes have to act together in aid of the community members.

In *Home*, Ethel and the other «seen-it-all eyes» Lotus women form a welcoming female community that helps trauma survivors, such as Frank and Cee, and all those who needed them (Morrison, 1978, p. 123). In *Beloved*,

the black female community led by Ella finally comes on a healing mission to Sethe's rescue. This collective exorcism, which resembles African rituals used to command evil spirits plaguing the living, finally defeats the revenant, Beloved. These women's chants act as a kind of baptism, which signals «Sethe's cycle from spiritual death to rebirth» (Krumholz, 1999, p. 118). Crones' magical mantras/chants amplify the power of the creative Word or Logos, and the latent energy within us emerges freeing us from the cycle of life and death.

In pre-patriarchal communities, among Crones' sacred duties were included «hands-on care»: «Medicine was almost exclusively in the hands of old females for countless thousands of years, because of their supposedly innate communion with the Goddess of life and death» (Walker, 1985, pp. 34, 127). Morrison's Crones are often sorcerers with spiritual/witchlike/supernatural and healing powers. Elder women, such as M'Dear or Circe, were frequently midwives, a traditional female role. Women healers and midwives were viewed with suspicion due to the witch-hunts. The Inquisition especially persecuted midwives as they thought they harmed the faith by easing females' pain in birth giving, and also because they had forbidden knowledge of contraception and abortion methods (Walker, 1985, p. 128). Midwives and women healers, Sady Doyle states, «were killed to cement patriarchal power and create the subjugated, domestic labor class necessary for capitalism» (2019). Witch-hunts left a lasting effect. From then on, midwives and female healers have been likened to witches and, consequently, have been excluded from their conventional healing practices.

In *The Bluest Eye*, M'Dear is a community conjurer/medicine woman, «one of the timeless earth mothers [...] repositories of indigenous knowledge» (Zauditu-Selassie, 2007, p. 38). She wears an asafetida bag and carries a hickory stick that seems to help her communicate. She is a «competent midwife» and an unorthodox «decisive diagnostician», who lays her hands on Aunt Jimmy to diagnose her (Morrison, 1970, p. 106). Circe, called a «healer» and a «deliverer», is renowned for her healing abilities and vast knowledge of herbs and magical beverages. She is «skilled in ancient medicinal arts such as prescribing cobwebs to staunch and heal Pilate's bleeding and infected pierced left ear» (Jennings, 2008, pp. 160-61). Pilate is «a natural healer» (Morrison, 1978, p. 165), who helps her sister-in-law, Ruth, for whom she

concocts a love potion. She also uses her obeah powers, a voodoo doll, to scare her brother.

Morrison opposes the disembodied objective patriarchal view of science with the ancestral, more humane and close to nature healing powers of elderly females. The Lotus Crones' restorative and curative practices rooted in black traditions are contrasted to the Western medical system that fails in curing Frank, a traumatized veteran, and to Dr. Beau's eugenic research on black women's reproductive organs. The nurture and warmth of these matriarchs manifested in their community name, Lotus, encapsulate rebirth and enlightenment (Vega-González, 2013, p. 204). They aid Frank and Cee to reconstruct their fractured selves.

In patriarchal societies, during the witchcraft mania, churches denied «spiritual authority to women». The Inquisition and religious leaders campaigned «to cut women off from their own direct experience of spiritual vision», and encouraged sadistic attacks on females, especial aging ones, whom they saw as rivals (Walker, 1985, pp. 142, 143). In African American communities, elder women are regarded as prominent community leaders, who take charge of religious rites and official sacrifices, conducting ceremonies/rituals for every event. Pilate is the «priestess» who performs the ceremonial singing when the insurance agent jumps off Mercy hospital. Baby Suggs also holds a cleansing ceremony when Sethe gets to 124, auguring her rebirth. Queen's burning of her bedspring can be equated with a purification fire rite.

Crones, as Walker contends, were key to older religious systems: «In the earliest times, old tribal mothers were credited with the important religious or magical lore, including the knowledge of right and wrong (or 'good and evil') that led them to formulate laws and other rules of behavior» (1985, p. 49). Their spirituality is interwoven with the wild. The Goddess, and its facets, cannot be separated from nature. There is an intimate link between them that the God of classical patriarchal theological views does not share. Actually, the Crone is assimilated with Mother Earth. Pilate, identified with a snake, is remembered as «a pretty wood-wild girl» (Morrison, 1978, p. 255). Circe lives in a mansion in the clearing of a dense wood. According to Kokahvah Zauditu-Selassie (2007), the «woods» is a metaphor for a place

full with spirits, an abode for the invisible powers, as in West and Central African spiritual traditions.

Baby Suggs «Holy» becomes an unchurched preacher, a self-appointed spiritual leader, who uses Christian symbolism and West African ritual expressions in her religious meetings. She delivers her speeches, which come from her 'big old heart', outdoors in the Clearing on a huge flat rock. Her sermons provide a «scaffold» for the regeneration of the damaged community fabric (Lawrence, 1998, p. 91). Baby Suggs preaches her own «non-patriarchal» religion to the ex-slave community of Cincinnati, subverting and distancing herself from institutionalized religions. She renounces the Christian notion of sin, as she does not tell them to «clean up their lives, or go and sin no more» (Morrison, 1987, p. 88). Instead, her message of redemption and self-love is «based on humanistic and practical principles. She is as much god as any other god. Her calling [...] is to encourage black people to reclaim the best in themselves by erasing the trauma of slavery» (Harris-López, 2002, p. 144). Baby Suggs teaches Blacks to love their tortured bodies and helps them recover their dignity and sense of self-worthiness, a theology for the oppressed that challenges the structures of domination and repression. Thus, Baby helps ensure the empowerment and survival of African Americans.

## 5. CONCLUSION

In her oeuvre, Morrison defies and questions race, gender, age and class patriarchal constructions, and unveils false representations about elderly women by resorting to the mythical Crone. She restores the archetypal concept of the Crone, which over time has been both misconstrued and vilified by patriarchy, to its privileged and rightful place. As Walker argues, «[w]hen the Crone was recognized as a valid image, the old woman was not seen as a useless object, as she often is today» (1985, p. 175). Morrison's depictions of the aging female may help bring her out of her «closet of suppression, social invisibility, and pejorative labeling» (1985, p. 40).

Morrison's Crones are at the core of her novels. Her fearless wise old women cope with an unspeakable past and bear witness to the crimes of the past (slavery). These Crones are not idealized. They are imperfect, complex, strong characters, which transcend and deconstruct the derogatory

stereotypes of elder black females, the Mammy and the Matriarch, fabricated by hegemonic normative discourses. These Crones exhibit characteristics that surpass gender ideologies by reversal/blurring. Morrison shows sexual and independent aging black women who contest conformity and dehumanization, and assert their integrity, power, determination and courage. They have control over their lives and destinies. Morrison's Crones are engaged in a struggle for their survival and that of their community by interrogating, resisting and challenging all oppression of the white patriarchal system.

Morrison's narratives unfold a matrifocal world. She disputes the notion of motherhood, stressing «matrilineage». Her Crones are endowed with traditional domestic feminine abilities and are capable of creating a non-patriarchal home for their families and, in their tar quality, hold them together, as they also do with their communities. Even though they are not usually maternal in a conventional way, they prove to stand for the nourishing female ancestry that sustains future generations. These elderly women embrace and embody the ancestral lore, their historic and mythic past, and their ancestral African American values. These ancestor figures symbolize the importance of forebears and ancient knowledge for Blacks' empowerment and survival.

These Crones transmit stories, myths and legends of their African heritage to black youngsters, who are seeking for the significance and relevance they have in their lives. Morrison exemplifies how these old females, in their wisdom, are decisive in the spiritual development and growth of these young women and men, whom they mentor and guide on their quest for self-definition. They teach future generations to adhere to the true values of the black community, so they can shape a better future. Morrison's Crones also expose how a different non-patriarchal maleness is possible. They become spiritual guides and leaders of the new generations and their communities.

To sum up, in her portrayals of the elder black female, Morrison counteracts the denigrated, invisibilized and reviled Crone figure. Conversely, her Crones lead meaningful and valuable lives, and play a paramount role in the community. As ancestor figures, they embody ancestral supernatural/spiritual/witchlike properties and powers that they use to heal, both physically and spiritually, the people in their communities. In her novels, Morrison refashions and reclaims the mythic primordial crone archetype to empower and honor old black women and their contributions to the

community, as well as to deconstruct negative societal myths and images about aging black females that do not represent their true experiences.

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