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CANDIDATES FOR L'ECRITURE FEMININE:
ANALYSES OF AUSTEN'S *PRIDE AND PREJUDICE*, WOOLF'S *NIGHT AND DAY*,
AND MORRISON'S *SULA*

by

Brooklyn Jongeling

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the University Honors
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The members of the Honors Thesis Committee appointed to examine the thesis of Brooklyn Jongeling find it satisfactory and recommend that it be accepted.

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ABSTRACT

Candidates for l'écriture Feminine:
Analyses of Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, Woolf's *Night and Day*, and Morrison's *Sula*

Brooklyn Jongeling

Director: Darlene Farabee, Ph.D.

This thesis discusses Hélène Cixous' ideas on feminine literature, as expressed in her article, "The Laugh of Medusa," and attempts to apply the goals that she sets out for what feminine literature must look like in order to develop the literary canon to the novel. In an attempt to pull away from traditional patriarchal images and expectations of feminine lifestyles, I join Cixous' call for the marginalized to inscribe their voices into the canon for themselves, and argue that representation of such images in literature is necessary to the development of our biased perceptions to more authentically represent typically marginalized groups. I examine three examples, Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, Woolf's *Night and Day*, and Morrison's *Sula*, which I argue to be historical examples of novels that both portray and question the limits that patriarchal structure places on femininity. In each of these works, I discuss female characters and their relationships with parental figures, other women, and romantic interests, where preconceptions of femininity based on patriarchal tradition are present, and suggest how these characters are able to show a more nuanced representation of feminine identity. As boundaries placed on women have evolved over time, as have our preconceptions of femininity, and the perspective from within marginalized positions within symbolic order must be shared in order to continue the development of meanings understood within our culture.

KEYWORDS: Feminine Literature, Hélène Cixous, Jane Austen, Virginia Woolf, Toni Morrison, patriarchy

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**Candidates for l'Écriture Feminine: Analyses of Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*,
Woolf's *Night and Day*, and Morrison's *Sula***

In pulling away, as we have begun to in the last century, from the dominance of the male perspective that permeates authorship and narrative as a result of the longstanding patriarchal structure of Western culture, feminine writing must be taught and studied in order to shatter the imbalance of perspective within literature. Feminist theorist, Hélène Cixous, acknowledges that the amount of female authorship “has always been ridiculously small,” (878) and stresses the importance of feminine writing in “The Laugh of the Medusa,” urging women to write for themselves and for the sake of other women.

Cixous asserts that “it is by writing, from and toward women, and by taking up the challenge of speech which has been governed by the phallus, that women will confirm women in a place other than that which is reserved in and by the symbolic, that is, in a place other than silence” (881). When she mentions “the symbolic,” Cixous refers to the symbolic order of a culture, within which (and as a result of which) language takes on meaning. In a patriarchal structure, like that of Western society, the symbolic order is what feminist critics like Cixous describe as phallogocentric – centered around and inevitably moving toward the phallus. Mary Klages helps us to understand Cixous’ framework, as it is partially developed by the ideas of poststructuralist theorists like Derrida and Lacan, by describing the patriarchal societal structure to which we refer as “based on the primacy of certain terms in an array of binary oppositions” (35). For example, binary opposition of terms (signifiers) like man/woman, masculine/feminine, and light/dark, are posited in relation to each other, where one of the terms (those on the

left side of the slash) is upheld by Western Culture, and the other is suppressed. Women are less secure within this structure than men are because, having no phallus, the signifiers attached to them (i.e., “woman,” “feminine,” “girl”) are positioned farther from the center and have less stable meaning. Woman, Cixous claims, “has always functioned ‘within’ the discourse of man, a signifier that has always referred back to the opposite signifier which annihilates its specific energy and diminishes or stifles its very different sounds” (887). Drawing on the language of Derrida, Cixous is arguing that words, signifiers to which meaning is attached according to the symbolic order in which they exist, are operating under the “glorious phallic monosexuality” that man has attempted to keep in view (884), and that signifiers associated with femininity have no fixed place in the symbolic (and are therefore silenced). Cixous proposes that, through feminine writing, woman may dislocate her position within the confines of man’s discourse and create a new language and meaning for herself (887). I would like to expand upon this idea and propose that, through portrayal of the patriarchy, the phallogocentric nature of the symbolic (the inherent meaning attached to signifiers in a text that are derived from patriarchal standards) may be exposed and then chipped away at where characters are able to move away from a phallic center or operate outside of the phallogocentric order of the text.

Cixous argues that poetry is the prime medium for *l’écriture féminine*: “but only the poets,” she writes, “not the novelists, allies of representationalism” (879). I would suggest rather that the novel functions as a fruitful medium for feminine writing, for it is the very representation of the phallogocentric order of the patriarchal structure in which we live that allows us to reveal its existence, a necessary step in the deconstruction of that

order which must be accompanied by departure from traditional images rooted in patriarchy. A novel written by a woman that offers female perspective may unveil what it means to be attached to the signifier “woman,” and provide a means to question that meaning. This set of analyses will attempt to explore the ways in which Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, Virginia Woolf’s *Night and Day*, and Toni Morrison’s *Sula* exemplify feminine literature by exposing the patriarchal structure of the communities within the texts (portraying it in parental relationships, female friendships, and romantic affairs), and then departing from it where characters are able to rebel against the boundaries of their position within that order.

The purpose of feminine literature is to create a future where the meanings associated with women in text are less limited, a future where woman has a voice in the literary cannon, but it is important to acknowledge the texts that have pushed the boundaries that have had to bend in order to create the progress that we have seen. Each of the texts discussed in this analysis are written by women and offer a primarily female perspective from within a clearly patriarchal system, completing the first step toward feminine writing by giving woman a voice within literature. Each published at least half a century apart, *Pride and Prejudice* in 1813, *Night and Day* in 1919, and *Sula* in 1973, the novels display the bounds of feminine meaning as set out by the patriarchal societies of each time period. In *Pride and Prejudice* the marriage market governs a lady’s future, and yet the female characters who resist the urge to marry for economic purposes are able to subtly prevail against the marriage market’s potential consequences by finding a mutually respectful arrangement in marriage. Similarly, to be a woman in *Night and Day* appears to mean her eventual marriage and state of economic dependence until it doesn’t,

as other outcomes like personal choice, self-sufficiency and nonmarital relationships are revealed to be possible. In *Sula*, we see that this expectation is still present of African American women in the early 20th century, this meaning attached to their lives that their goal must be to marry, procreate, and preserve the family unit, but these teachings must take a back seat to the importance of female friendship. Each of these texts have something to teach us about the meanings bound to women of patriarchal societies, how those meanings limit women, and how they fall short of true femininity. A reading of these novels together also shows a progression from the rigid, economically dependent role that woman has historically filled in patriarchy, to a position of somewhat more liberty to make her own decisions (though the expectations of her life choices remain derived from patriarchal roots). In looking at the challenges that truly feminine characters (written by women) pose to traditionally patriarchal views of their sex, and the progression of the boundaries they face, we may look to a future where woman may have an authentic place in literature. For such a future to exist, we must continue to write women that, as Cixous calls for, do not listen to the voices of the Sirens (885), for we cannot let our voices be spoken for us in the falsely feminine tune of male-written characters.

Section 1: Reshaping Courtship Practices in Jane Austin's *Pride and Prejudice*

Though her work has been occasionally criticized for its romantic themes, often thought to perpetuate marital conventions of her time, Jane Austen is a historical example of a novelist to have taken a first step toward the feminine literature that Cixous calls for – by writing and circulating the female perspective. Many of her novels involve strong and intelligent female protagonists with unconventional ideas about marriage (i.e., *Emma* and *Pride and Prejudice*) who still manage to acquire a suitable match for marriage by the novel's conclusion. One may wonder whether a novel in which such an independent female heroine ultimately marries intends to uphold patriarchal standards; however, a closer look at the elements of Austen's work and the events that must take place in order for her protagonists to reach their happy endings reveals the underlying ways in which her work actually subtly pushes back against such standards. Vivien Jones argues against the notion that Austen's work upholds traditional conventions because her novels contain themes of marriage. She argues that "Austen's heroines demonstrate women's condition – in material terms at least – to be one of precarious dependency" (283). This is certainly true of *Pride and Prejudice*, as the laws of entailment make Mr. Collins the heir to the Bennets' estate, leaving the five Bennet girls in the most precarious of situations unless they manage to marry – without a home (not to mention the slightest possibility of their own income). The models of marriage put forth by the Bennets, the exclusive sense of comradery between female characters, and the growth within the courtship displayed by the principal characters, all portray ways in which women are limited by patriarchy in the early 19th century setting of *Pride and Prejudice*, as well as nuances that allow questioning of such limits.

Setting an Example

One's ideas of marriage and romantic relationships tend to derive first and foremost from the image of their parents but, in *Pride and Prejudice*, the primary example of a parental relationship is more an example of how a seemingly advantageous marriage may fail. Mr. and Mrs. Bennet, parents of the novel's protagonist, Elizabeth, and her five sisters, provide representation for the parents' generation in *Pride and Prejudice*. Their relationship, based initially on the beauty of Mrs. Bennet in her youth and the security that Mr. Bennet would provide her, is also a representation of "advantageous" marriage rooted in patriarchal courtship practices where women must market themselves to men. The example of marriage that the Bennets set for their daughters expose the Symbolic order of society in which the Bennets live, Mrs. Bennet being a strong proponent of marriage at any cost as a result of the precarious situation of her family, while overturning it where her marital goals for her daughter are denounced.

Elizabeth's parents, Mr. and Mrs. Bennet, have an intriguing dynamic between them, where endearment seems almost entirely absent in their relationship. The Bennets represent a common result of marriage in a patriarchal system in which economic and social factors dictate choice, that result being a disappointing, affectionless relationship. Mr. Bennet is unable to respect his wife, and Mrs. Bennet does not fulfil his intellectual needs. For Mrs. Bennet, "the experience of three and twenty years had been insufficient to make [her] understand his character. *Her* mind was less difficult to develop. She was a woman of mean understanding, little information, and uncertain temper" (Austen 3). The lack of understanding between the Bennets is a defining feature of their marriage, and of the example they provide for their five daughters of a marital relationship. Many of their

interactions together involve her nagging or his essential dismissal of her. Having married for shallow purposes (i.e., “her father captivated by youth and beauty, and that appearance of good humour, which youth and beauty generally give, had married a woman [of] weak understanding and illiberal mind [...]. Respect, esteem and confidence, had vanished forever” (172)) the result is a distinctive lack of endearment between them. Mr. Bennet mostly seems to find his wife somewhat ridiculous and daft, often making fun of her behavior. The narrator acknowledges that “had Elizabeth’s opinion been all drawn from her own family, she could not have formed a very pleasing picture of conjugal felicity or domestic comfort” (172). Her parents’ relationship is exactly the kind of pitfall that Elizabeth hopes to avoid, a trap of a patriarchal system in which a man in a position of economic advantage is expected to be able to choose to marry whomever he desires (whether he base his choice on beauty, disposition, or intellect), and a woman must desperately hope to be chosen in order to find a comfortable life. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen provides other outcomes of the marriage market, like men who cannot afford a variety of choices for marriage (Colonel Fitzwilliam), men whose proposals offer relative or even considerable comfort and are rejected (Mr. Collins and Mr. Darcy), matches that do not provide financial security (Lydia and Wickham), and matches that *do* provide mutual respect (Jane and Bingley, and Elizabeth and Darcy). The model set forth by the Bennets represents a product of the marriage market and is understood to be undesirable within the novel, as shown by their unhappiness and Elizabeth’s staunch opposition to marriage for advantage, which challenges the economic aspects of courtship practices. Their disappointments in each other reveal an unfortunate outcome of the illusions presented by the marriage market, but the novel’s attitude toward their dynamic, and the

variety of other outcomes represented in the book, provide a more nuanced representation of courtship.

As well as providing an example of how marrying based on conventional ideals can go wrong, the Bennets' attempts to guide their daughters, and in particular the contrast between their attempts to do so, show how the novel can exemplify the limits that women face as a result of patriarchal structure, while discrediting them at the same time. Mrs. Bennet is a steadfast proponent, almost to the point of obsession, of advantageous marriage for her daughters (a concept rooted in patriarchy), whereas their father is somewhat more sympathetic to their own decision making regarding their marital affairs. Anshoo Sharma notes mealtime at the Bennet house to be an example of Mrs. Bennet's adherence to social order. Sharma proposes that "food is to Mrs. Bennet what her beauty was to her in her youth – a status symbol and a means of attracting men," pointing to her swift movement from the topic of food to beauty and her association of quality dinners with social superiority (47-48). Mrs. Bennet indeed uses mealtime as a tool for receiving men into her home in hopes of securing their romantic interest in her daughters. So determined is she to have her daughters married (though for good reason, considering the possible implications of them not marrying without the entailment of the estate), she implores her husband to insist that Elizabeth take back her refusal of Mr. Collins' marriage proposal lest she never see her daughter again. In contrast, Mr. Bennet's response to this request is to tell his daughter: "an unhappy alternative is before you, Elizabeth. From this day you must be a stranger to one of your parents. – Your mother will never see you again if you do *not* marry Mr. Collins, and I will never see you again if you *do*" (83). Mr. Bennet shows significantly less urgency in marrying off his daughters

than his wife does, though he is more at liberty to do so, having inherited the entail to their estate by due process, and having no prospect of losing it before his death. He is, however, also more open to Elizabeth making her own decision regarding a husband (as shown by his acceptance of Elizabeth's refusal of Mr. Collins, as well as his desire to speak with her privately to see if she is sure of her engagement to Darcy), which adds to the ridiculousness attributed to Mrs. Bennet's character. However understanding an eagerness to ensure the security of one's children may be, the extremes that Mrs. Bennet goes to in pushing her daughters to marry (i.e., forcing Jane to stay with the Bingleys while sick, attempting to force Elizabeth to accept Mr. Collins' proposal, forgetting her hatred of Wickham simply for his conceding to marry Lydia) uphold the same patriarchal traditions that have designated Mr. Collins as entail and left her and her daughters in so despairing a predicament. The inability of characters around her, including her husband, to take her seriously or humor her, paired with the ridiculousness attributed by the text to her character, challenge the patriarchal ideals that she represents. The fun poked at Mrs. Bennet's character, however, does not revoke the necessity of her character or her intentions, for she also represents the economic dependency that she and her daughters face.

Looking Out for Each Other

Interactions between female characters provide another key aspect in which we might consider the representation and questioning of patriarchy in *Pride and Prejudice*. The closest, most honest relationships described in the novel are between female characters. Having to uphold the proper social etiquette of a patriarchal society, women must maintain appropriate conversations with males, acquaintances, parents and visitors;

however, female friendships provide a safe space in which one's true opinion may be uninhibited. The novel's female protagonist, Elizabeth, has particularly close relationships with her eldest sister, Jane, her best friend, Charlotte, and her aunt, Mrs. Gardner, with whom she is conversationally unrestrained. Elizabeth's reservation of candor for other female characters and her investment in their marital affairs reveal the structure of the social order in which the characters of *Pride and Prejudice* function, and the limits felt by women as a result.

Though Elizabeth's language is carefully crafted in public settings, she feels no need to censure herself in the private presence of other women. Her most private thoughts and controversial opinions are reserved for them, particularly her sister Jane, and including opinions concerning her aversion to marriage for purely economic purposes. On any occasion that Elizabeth feels the need to hold her tongue for the sake of propriety (i.e., her reservations at revealing to Darcy that Lydia had run away with Wickham), she is instinctively eager for a moment alone with her sister, Jane. It is Jane whose letter first informs Elizabeth of the seeding scandal of Lydia and Wickham, and it is Jane to whom she must immediately speak upon her rushed arrival home:

Elizabeth jumped out; and, after giving each of them an hasty kiss, hurried into the vestibule, where Jane, who came running down stairs from her mother's apartment, immediately met her.

Elizabeth, as she affectionately embraced her, whilst tears filled the eyes of both, lost not a moment in asking whether any thing had been heard of the fugitives.

(206)

The diction in these two sentences is overflowing with mutual eagerness (i.e., “jumped out,” “hasty,” “came running,” “immediately,” “lost not a moment”) between the two sisters for the chance to speak uninhibitedly about the recent events. Though she is brought to reveal the situation to Darcy by the shock of the news, Elizabeth is struck by the impropriety of doing so and terrified at the notion of news of the scandal spreading and affecting her family’s reputation, whereas she is able and eager to speak freely with Jane. The two girls also have a particularly trusting relationship with their aunt, Mrs. Gardner, whom they frequently update and ask for advice. Elizabeth is unreserved in voicing her opinion with her aunt, particularly in regard to her assessment of her opposite sex: “I have a very poor opinion of young men who live in Derbyshire; and their intimate friends who life in Herfordshire are not much better. I am sick of them all,” she tells her, and later playfully questions, “what are men to rocks and mountains?” (114). This interaction with her aunt is one example of Elizabeth opening up to another woman about her dissatisfaction with courtship in their community. Her diction restricted by rules of propriety in which a woman must consider her reputation and that of her family before a man, Elizabeth must reserve her language for other characters that are restricted in the same ways that she is, which reveals the boundaries that women are restricted to outside of private settings. Cixous reminds us that, because “writing has been run by a libidinal and cultural – hence political, typically masculine – economy,” woman in fiction “has never *her* turn to speak” (879). Woman is shown in *Pride and Prejudice* to have her turn to speak in the presence of her natural counterpart, other women (as well as in narrative through Austen’s fiction).

As well as particularly honest with other females, Elizabeth is invested in their respective courtships and wishes for them to subvert the standard as she does, and avoid marrying for economic purposes, and yet the necessity in doing so is evident in Charlotte's acceptance of Mr. Collins. After bluntly rejecting the proposal of Mr. Collins, Elizabeth is appalled to learn of Charlotte's decision to agree to marry him. She principally finds the offence to be intellectual, considering Mr. Collins to be beneath Charlotte in that regard, and the decision to accept his proposal in light of his ridiculous nature to be uncharacteristic of her sharp mind. Following the interaction between the two women when Charlotte relates the engagement, Elizabeth digests her feelings on the subject: "And to the pang of a friend disgracing herself and sunk in her esteem, was added the distressing conviction that it was impossible for that friend to be tolerably happy" (93). Elizabeth is not only genuinely concerned for her friend's happiness but considers her choice to marry for economic purposes to be disgraceful. Deborah Knuth notes Charlotte's disinterest in Mr. Collins and simple desire for an establishment to be the source of Elizabeth's judgmental reaction to their engagement, and proposes that the event causes a newfound restraint between them on the subject (Knuth). In some sense, Elizabeth loses respect for her friend and withholds some of her reserved candor when she sees Charlotte's resignation to marry for economic purposes, as opposed to her feelings on Mr. Bingley, who she believed is someone with whom Jane could reasonably love and have a mutually respectful relationship. This is not to say that the text itself condemns Charlotte's decision, as her arrangement with Mr. Collins does eventually seem to promise tolerable happiness, but Charlotte's material motivation for accepting his

proposal exposes the near necessity of the pursuit of security through marriage for women in a patriarchy.

Raising the Bar

Despite the romance of the “happy” ending of *Pride and Prejudice*, in which the marriages of Jane and Elizabeth tie up the plot, the progress of the courtship that takes place between the happy couples, particularly Elizabeth and Darcy, reveal ways in which Austen discredits preconceptions rooted in patriarchy. Vivien Jones proposes that,

Austen’s moral realism is equally critical of individual women for whom marrying advantageously takes precedence over any other motive. But marriage nevertheless remains the grand feature of her novels, as it is of her heroines’ lives. Her realism is tempered by romance: an essentially conservative form. Happy-ever-after endings, which conveniently combine material comfort with emotional satisfaction, are her heroines’ reward for their moral integrity and for refusing to marry for mercenary convenience. (284)

Indeed, Elizabeth and Jane manage to marry up in class despite neither having expressed interest in doing so, and both girls are seemingly able to avoid the pitfall of loveless economic marriage that their mother had fallen into, both of their husbands appearing to have some level of respect and admiration for them. Darcy’s realization of his misguided expectations of Elizabeth due to their contrasting positions in society, evident in his second proposal to Elizabeth, can help bring to light the preconceptions people can develop as a result of images presented by patriarchal traditions that urge women to pursue equitable matches, as well as provide an example of a character questioning and resisting such preconceptions.

Although the novel ends with the marriage of its heroine, Elizabeth's courtship with Mr. Darcy is by no means traditional and does not seem to advocate for marriage for advantage. Both characters are somewhat averse to marriage in general, and especially to each other (for much longer in Elizabeth's case). They must find a way to understand each other and communicate, in contrast to the model her parents provide. In observation of the changes that must occur in both Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy for their ultimate union to be possible, Alistair M. Duckworth argues that "Elizabeth recognizes that individualism must find its social limits, and Darcy concedes that tradition without individual energy is empty form" (118). While I agree that Darcy's pride must be humbled and Elizabeth must resolve her prejudice against him (as the novel's title suggests), I wouldn't say that "Jane Austen has qualified Elizabeth's largely admirable individualism" by having Elizabeth move "from individualism to a sense of social identity" (141), but rather propose that Darcy must grow to detach from the preconceptions that he holds and see that Elizabeth is more than the signifiers to which she is attached, that her desires reach beyond a comfortable establishment. Darcy must learn by his second proposal attempt not to expect that Elizabeth would jump at the chance to marry him. During their engagement, Darcy asks Elizabeth of his first proposal, "what will you think of my vanity? I believed you to be wishing, expecting my addresses" (268). By admitting his assumption that she would jump at the chance to marry him because of the economic advantage that he would provide her, Darcy reveals that he has grown to look past the expectations he had attached to Elizabeth because of her sex that had caused him to assume her inherent desire for their engagement.

Section 2: Pushing Boundaries in Virginia Woolf's *Night and Day*

Virginia Woolf considered *Night and Day* (1919) to be an exercise in the traditional form of writing and, as Julia Briggs notes in her introduction to the novel, “it was written very slowly, [...but] with an unusual fluency and certainty of purpose” (Briggs xiii). Though written in more traditional form than much of Woolf's later work, the text manages to push back against traditional ideas of courtship and the economic limits placed on women of patriarchy. Criticized after its release for its intentional exclusion of themes related to the recent World War (the patriotic rhetoric around which Woolf found grotesque), *Night and Day* was for Woolf, as described by Jane Marcus, “a feminist pacifist's answer to masculinist pacifism,” whose “first principle [...] was hatred of women” (Marcus 21). Despite the scant criticism over Woolf's *Night and Day* compared to some of her other work, like *Mrs. Dalloway*, *A Room of One's Own*, and *Three Guineas*, her early novel displays many of the provocative themes that she has been known to explore, including questions of gender roles and societal expectations of women. Though the limits placed on women have progressed from a state of total economic dependency in *Pride and Prejudice*, where self-sufficiency and sustainable singledom are nonexistent options for women, to an early 20th century patriarchal society where it is possible for a woman to live alone or remain unmarried, the same societal expectations that women must pursue a suitable match are still very present in *Night and Day* (and these new options are not necessarily shown as reliable options for women). An examination of Katharine Hilbery's familial connections, the dynamic between Katharine and Mary, and the unusual forms of courtship in *Night and Day* can help bring to light the

ways in which the novel portrays and questions patriarchal structure in early 20th century England.

Legacy

Katharine Hilbery, who effectively manages her family's estate and is known for her practicality, is placed within the confines of her position as a daughter in a particularly distinguished English family. She has no profession, though she considers whether one should, and instead focuses on fulfilling the needs of her household.

Katharine's character attempts to maintain her position in the symbolic order by attempting to play the role of a proper daughter, but also rejects that role when she resists, first subtly against her family's literary legacy, and then concretely by defying her family's patriarch.

Katharine rejects her family's literary legacy to some degree, privately preferring mathematics and astronomy – perhaps more masculine subjects. The omniscient narrator of *Night and Day* muses that “perhaps the unwomanly nature of science made her wish to conceal her love of it. But the more profound reason was that in her mind mathematics were directly opposed to literature” (34). Despite her disinterest in literature, she dutifully assists her mother in her disorganized attempt to write the biography of her famous grandfather, a notable poet named Richard Alardyce. Katharine attempts to hide that she dislikes her family's valued vocation, and questions whether one's reputation can be deserved if it is built by the distinguishment of their family. For Katharine, “she would rather have confessed her wildest dreams of hurricane and prairie” than admit her secret studies of mathematics in the early mornings and late nights, and “no force on earth would have made her confess” (34). Whether she be afraid to upset her mother, who is

passionate about literature and her family's legacy, or embarrassed to admit that her own passions are unbecoming to her family's reputation and her sex, Katharine attempts to appear closer to the phallic center of the symbolic order within her household and society by suppressing her interests. If the binary opposition of masculine/feminine signifiers is what structures a phallogocentric culture, Katharine imitates maintenance of the structure by upholding her reputation during the day and reserving any actions that belong in the margins, far from the phallic center, for the more feminine nighttime (reminiscent of the duality proposed by the novel's title). She fears revealing her own reality, and instead attempts to mold herself to the constructed reality for women that is presented to her by patriarchal society. As a woman, Katharine inherently, as Cixous describes, "occupie[s] the place [in the superegoized structure] reserved for the guilty (guilty of everything, guilty at every turn: for having desires for not having any," which is shown by her hiding her interests, but she is able to break away from that structure by "*seizing* the occasion to speak" (880). Katharine grows to take her opportunity to speak as the novel progresses, eventually speaking up for herself to her family regarding her own best interests, but her initial sense of obligation in covering up her digression from the stereotypes of her role reveal the pressures she faces within the patriarchal society portrayed in the novel.

Although Katharine initially attempts to disguise the ways in which she does not adhere to the patriarchal images associated with her sex, she grows to disrupt it outright by standing against her father. Katharine may have a close relationship to her mother, but her father is somewhat absent throughout the novel and reacts negatively to her decision-making regarding her engagement. She has, upon deciding that she should not have agreed to marry William Rodney without truly loving him, arranged for his courtship

with her cousin, Cassandra, for whom he shares mutual feelings. In reaction to learning about the complicated situation between Katharine, William, and Cassandra, Mr. Hilbery loses his temper. He tells his daughter,

Then all I can say is that you've very strange ideas of the proper way to behave ... People have drawn certain conclusions [...]. How am I to explain to your uncle Francis - but I wash my hands of it. Cassandra goes tomorrow. I forbid Rodney the house. As for the other young man, the sooner he makes himself scarce the better. After placing the most implicit trust in you, Katharine-' He broke off, disquieted by the ominous silence with which his words were received, and looked at his daughter with [] curious doubt as to her state of mind. (404-405)

Mr. Hilbery is principally concerned with the potential scandal of the situation upon learning of it. He genuinely questions the sanity of his daughter for handling her own affairs because he worries of the conclusions that people may draw. In her book, *Virginia Woolf: Feminist Destinations*, Rachel Bowlby discusses Woolf's views on the patriarchy of British society in her time. She asserts that the term patriarchy "indicates a hierarchical division of ruled and rulers, with fathers providing the pivotal category" (Bowlby 19). As the father of the house, as well as potentially the head of their family (as argued by Katharine (89)), Mr. Hilbery is definitively placed in the role of ruler according to social order. Katharine is then ruled by him, being farther from the phallogocentric center of the symbolic order in which he is firmly fixed. Bowlby elaborates: "whereas sons will inherit and mothers be honored, daughters in this arrangement are not easily put in their place, except in that their place is one of exclusion from any position of authority" (19). Katharine subverts her place in this arrangement by holding her ground against her

father's angry reaction, no longer willing to fit so complacently within the bounds of the patriarchal structure that would render her a subservient member of the Hilbery household.

Mutual Respect

An examination of the dynamic between Katharine and Mary, the two women of *Night and Day's* four protagonists, may also prove interesting in consideration of how Woolf depicts patriarchal boundaries placed on women in the book. The two women don't interact as frequently as they do with some other characters, particularly men, perhaps because, as Katharine notes during the first scene we see them share together, "the consciousness of being both of them women made it unnecessary to speak to her" (45). The diction here – "unnecessary" – implies that a woman in the presence of a man would be required to address his presence and provide him with conversation (whereas a woman is due no such entertainment), but also that she needn't uphold any illusion of interest in the presence of a woman. Though Katharine and Mary have fewer interactions together, they influence each other through their mutual connections with Ralph and William, and what moments they do share are honest, which shows an inherent trust for each other that can only be shared between women because of shared instability within a social order that revolves around man.

Mary's refusal of Ralph's proposal is an example of Mary's respect for Katharine, as it results from Mary's realization that Ralph is in love with Katharine, as well as an example of a female character's departure from the expectation that she pursue prospects of marriage. A close friend of Ralph's, she had previously privately loved him and hoped for a marriage proposal from him, but seeing that he loves another woman is enough to

change her mind. As they are eating together, Ralph notices Katharine outside and “the impression was so intense that he could not dismiss it,” so he mentions to Mary that he has just seen Katharine Hilbery. Suddenly it strikes Mary that Ralph has been in love with Katharine all along, and she is able to see the signs of his infatuation with her, understanding that “the light of truth, she seemed to frame the words as she rose to go, shines on a world not to be shaken by our personal calamities” (194). Mary realizes that there is nothing to be done, because Ralph’s love for Katharine diminishes the possibility of a mutual relationship with him and herself, and she releases the notion. When she later has the opportunity to marry him anyway, she turns him down and instead finds that she can find happiness in her work, subverting the idea that marriage is a golden opportunity for women and that women are in competition for it (marriage/phallus) with other women. Interestingly, as soon as she makes this switch, leaving herself out of the love pentagon of the book, Mary is also left out of the narrative. Her absence in the last parts of the novel is palpable. Cixous argues that in looking for the rare instances of “writing that inscribes femininity [...], we must first deduct the immense majority whose workmanship is in no way different from male writing,” cautioning that masculine forms of writing are so embedded in literature so as to prevail frequently within the work of women (878). Although *Night and Day* is written in more traditional style than much of Woolf’s later, more experimental, work and takes on the Shakespearean comedic form (in the partner exchanges between couples and the nuptial conclusion), Mary’s ability to decide a new ending for herself and exit the marriage circuit makes her an outlier. She is effectively removed from the symbolic order that is represented by the narrative, where the principal characters must marry, and set aside to function as a threat to that very

order, dedicating herself to working against the patriarchy for the rights of women.

Though the novel and characters alike don't seem to know what to do with Mary after her decision to maintain her independence (i.e., her lack of presence in the last half, Ralph and Katherine's seeming inability to visit her in the final pages), her departure provides a hope for the exploration of the uncharted waters of economic independence that were unavailable for Austen's characters to explore.

Katharine's character shows the same sort of inherent respect between women that Mary shows her. When Katharine feels pressure that she is expected to marry Ralph because she chooses him over Rodney, she decides to embark to find him and instead finds herself at none other than Mary's apartment. Believing her appearance to be an imposition despite Mary's assurance that she had a right to come, Katharine admits, "no, [] except that when one's desperate one has a sort of right. I am desperate" (380). Unable but eager to find Ralph, she is somehow unafraid to allow Mary to see her desperation, exemplifying the natural freedom of speech that may only occur in the company of women. Katharine expects Mary to be sympathetic to her interests as another woman. Within the security of a private setting between women, they are unrestricted by the expectations of their sex. Their openness demonstrates a comradeship between the marginalized that is similar to that portrayed between the female characters of *Pride and Prejudice*.

Lady's Choice

The characters of Katharine and Mary each rebel against patriarchal values in their own ways when it comes to their romantic affairs. The contrast between the two women is significant in that they are each able to question patriarchal images of female living to

different degrees. Katharine's meddling in her own marital affairs and Mary's independence and ambition are evidence of their attempts to push back against the boundaries placed on women as a result of the patriarchal system in which they live.

Katharine finds herself in an engagement to William Rodney, despite the fact that she has no romantic interest in him, because she desires independence from her family. Finding that she is unable to fit into Rodney's ideal image of a dutiful wife, she is able to find a way out of the engagement by managing the situation as effectively as she does her family's estate, noticing a mutual interest between Cassandra and her fiancé (whom she does not wish to marry), and arranging for their interaction. The contrast between herself and her replacement in her engagement is notable: "where Katharine was simple, Cassandra was complex; where Katharine was solid and direct, Cassandra was vague and evasive. In short, they represented very well the manly and womanly sides of the feminine nature" (290). As opposed to the pensive and blunt Katharine, Cassandra exhibits some of the attributes typically associated with femininity (i.e., "complex," and "vague and evasive" (290)), fitting more closely into the image that Rodney is hoping for in a wife. Katharine displays some resistance to the idea that a couple must marry or cannot live together beforehand, telling her mother that she and Ralph do not wish to marry and asking, "why, after all, isn't it perfectly possible to live together without being married?" (411). She nevertheless eventually agrees to an engagement with Ralph, which her mother manages to arrange, despite their difference in social standing (she comes from a family with some renown thanks to her grandfather's literary achievements and he must work to support his family). By making her own decisions regarding her marriage and deciding not to marry for social standing, Katharine effectively escapes a pitfall of

patriarchy in which women, like products, are expected to market themselves to the highest bidder, though she is unable to escape her family's expectation that she be engaged to the man she is seeing. She and Ralph are left in a position of uncertainty in terms of their relationship, as they realize that it is more complicated than a simple desire to be married and yet are engaged. However, their position is also hopeful in that it provides a more complex model of potential love that is not based at all on the pursuit of an establishment, but rather on mutual respect, admiration, and intellectual interest.

In higher contrast to Katharine than her cousin, Cassandra, is the self-sufficient character of Mary Datchet, who rebels against the expectations of the role that society has set out for her in a more direct manner than Katharine's meddling by remaining unmarried at the novel's end and prioritizing her career. Where Katharine is able to push back against the boundaries of her position as a woman by questioning the need for marriage and making choices for herself in terms of her own marriage, Mary surpasses some of the societal pressure placed on her by pursuing fulfillment in her work and maintaining her independence. Living in an apartment of her own with a job of her own, Mary may serve as a partial representation of Woolf's famous assertion that a woman should have a room of her own and an income. Though she receives a meager wage and little recognition outside her small office of just three (her, Mr. Clacton, and Mrs. Seal), Mary is able to find satisfaction in pursuit of fulfillment in her suffrage work rather than in an advantageous match for herself. Initially feeling as though she is no longer "quite 'in the running' for life" (222) after having decidedly given away the opportunity to marry Ralph, something changes in Mary and she begins to "feel that something important – she hardly knew what – was taking place" (223). She finds newfound

excitement in her mission and dedicates herself to her work. In her essay, “Night and Day: The Marriage of Dreams and Reality,” Julia Briggs argues that “Katharine’s desire for power and independence remains largely unrecognised, operating at a subliminal level, but it is vicariously fulfilled through the figure of Mary Datchet” (Briggs 54). It is Mary that shows Katharine that one need not marry if they so choose, especially to someone they do not love. She serves almost as a model for Katharine of what independent female choice looks like.

Section 3: Focal Femininity in Toni Morrison's *Sula*

Toni Morrison's 1973 novel, *Sula*, offers a focused feminine perspective on a somewhat more modern view of American patriarchy, narrowing the social order through which her characters learn and grow through the female African American lens, a perspective that is further marginalized by patriarchal standards and even more absent in the literary canon than the white woman. Morrison famously rejected the idea of writing more characters in the white perspective because she desired to create a safe space where she "felt free not to have the white gaze," and attributed the inquiry's "profound" racism to coming "from a position of being in the center" (1:29-2:19). Morrison, then, would specify that the male around which social order revolves is most certainly a white male, and aims to develop a canon in which that is not the case. In *Playing in the Dark*, Morrison writes: "my project is an effort to avert the critical gaze from the racial object to the racial subject; from the described and imagined to the describers and imaginers" (90). Her mission is reminiscent of that of Cixous for women – to have a place as subject within the literary canon. Cixous also connects the repression of women to racism, writing of women that "as soon as they begin to speak, at the same time as they're taught their name, they can be taught that their territory is black: because you are black you are Africa, you are black. Your continent is dark. Dark is dangerous," (877-878). She proposes, and Morrison would certainly agree, that "we the repressed of culture [...] are black and we are beautiful," and that this beauty must be documented and shared (877). In stark contrast to typical standards in a literary world dominated by white male authors and protagonists alike, Morrison creates a community in the Bottom that at close analysis seems powered almost entirely by African American feminine energy. To start, the

narrative focuses almost exclusively on black women, but primarily on two complex female protagonists: Nel and Sula. Though one could argue that the story is centered around the Bottom and the community that resides there, the reader is offered insight into these two residents more than any others. Nel and Sula grow up in the Bottom under the leadership of their solitary mothers, and beneath the watchful and judgmental eyes of their town. Though they do not share the same level of economic dependency on men that the feminine characters of *Pride and Prejudice* and *Night and Day* face, the societal pressure that results from a long history of patriarchal tradition continues to influence the women of *Sula*. Morrison's novel shows that expectations of women (particularly black women) rooted in patriarchal images remain, despite the acquisition of certain legal rights, and experiments with a more feminine form of the novel as a result of creating a woman-centered community in the Bottom, filled with female-run families, powerful female friendship, and challenges to patriarchal ideals of female monogamy and motherhood.

Like Mother Like Daughter

The characterization of *Sula*'s primary protagonists, along with many other significant characters, begins with their mothers. In fact, the most notably influential figures in the plot happen to be women. Claude Pruitt notes the significance of the matriarch in the community of the Bottom. She explains that "everywhere in the Bottom [there] are woman-centered families: The Wrights led by Helene; the Peaces by Eva and followed by Hannah; Teapot's mother; Ajax's mother; Chicken Little's mother; and the unnamed others" (Pruitt 118). By placing such importance on maternal guidance, Morrison inverts the standard literary structure that centers around male leadership and

exposes the less explored but just as impactful influence of feminine figures on communities. For example, when the novel momentarily delves into Ajax's background it offers only his experiences with women, including his various lovers and his mother. No father, or male friend, or any of his brothers is portrayed as emotionally significant to Ajax, but his mother, "an evil conjure woman, blessed with seven adoring children," is described as the only woman he ever loved (Morrison 126). This focus on motherly influence is especially important to the novel's protagonists, Nel and Sula, whose childhood experiences with their mothers are notable, and who are depicted as having inherited some of their mothers' habits/personality traits.

Connected with (arguably) two of the most impactful events of *Sula*'s plot, the memory of her trip with her mother and the soldier's faces on the train is employed heavily in Morrison's characterization of Nel. The image is recalled more frequently than any other throughout the course of the novel, partially because of its early appearance but mostly due to its impact on Nel. When Nel and her mother board the train to visit her grandmother, Helene responds to the dominating stares of the men on the train with a dazzling but passive smile, which Cassandra Feters claims is significant to Nel because "she no longer sees her [mother] as an authentic subject, a reliable other on whom she can rely to confer recognition" (Feters 34). Afterwards, the event ripples repeatedly through Nel's memory over the course of the rest of the book, most notably during her self-realization after her trip with her mother, and when Nel catches Jude and Sula having an affair together. As Nel mourns her lost marriage and friendship, she thinks to Jude, "and if only you had not looked at me the way the soldiers did on the train" (Morrison 105). The image repeats again soon after on the following page: "because your eyes

looked like the soldiers' that time on the train when my mother turned to custard" (106). Nel feels ashamed for having allowed herself to be looked at like an object just as she had felt shame for her mother's passivity in the face of common objectification. She had failed to "make certain that no man ever looked at her that way," as she had hoped for after her trip (22). This moment was clearly quite impactful for Nel's development as a black female character, as it defines her place (or lack thereof) in a white man's world, shapes her ideas of the kinds of love and happiness that are available to her, and it continues to affect her into her adulthood. Nel's desire to avoid this domineering look is evidence of her realization of the structure of her culture and her subtle attempt to resist it; Jude looking at her in this way is a reminder of her place within the structure.

The effects of the girls' experiences with their mothers are evident in their character development, as they maintain habits and traits as adults themselves that mirror those of their mothers. Nel marries and has kids, living in relative modesty and conforming to a typical feminine lifestyle within a patriarchal system, whereas Sula rejects this traditional mold. Sula experiences her own life-altering memory with her mother, Hannah, when she witnesses Hannah say to her friend that she loves her daughter but does not like her (57). Andrea O'Reilly, in her book, *Toni Morrison and Motherhood: A Politics of the Heart*, claims that "Sula dismisses the teachings of her motherline and decisively breaks her connection to it" as a result of hearing her mother deny liking her (60). I would argue that, while O'Reilly may be correct to say that this moment shattered Sula's idea of stereotypically unconditional motherly love, her connection to her mother is all but intentionally lost. She is aware of the similarities she shares with her mother and happy to continue living with them. Both Nel and Sula retain characteristics that had

stood out in their mothers' personalities. Nel marries and has children, not straying far from the social conventions that Helene also clung to, while the whimsical nature and promiscuity of Hannah live on in her daughter Sula. In Sula, "Eva's arrogance and Hannah's self-indulgence merged," (118) and "having lived in a house with women who thought all men available," (119) she learned to continue her mother's habit of sleeping with married men throughout the community, and is unashamed of her lifestyle at the time of her death. Despite having had somewhat disheartening experiences under the guidance of their mothers, Nel and Sula carry the evidence of their mothers' influence on them, which (along with a complete absence of father figures in the book) indicates an almost unparalleled nature of maternal (feminine) influence on one's development.

Inseparable

The remarkable importance of female friendship in this novel is another aspect in which the importance of feminine influence is portrayed. The plot follows the lives of Nel and Sula, delving slightly into their immediate family history, through their girlhood and friendship together in the Bottom, and into their adulthood until the death of Sula. It is the dominance of their perspectives over the narrative that drives the focus of the plot. Although both women also have a love interest, Nel's husband Jude (who also has an affair with Sula) and Sula's lover Ajax, neither remains to the plot's conclusion. In fact, the depression that Nel believes to be a result of Jude's infidelity and resulting absence turns out to be a manifestation of her longing for her friendship with Sula. The closeness of the two girls in childhood and the resilience of their love for each other (against the trauma of Sula and Jude's infidelity against Nel) are evidence that the significance of

female friendship in *Sula* outweighs that of romantic interest and pushes back against the idea that preserving the family unit should be the principal goal of a woman's life.

Nel and Sula develop a close friendship from a very young age after Nel returns from her trip with her mother to visit her grandmother. Helene had previously instructed Nel to avoid Sula because her mother was "sooty" (29), rejecting the unconventionality of the Peace family, but after her visit to the south with Helene when she decides that she never wants to belong to anyone ("I'm me," she whispered. 'Me,') declaring that she belongs only to herself (28)), Nel is able to push back slightly against her mother's wishes by befriending Sula. For a character that ultimately seems to carry on the conservative values that her mother had imbued in her, becoming a dutiful wife, mother, and member of the community in the Bottom, defying Helene is a step away from the phallic center Nel is pushed toward. In examining the relationship between word slippages and characters' desires, Rachel Lee suggests that Nel and Sula's "history has been marked by an uncanny unison of thinking and movement that does not require words," connecting wordlessness and closeness, and pointing to the scene leading up to Chicken Little's death in which the girls simultaneously dig holes in the ground as an example (573). The unspoken bond that Lee refers to between the girls points to an inherent kindred connection between them as members of the repressed. Nel and Sula are inseparable from the very beginning, "their friendship [] as intense as it was sudden" (Morrison 53). The two become major influences in each other's lives, coming of age together and sharing pivotal experiences (like Chicken Little's accidental drowning) with only each other, their mutual feminine influence becoming a defining developmental feature of their lives.

Though the girls' friendship is unable to survive in the years after Nel finds out that Sula is sleeping with her husband, their love for each other is able to withstand the betrayal even without the characters initially realizing it. Curiously, Nel notices that Sula's nudity is less significant to her than Jude's in the moment when she finds them together. She sees Sula "sitting on the bed not even bothering to put on her clothes because actually she didn't need to because somehow she didn't look naked to me, only you did," and feels the urge to privately urge him to cover himself (106). Nel's immediate, apparently subconscious reaction focuses the shame of the infidelity on Jude, the first indication by the text that Sula's crime against Nel is lesser than his. This initial assignment of shame is not enough to preserve Sula's place in Nel's life in the years following the event, however. Nel realizes that her love for her friend outweighs the loss of Jude only after Sula's death, this realization being the plot's resolution, which highlights the significance of their relationship to their story by circling back around to their friendship in the end. When Nel visits Eva and is mistaken for Sula by the aging woman, Nel wonders whether she had unjustly blamed Sula. The "soft ball of fur," which follows her around after Jude leaves and represents her loneliness, "br[eaks] and scatter[s] like dandelion spores in the breeze," and she calls out in sorrow for Sula. She says, "as though explaining something" aloud, "'all that time, all that time, I thought I was missing Jude. [...] We was girls together'" (Morrison 174). In this moment, Nel realizes that the loneliness that haunted her after she lost her husband, the "gray ball hovering just there" that she "knew she could not look [at], so she closed her eyes and crept past," belonged to Sula all along (109). This realization in mind, Margaret Bauer suggests that Nel and Sula's girlhood together and "their friendship is more important

than any other relationship in their lives,” highlighting the importance of female friendships (99). Bauer argues that Morrison “recognizes [a] failure to appreciate the value of friendship” between women and that, in reading *Sula*, “the relationship that emerges as the most nurturing, the strongest, the most valuable to these women is a friendship” (92-93). The strength that Bauer points to, of Nel and Sula’s connection to each other, is evident in the resilience of their love in the years following their separation. Sula’s love for Nel doesn’t just disappear after their falling out either, though she has little understanding of Nel’s perspective (“she had no thought at all of causing Nel pain when she bedded down with Jude” (119), and when confronted on her deathbed by Nel she remarks “‘I didn’t kill him, I just fucked him. If we were such good friends, how come you couldn’t get over it?’” (145)). Nel is who Sula thinks of in her last moments: “‘Well, I’ll be damned,’ she thought, ‘it didn’t even hurt. Wait’ll I tell Nell” (149). Sula was never taught the patriarchal marital conventions that Nel holds so dear, in which a man and woman in a relationship belong to one another, but she never loses her love for her friend despite being cast out for misunderstanding. Having withstood the destruction of Nel’s marriage half by Sula’s hand, the friendship of the two girls is proven to have more significance than the marriage itself, the revelation that their love for each other had been the most precious concluding the novel.

Different Priorities

The contrast between Nel and Sula’s two very different perspectives on the purpose of romantic relationships is another method that Morrison utilizes in order to both portray and push against societal pressures rooted in patriarchy in the Bottom. The way in which Morrison illustrates the potential consequence of falling prey to unequal assumptions of

monogamy in a system that marginalizes women, particularly black women, in one of the female protagonists, and blatant rejection of such assumptions in the other, is interesting in the case of *Sula*. Nel maintains the patriarchal values that society and her mother taught her, marrying Jude and having his children before he cheats and leaves her, while Sula completely renounces them, sleeping with whomever she chooses and never marrying or giving birth.

Though it is more a result of societal expectations and the conventional teachings of her mother than of the kind of economic dependency that Austen and Woolf's characters face, Nel preserves the traditions that her mother and thousands before her had upheld by becoming a wife and mother. Sula, having no desire to fix herself within the symbolic order of the Bottom, is disappointed to see her friend's complacency to it. When Sula comes to understand that Nel does not share her disapprobation of monogamy, she believes that "now Nel belonged to the town and all of its ways. She had given herself over to them [and] it surprised her a little and saddened her a good deal when Nel behaved the way the others would have" (120). Having grown up in a home where monogamy and marital fidelity were not a consideration, Sula has little understanding of the importance that such things would have for Nel. Sula then becomes part of the rupture of Nel's place in the phallogentric order of her own home, in which Jude is the center, when she has an affair with Jude. Jude then leaves Nel, which he may do without disrupting the center that he himself represents (phallus), and yet Nel then becomes a single mother shrouded in loneliness and falls closer to the margins, losing the stability that she had strived for. She has fallen victim to the fool's game that Cixous warns us about, which boasts that "each one will love the other sex. I'll give you your body and

you'll give me mine" (885). For Nel, this deception is shattered at the realization that man is not bound to the same expectations of loyalty as woman, being in a more stable position than she is.

While Nel marries and has kids, fitting the patriarchal standard that has been set for black women (by her mother and community), Sula completely rejects marriage and even monogamy, as well as motherhood. Despite being outcast by the community for her unique behavior, she continually breaks the mold. Although she chooses a less traditional path as an adult than Nel does and is repudiated for it, Sula seems to find happiness by loving herself. Ajax is the only man to whom she briefly considers committing, but, just as averse to monogamy as she is and praised for it because of his manhood, he disappears before she has a chance to realize that she had never known that his name was actually Albert Jacks. When Nel visits Sula on her deathbed, they address Sula's inclination toward solitude; Sula says of the black women in America at the time of her death,

"Dying. Just like me. But the difference is they dying like a stump. Me, I'm going down like one of those redwoods. I sure did live in this world."

"Really? What have you got to show for it?"

"Show? To who? Girl, I got my mind. And what goes on in it. Which is to say, I got me." (143)

Sula does not feel as though she missed out on anything by not marrying, but rather that she was able to flourish and truly live as a result of it. She is alone, without a husband or child, and she feels stronger for not having attempted to find a place inside a

phallogocentric system within which, without a phallus, she inherently cannot stably fit.

Though I disagree that Sula intends to completely cut herself off from her mother because

she proudly carries parts of Hannah within herself, I agree with Andrea O'Reilly's assertion that Sula intends to reject motherhood. She writes that Sula is "disconnected from the motherline [...], rejects motherhood and embraces dominant standards of female success and well-being. In particular, she fashions a female selfhood modeled on the values of autonomy, independence, and self-sufficiency" (O'Reilly 61). In adopting these more masculine (as dictated by the symbolic) characteristics, Sula casts off the stereotypes of her sex and provides another image of femininity. She is in turn cast off by her community, which scorns her, and yet Sula is a female character who, in the language of Cixous, has stopped listening to the Sirens (feminine creatures of Greek mythology who lure sailors to their deaths), "for the Sirens were men" (885). Sula realizes what Nel does not: a woman need not gravitate toward a man, nor rely on anyone but herself for happiness; women are not characterized by the danger they pose to men, nor is their singular desire the acquisition or downfall of man.

Conclusion

The patriarchal structure of Western society has permeated the very language we speak and read. Where words are signifiers attached to things, they are associated with whatever constructs be delegated to them by the culture. In the case of signifiers associated with femininity, these constructs may include marriage for economic advantage, social propriety, duties of daughterhood, and motherhood. Hélène Cixous calls on women to write so that they may take part in the meaning that the signifiers to which they are attached take on, coining the phrase *l'écriture féminine*, and offering a framework for what feminine literature must look like in order “for history to change its meaning” (885). Expanding upon Cixous’ ideas, I propose that, in order to deconstruct these associations and values that our society puts forth, feminine literature must portray the consensus of meaning connected with the word “woman,” and then allow it to fall apart. This process, as we have seen, can be found in Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, Virginia Woolf’s *Night and Day*, and Toni Morrison’s *Sula*, where the system that marginalizes women is exposed and then challenged in various ways as characters are able to resist movement toward a phallic center.

The study of each of these novels reveals the ways in which they each display the limits on women that result from the meaning that patriarchy assigns to them, but also push the boundaries of those limits. In *Pride and Prejudice*, we see Elizabeth (and her sister Jane) resist the patriarchal ideas upheld by their mother that they must marry purely for economic advantage (and to avoid being left without a home due to their social standing as women). Yet, the girls are able to land themselves in relationships that are not only mutually respectful, in contrast to the uncompanionable model set forth by their

parents, but also financially stable. Katherine Hilbery and Mary Datchet of *Night and Day* are likewise able to question traditional ideas that a woman should principally desire to marry, Mary successfully avoiding the set of engagements that tie up the plot to focus on her work (though it somewhat loosens her place as a protagonist of the novel). Morrison's *Sula* narrows the lens to the further marginalized black woman, also displaying the ever-present societal expectation that she must start and preserve a family, which the novel sidelines beneath the significance of female influence and friendship. Each of these novels offers the female perspective written by the female hand, but it is through each of these challenges to patriarchal images that the meaning of femininity is revealed to be much larger than the associated stereotypes that patriarchy has traditionally ascribed to it, which is perhaps the most important aspect of feminine writing in eliminating the skewed perspective within literature.

We can also see that the limits that women face have changed over time, as the characters of *Night and Day* are able to make more significant decisions regarding their lives than those of *Pride and Prejudice*, decisions like whether to marry at all without the prospect of complete economic despondency. The women in *Sula* are able to push the limits even further by questioning pillars of patriarchy, like monogamy and motherhood, and even proposing feminine influence as a defining aspect of character development. The questioning of patriarchal standards has changed over time, from whether a woman should have to marry for financial stability, to whether she should marry at all, or even support herself, to whether the goals she has set for herself are really her goals at all, and what else is there? This is where feminine literature must pick up, to explore and challenge new limits for femininity, until we are able to accept that there are none. We

must look forward to a future literary cannon with a place for every voice. There is no group of people or set of ideas that is capable of creating a universally applicable voice for every other group, and the attempt to do so has created a system of meanings that leaves many in the margins. In inscribing our own voices into the cannon, we may pave the way for authentic representation, but in order to do so we must lay out the failures of the roles we have been assigned to fill and define our own meaning for ourselves.

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