

## ABSTRACT

THE INFLUENCE OF WHITENESS ON FEMALE GENDER ROLES: A STUDY OF  
RACE, CLASS, AND GENDER IN *SULA*, *THE AWAKENING*, AND *THE  
HANDMAID'S TALE*

By Jennifer McIntosh

In this thesis I explore how Toni Morrison, Kate Chopin, and Margaret Atwood use the central female characters in their respective novels, *Sula*, *The Awakening*, and *The Handmaid's Tale*, to showcase the intricate relationship between race, class, and gender as it relates to the struggle to break free from society's expectations. Differences in race and levels of class allow for small glimpses of freedom, but in reality the possibility of true freedom is simply an illusion. From the perspective of Sula, Edna, and Offred, the ability to transcend the expectations society has placed upon them, which varies based on class and race, and create a unique self would mean achieving true independence. In their novels, Morrison, Chopin, and Atwood stress the dangers that lie within this puzzle of male domination, class rank, and white privilege. I contend that this danger is the incongruence that exists between society's view of female independence and its meaning to these women. I also argue that the dominant race and class, white, middle-class society, controls the illusions of freedom. As long as the female characters play within the boundaries approved by the "white norm," those around them will view their actions as the harmless testing of boundaries and as meaningless play, but, to these female characters, their actions reflect willful and serious struggles to gain autonomy and freedom.

As these women push the boundaries, they go through a journey of realization. Through the analysis of the novels, it is clear that these women are not naive in terms of their limitations as women, but because their respective societies allow them to "play" within the confines of their gender, early in the novels they believe they can actually transcend their socially assigned gender roles, but they do not understand the relationship between their class, gender, and race and the power which white privilege has in controlling their freedom. As all three women progress toward what they believe to be a true, independent self, they begin to see the relationship between their class, race and gender and the unique challenges they face because of these social markers. Ultimately, these women come to realize that although race, class, and gender provide unique experiences for them, it is the power of white, middle-class society that holds them back. Ultimately, once these women realize their experiences will never result in true independence as long as white, middle-class society determines their boundaries, they find little hope for the future.

THE INFLUENCE OF WHITENESS ON FEMALE GENDER ROLES: A STUDY OF  
RACE, CLASS, AND GENDER IN *SULA*, *THE AWAKENING*, AND *THE  
HANDMAID'S TALE*

By

Jennifer McIntosh

A Thesis Submitted  
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
For the Degree of

Master of Arts-English

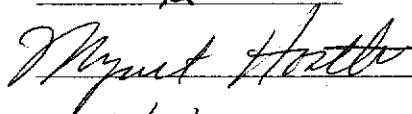
at

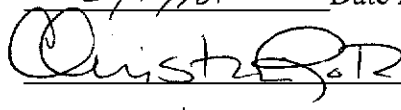
The University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh  
Oshkosh, WI 54901

May 2012

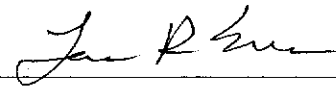
COMMITTEE APPROVAL

 Advisor  
6/1/12 Date Approved

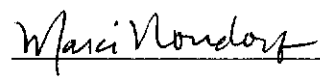
 Member  
6/1/12 Date Approved

 Member  
6/1/12 Date Approved

PROVOST  
AND VICE CANCELLOR

  
6/6/12 Date Approved

FORMAT APPROVAL

  
4/16/12 Date Approved

To Jordan Landry, your incredible and unwavering support gave me the courage and strength to persevere. You are a gift to the world of education.

To Margaret Hostetler, Christine Roth, and Laura Jean Baker, your help through the process was invaluable.

To *all* of my parents: Sue, Harry, Ed, Jeannette, M.C., Cecil, Dave, and Joann. Thank you listening and caring.

And to my amazing family, Bill, Kaegan, and Kinley, my success is the direct result of your understanding and love.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER ONE: SULA.....	10
Maternal Influence.....	18
Sula and Nel: Black and White.....	32
CHAPTER TWO: THE AWAKENING.....	44
White Privilege.....	49
The Culture of Race.....	57
Good-bye to Whiteness.....	62
CHAPTER THREE: THE HANDMAID’S TALE.....	72
Imagery: Black and White.....	78
The Reproduction of White Society.....	82
Relationships and Whiteness.....	86
CONCLUSION.....	99
WORKS CITED.....	100

## INTRODUCTION

In this thesis I explore how Toni Morrison, Kate Chopin, and Margaret Atwood use the central female characters in their respective novels, *Sula*, *The Awakening*, and *The Handmaid's Tale*, to showcase the intricate relationship between race, class, and gender as it relates to the struggle to break free from society's expectations. Differences in race and levels of class allow for small glimpses of freedom, but in reality, the possibility of true freedom is simply an illusion. From the perspective of Sula, Edna, and Offred, the ability to transcend the expectations society has placed upon them, which varies based on class and race, and create a unique self would mean achieving true independence. In their novels, Morrison, Chopin, and Atwood stress the dangers that lie within this puzzle of male domination, class rank, and white privilege. I contend that this danger is the incongruence that exists between society's view of female independence and its meaning to these women. I also that the dominant race and class, white, middle-class society, control these illusions of freedom. As long as the female characters play within the boundaries approved by the "white norm," those around them will view their actions as the harmless testing of boundaries and as meaningless play, but, to these female characters, their actions reflect willful and serious struggles to gain autonomy and freedom.

As these women push the boundaries placed upon them, they go through a journey of realization. Through the analysis of the novels, it is clear that these women are not naive in terms of their limitations as women, but because their respective societies

allow them to “play” within the confines of their gender, early in the novels they believe they can fully transcend their socially assigned gender roles, but they do not understand the relationship between their class, gender, and race and the power which white privilege has in controlling their freedom. As all three women progress toward what they believe to be a true, independent self, they begin to see the relationship between their class, race and gender and the unique challenges they face because of these social markers. Ultimately, these women come to realize that although race, class, and gender provide unique experiences for them, it is the power of white, middle-class society that holds them back. Ultimately, once these women realize their experiences will never result in true independence as long as white, middle-class society determines their boundaries, they find little hope for the future.

The individuality of these characters’ experiences become apparent as each of them is able to experience small glimpses of freedom and moments of consciousness in which they realize their constraints. Although achieving true independence for these women would be to transcend the barriers placed upon them by society, achieving a level of conscious awareness also allows them to recognize whiteness’ influence and see what may lie beyond it even though they can never truly transcend it. This level of awareness creates a paradox within the text. The central female characters are able to see the restrictions placed upon them, they realize that those restrictions are upheld by white society, and they challenge those boundaries placed upon them. Those realizations in and of themselves represent the “freeing” of their thinking. The paradox lies in the fact that

they are able to free their thinking, but they will never be able to fully and physically transcend the constraints placed upon them.

All three novels show a similar progression of consciousness in their central female characters. In Toni Morrison's *Sula*, Sula Peace and her best friend Nel Wright recognize as young girls that "they were neither white nor male, and that all freedom and triumph was forbidden to them, they had set about creating something else to be" (52). Early on they recognize that being female and black puts them at a disadvantage socially, but they still feel that they can change how they are perceived and create unique selves. Sula and Nel are not aware of the real reason that society views them differently and as Morrison takes us through their lives, it becomes clear that their differences in class position create different expectations for each of them. In the text, Sula is able to achieve a conscious awareness of her restrictions due to race, and class. Morrison juxtaposes Sula and Nel to show that they encounter different challenges and, conversely, experience different glimpses of freedom because of their different class positions. Although their challenges are different, the root cause always comes back to white society's expectations for these women and the limits white society has placed upon them. With regard to Morrison's text, I argue that Sula and Nel achieve levels of conscious awareness at certain moments in the text, and they make different choices based on their race and class, yet both women eventually see that white influence was the ultimate reason they could not truly be independent and create "something else to be."

In Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, Edna Pontellier is aware that there have been many expectations placed upon her as a wife, mother, and upper-middle class woman, but

as she progresses through the novel, she begins to step outside her upper-middle class white view and see that she experiences both privilege and restraint because of her class and race. Chopin begins Edna's story when Edna is fully entrenched in her marriage and motherhood, and immediately Chopin begins to showcase Edna's leisure, which is a sign of her class. On the surface, Edna's story may seem to simply be about her class position and her expectations as a wife and mother, but, as Edna begins to reject motherhood and wifehood, Chopin explores Edna's lack of culture and uniqueness. Through a number of experiences, Edna becomes consciously aware of white, middle-class society's grasp on her independence. Edna is able to step outside of her position as an upper-middle class white woman, and appreciate the uniqueness other classes and races possess. Edna eventually challenges her fidelity and her class position, and she envisions "a new race of beings" (52). Like Sula, Edna recognizes that in order to break free, she must create something new entirely, and, for a while, she is allowed to resemble another race and class (the black working class) and escape the grandeur that symbolizes her wealth. Ultimately, Edna realizes there is no "new race" nor can she become something different than what she represents: a pure, white wife and mother. She realizes that there is no escape from the white "race" and its control over her.

In her dystopian novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*, Margaret Atwood explores the logical conclusion of the influences of whiteness that Sula and Edna experience in their respective novels. In Atwood's text, Offred lives in a highly restrictive society which limits her dress, language, sexual partners, and more. Offred knows that she is experiencing these restrictions due to her gender, but as she experiences life in Gilead,



she begins to recognize, as does the reader, that Gilead is ultimately concerned about preserving white society. Offred is in a unique position when compared to Sula and Nel. Offred's consciousness leads to the realization that she had freedoms before the Gilead regime took over, now she has no freedom or independence, and, within this highly restrictive society, she strives to regain a sense of self once again. When she makes the choice to "cross the invisible line" with Ofglen and engage in unapproved discourse she says, "I steel myself" (217). Offred consciously prepares to make herself hard, like steel, but she also "steals" herself from the powers of Gilead and makes her own conscious decision to engage in conversation with Ofglen. Throughout the novel, Offred becomes consciously aware that she must partake in these small moments of freedom, and she also becomes aware that whiteness is the main influence of Gilead. Although there are clear indications of socioeconomic status and certain privileges for those in that class, the ultimate goal of Gilead is to have a perfect, white society. Ultimately, Offred gains an understanding of the goals of Gilead and she, too, recognizes that she cannot escape the confines of whiteness. Even when her options for the future look bleak, she is thrust into the control of white men who determine where she is to go next and how she is to escape Gilead. She is never able to establish a unique self and experience true independence.

I argue that these three seemingly unrelated novels are in fact connected because all three authors highlight the tangled puzzle of class, race, and gender and its relationship to white privilege. I contend that these authors consciously chose to use their novels to show that in some ways women can challenge the boundaries, but, once they come too close to transcending the gender expectations placed upon them, white, middle-

class, male-dominated society exerts its power and control and ultimately thrusts them out of their journey toward independence and back into a society that does not recognize nor accept their creation of a unique self.

In this thesis, I analyze the texts from a feminist perspective and through the lens of whiteness studies. Contemporary feminist scholars, many of whom I will call upon in this thesis, recognize the relationship between race, class, and gender and acknowledge that women experience different challenges and small illusions of freedom based on their race and class. In her 2004 essay “Some Group Matters,” feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins addresses the importance of recognizing the different challenges women face based on their race and class. She observes, “Because women are distributed across groups formed within race-class intersectionality, gender raises different issues. Long-standing exclusionary practices that separate women by race, economic conditions, citizenship status, and ethnicity result in social groups that include women, organized via these categories” (75). Collins notes that women are not separate social groups, but rather a part of larger socioeconomic and racial groups that experience different limitations and expectations based on their background. Feminist theorists in general acknowledge that women’s race and class allow for different experiences, and, therefore, present unique struggles for each woman. I enter this conversation of race, class, and gender by acknowledging that these factors provide unique experiences for each woman, but I argue that whiteness has the most influences and white society ultimately decides how far each woman can go depending on her race and class. Whiteness experts have addressed issues of race, and class, but have not fully addressed these issues in relation to

gender roles, in this case, female independence. In this thesis, I bring all of these ideas together through the analysis of the characters and imagery in Toni Morrison's *Sula*, Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and show how white society controls these women in the same way, yet with different boundaries based on each woman's race and class.

I see a clear connection between Collins' arguments and the foundations of whiteness studies. Whiteness studies as an interdisciplinary subject began to take shape and gain recognition in the early 1990s. I base much of my discussion of whiteness on several seminal authors in the field including Richard Dyer, Ruth Frankenberg, Peggy McIntosh, and Toni Morrison. I argue that middle -class white society, which represents the majority, is ultimately in control of all three characters' journeys toward independence. As discussed, I see true independence as a woman's ability to create a new self that is not defined by the limitations of traditional female roles, which were originally socially constructed and continue to be enforced and maintained by white society. Collins, too, sees a clear standard for the traditional family unit and women's place within it. She states,

Defined as a natural or biological arrangement based on heterosexual attraction, a normative and ideal family consists of a heterosexual couple who produce their own biological children. Formed through a combination of marital and blood ties, the traditional family ideal views this nuclear unit as having a specific authority structure, arranged in this order: a father-head earning an adequate family wage, a stay-at-home wife and mother, and children. (76)

I see a direct correlation between Collins' discussion of the "natural" and "traditional" family and Richard Dyer's definition of whiteness as the "human norm." Dyer contends, "As long as race is something only applied to non-white peoples, as long as white people are not racially seen and named, they/we function as a human norm. Other people are raced, we are just people" (1). Just as Collins defines the traditional, male-dominated, middle-class family unit as a socially constructed norm, Dyer sees whiteness as society's normal and dominant race. Like Collins, Dyer sees the "white norm" as a restraining, preventive, and exclusive social norm. My "definition" of whiteness is based on Dyer's argument. Dyer points to the basic idea that to define one's race as white is to claim normalcy. My discussion of the expectations placed upon women is based on Dyer's contention that in modern society, whiteness is viewed as normalness, and, if a person identifies themselves as one race or another, then they are identifying themselves as the "other," as non-white, as a person outside of the societal norm. Peggy McIntosh, Associate Director of the Wellesley Centers for Women supports this discussion of the representation of whiteness. In her famous essay, "White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences Through Work in Women's Studies" McIntosh contends, "Whites are taught to think of their lives as morally neutral, normative, and average, and also ideal, so that when we work to benefit others, this is seen as work that will allow 'them' to be more like 'us'" (78). McIntosh also recognizes society's assumption that white equals normal and that all non-whites wish to be "whiter," allowing "them" to be more like "us." Furthermore, McIntosh's observations show how white privilege comes with the assumption that all people wish to be more like

their white counterparts, and, by white society assimilating them into the “norm,” white society is helping non-white society. With the assumption that whiteness equals normalness comes the misconception that all races long to be white rather than embrace their unique culture.

I bring Collins, Dyer, and McIntosh together and showcase a multi-faceted connection; the assumptions that all non-whites long to be white, the idea that all women have a natural tendency to follow the path of the heterosexual wife and mother, and the illusion that all women benefit from and long to move up the socioeconomic scale are socially constructed myths. As I will show, Morrison, Chopin, and Atwood clearly and brilliantly depict the characters’ realization of whiteness’ influence and the realization that race, class, and gender work as an intricate web creating the self. As Sula, Edna, and Offred embark upon their journeys toward independence, their eyes are opened to reality that as long as society still holds onto the beliefs and standards set by the dominant race and class, they will never truly be able to be independent; they will never be able to escape the ideal heterosexual wife, mother, and caretaker roles set by white society. At the end of their journeys, these women realize there is no unique self, and there is no accepted female role that falls between mother and whore; as far as society is concerned, they can only be one or the other. Morrison, Chopin and Atwood use their central female characters to demonstrate the repercussions of the socially constructed myths about women and their roles; furthermore, they use these female characters to show that no matter a woman’s race or class position, her ability to achieve true independence will always be controlled by white, middle-class society’s views of the norm.

## CHAPTER ONE

### SULA

In her novel *Sula*, Toni Morrison weaves a tale of women's freedoms and restrictions through the lives of two black women, Nel Wright and Sula Peace. Her novel not only tells the story of these women's lives, but it also offers a glimpse inside the impact of white society, class position, and gender inequality in a southern black community, Medallion (also referred to as the Bottom), in the 1940s. Morrison uses the girls' "coming of age" to showcase the impact which whiteness has on black women, and she juxtaposes Nel and Sula's social positions to elaborate on the complexity and uniqueness of their challenges to become independent. Morrison uses *Sula* to comment on the effects of gender and race expectations, and she outlines how these expectations coupled with class directly influence and hinder Sula and Nel's pursuits of independence and unique selves that embrace difference rather than conformity.

Critics have addressed many aspects of race, class and gender (as well as gender relationships) in Morrison's text, but my discussion will focus on the progression of Sula and Nel as they journey through life aware of their restrictions as black women, and becoming aware that whiteness has the most influence on their progression toward selfhood. In addition, my analysis shows that Morrison uses symbolism and imagery to show the power of white society and how Sula and Nel become more and more aware of the fact that the barriers white society has placed upon them are different based upon their social positions, but, ultimately, all the barriers are nearly impossible to break down.

Furthermore, the influence of whiteness and the pressures to conform to that which society identifies as standard female roles begins at home as mothers pass along expectations, or, in Sula's case, do not pass along expectations, to conform to the norm. Women are continually urged to find power and contentment in the private sphere, but men continue to hold power in the public sphere, which in turn continues the cycle of women's gender expectations and the power of white influence. This cycle is clearly portrayed in Morrison's text. Throughout their lives, Sula and Nel battle against an unrealistic standard of the ideal heterosexual wife and mother founded on the myths white society perpetuates. The standards on which Sula and Nel are judged are void of any uniqueness related to their race, but rather founded on the principles of the white "norm."

In order to understand the present state of criticism as it relates to these topics and Morrison's text, we must look at some of the arguments that preface my position, which I will expand upon in this chapter. One of the main foci of this thesis, in particular this chapter, is the influence of white society on the characters and its influence on the restrictions they encounter. Cynthia A. Davis addresses this topic in her article "Self, Society, and Myth in Toni Morrison's Fiction." Davis argues,

They [Sula and Nel] are also black women in a society whose female ideal is a white "doll baby," blonde and blue-eyed Shirley Temple. Even if they accept their reification they will always be inadequate; the black woman is "the antithesis of American beauty." No efforts at disguise will make them into the images they

learn to admire. Defined as the Other, made to be looked at, they can never satisfy the gaze of society. (329)

Davis speaks directly about *Sula* in relation to the “white equals normal” influence. Furthermore, Davis overtly points out that Sula and Nel will never “satisfy the gaze of society” because they are black. Davis’ observation mirrors Richard Dyer’s contention regarding the dangers of white privilege: If whiteness equals normalness then all races must strive to achieve a likeness to whiteness in order to be accepted. Although I fully agree with Davis’ position, and subsequently Dyer’s, I see a greater impact on the girls’ independence in *Sula*. Davis’ observation is just one piece of a complex puzzle of gender expectations, white influences, and class struggles. Nel and Sula struggle to define themselves in a community grounded in segregation and separation. Whiteness in combination with social position creates an unrealistic expectation to belong to a culture that mirrors the white social norm and is void of the unique traditions of the black culture. Furthermore, these expectations support the ideals associated with female beauty. Not only does white society try to strip Sula and Nel of the uniqueness of black roots, but it also reinforces the ideals of the female body to which Sula and Nel are constantly compared.

This discussion of *Sula* is by no means a universal representation of how “non-white” women are impacted throughout the United States, but the Bottom does serve as an interesting subject and representation of how race, class, and gender are represented and perceived within a community. In her essay, “Some Group Matters,” Patricia Hill



Collins discusses the relationship between the African-American community and the African-American individual. I base my observations of Morrison's text and my analysis of Morrison's societal commentary on Collins' theory of African American individualism. She contends,

One might ask whether African-Americans "live under economic conditions of existence that separate their mode of life, their interests, their culture from those of other classes" or, alternatively, whether African-Americans continue to bear the intergenerational costs associated with the denial of citizenship stemming from their being branded "a subordinate and inferior class of beings." For African-Americans, group personality is determined less by theoretical categories constructed within assumptions of distinct discourses of class or race, and more by actual lived Black experience (72).

Collins' discussion is imperative to the discussion of *Sula* in terms of class, race and gender because it is clear that the individual experience trumps assumptive theories on class and race. I contend that Sula and Nel's individual experiences, or lack thereof, with white society creates their personality and their path. In conjunction with Collins' argument, I contend that Sula and Nel have unique experiences with gender roles and relationships based on their family make-up and individual social position. Their distance from or proximity to the center of influence, which in the Bottom is white society, drives their individual actions. The lower their class position, the less influenced they are by white society because there is less pressure to conform. As I will show in this

chapter, Nel's family is most closely identified as a middle-class, black family as it would be defined in Medallion. As a result, Nel's mother Helene strives to resemble the typical white, middle-class wife and mother. She represents the classic heterosexual wife and mother. Sula, on the other hand, comes from a lower-class home which represents the antithesis of the classic middle-class home. Sula's mother and grandmother have several male lovers, none of whom live in the Peace home, and, on the surface, they care very little about their resemblance to a white, middle-class home. As young women, Sula and Nel strive to be unique and to "find something else to be," yet their class differences create distinct challenges and opportunities for independence. Neither woman finds the process of challenging society easy and they both experience challenges because of their race. Whiteness seeps into Sula's and Nel's lives and serves as an outside force attempting to crush their uniqueness, but their reaction to this force is based on their class, and that is what ultimately splits their paths in life.

Morrison not only uses Sula and Nel to represent the power of whiteness, the influence of class, and the uniqueness that comes with individual experience, she also uses the very essence of their home, the Bottom, to show how all these things come together. The Bottom serves as an interesting parallel between the personal identities Collins references and the cultural personality of a black community. As a piece of land given to a freed slave whose master coined it as "(It's) the bottom of heaven-best land there is" (5). Morrison describes,

...it wasn't a town anyway; just a neighborhood where on quiet days people in the valley houses could hear singing sometimes, banjos sometimes, and, if a valley man happened to have business up in those hills-collecting rent or insurance payment-he might see a woman in a flowered dress doing a bit of a cakewalk, a bit of black bottom, a bit of "messaging around" to the lively notes of the mouth organ. Her bare feet would raise the saffron dust that floated down on the coverall sand bunion-split shoes of the man breathing in and out of his harmonica. The black people watching her would laugh and rub their knees, and it would be easy for the valley man to hear the laughter and not notice the adult pain that rested somewhere under the eyelids. (4)

Morrison's rich description of the Bottom paints a vivid picture of the personalities that reside there, and this passage describes how many white visitors may see only one dimension of the residents of this neighborhood. The man from the valley does not recognize that within this seemingly joyous community there is pain and struggle. The outside visitors do not recognize all that encompassed the people of the Bottom. The individual experiences of the community members create a unique setting and culture. Throughout the novel, whiteness seeps into the Bottom and Morrison clearly shows how whiteness ultimately crushes the uniqueness of the Bottom, a community created by its unique individuals and their experiences. Morrison consciously begins the novel by stating that the Bottom no longer exists: "In that place, where they tore the nightshade and blackberry patches from their roots to make room for the Medallion City Golf Course, there was once a neighborhood" (3). A golf course, the perfect symbol of

whiteness, maleness, and the upper-class lifestyle in the 1940s, forcibly destroys all that is unique and special about the Bottom.

In order to fully understand the perils Sula and Nel face, it is important to understand the discussion that took place shortly after emancipation as black women were slowly and quietly emerging as leaders and women's rights activists. In Shirley Logan's book, *We Are Coming*, she addresses the feminist rhetoric which encouraged black women to strive to become important women's rights advocates. Chapter Five details Fannie Barrier Williams' 1893 speech, "Religious Duty to the Negro." Logan observes, in terms of Williams' speech, "She [Williams] created a picture of women struggling to 'catch up' with their white sisters in all things and to develop morally and intellectually in order to achieve the 'blessedness of intelligent womanhood'" (105). Williams skillfully complemented white women for helping black women through support and education and, yet, appealed to all women as she spoke of a new struggle: gender equity. Logan goes on to discuss the impact this event had on black women and its relation to race and class.

Participating in the nineteenth-century emancipatory discourse, Williams described again and again the ways in which black women had assimilated the conservative Victorian gender roles of their white sisters. Williams and other black women felt that racial advancement would follow on the heels of social respectability. (105)

Logan's discussion of Williams' speech sets the stage for black women's struggle for social recognition and acceptance. The problem with conforming to traditional white roles is the power it gives. Within Logan's discussion, we also see that "social respectability" ultimately means moving up the socioeconomic ladder, and, by doing so, the acceptance of a woman who is raced becomes dependent on her class position. The roles Logan refers to encompass the classic white, heterosexual, upper-class woman that Helene and eventually Nel represent. Sula is far from attaining this social position, but her actions show that she does not strive for normalness, whiteness, or any particular class position.

As I will show in this chapter, Morrison combines the ideas of Collins, Dyer, Logan, and many others to portray how black women not only eliminate their own uniqueness when striving to resemble white society, but by doing so they acknowledge whiteness and class position as the optimal position, which gives white society power and privilege over any other culture or race and positions it as society's preferred norm. I contend that as long as white, upper-class male society holds this power, it will allow women to play within certain boundaries of their race, class and gender, but will never allow them to forgo their respective boundaries; therefore, by giving this power to white, upper-class society, these women are indirectly jeopardizing their own freedom. Morrison explores this power and uses Sula to show how white society's importance is ingrained in all societies, even communities such as the Bottom.

### *Maternal Influence*

The relationship between historically “white” roles and class position is at the center of Morrison’s juxtaposition of independent rebel, Sula, with traditionalist, Nel. Each has a unique set of restrictive barriers based on her race and class. Nel’s mother, Helene, is the person that clearly connects Nel to white society and traditional Victorian roles because she is perceived as the only “middle-class” person living in the Bottom. Helene is invested in “keeping up appearances” and ultimately resembling the traditional “white” family. In their essay “Who Cares? Women-Centered Psychology in *Sula*” Diane Gillespie and Missy Dehn Kubitschek contend that “Helene represents the meltdown of the self that occurs when women unconsciously adhere to social convention” (30-31). I agree with Gillespie and Kubitschek, but in terms of the intersection between feminism and whiteness, I further contend that it is white society that creates the “social convention,” a convention that mirrors white, Victorian female values pushing women to conform to the norm or the majority, which in this case is white, middle-class society. Morrison showcases Helene as a woman that mirrors the middle-class white stereotype rather than embracing and adding to the cultural uniqueness of the Bottom or to her own cultural distinction. It is for that reason, that Helene “represents the meltdown of the self.” Helene does not represent, nor does she strive to represent, an independent “self,” and she allows whiteness to influence her behavior as a wife, mother, and black woman.

Morrison deliberately sets Helene up as the most proper woman in Medallion. Helene’s mother was a “Creole whore” and Helene’s grandmother took Helene in and

“raised her under the dolesome eyes of a multicolored Virgin Mary, counseling her to be constantly on guard for any sign of her [Helene’s] mother’s wild blood” (17). Morrison describes Helene’s domestic life as one that is serene and mirrors the typical, idealistic white, middle-class household.

He [Wiley] took his bride to his home in Medallion and put her in a lovely house with a brick porch and real lace curtains at the window. His long absences were quite bearable for Helene Wright, especially when, after some nine years of marriage, her daughter was born. Her daughter was more comfort and purpose than she ever hoped to find in this life. She rose grandly to the purpose of motherhood... (17-18)

This passage shows that Helene occupies the traditional white female roles of wife and mother and she finds her identity within the private sphere, her home. She not only occupies these roles, but she is content and rather happy attending to these duties. In addition, veritable to her style of juxtaposition, Morrison contrasts Helene’s white-influenced home with the other residents of Medallion: “The people of the Bottom refused to call her Helene. They called her Helen Wright and left it at that” (18). The pronunciation of Helene’s name is a small glimpse into the clear differences that exists between the whiteness-influenced Wrights and the culturally independent residents of Medallion. Helene strives to be “proper” and “dignified” as defined by the white, middle-class norm; she unknowingly longs to resemble the images of middle-class white society. The other residents do not concern themselves with such details, and call Helene by a name they are familiar with: Helen. Helene’s history provides a great deal of insight

into the life of her daughter, Nel, their mother-daughter relationship, and Nel's choices as she matures and encounters obstacles due to her race and gender. Since Helene struggles to be viewed as a more dignified woman, she in turn strives to make her daughter socially proper as well and unknowingly pushes her toward traditional white, middle-class gender roles.

In her own community, Helene successfully embodies the white, Victorian values of which Logan warns, but she struggles to successfully interact with white, upper-class citizens outside of the Bottom, yet her power in the private sphere does not translate into the public sphere. Long before Sula and Nel forge a friendship, Nel recognizes traits in her mother that she vows not to imitate. To her surprise, on a trip to see her grandmother, Nel sees her mother respond to white passengers and black male passengers alike with a submission and subordination she has never seen from her mother. Morrison depicts this interaction:

As they opened the door marked COLORED ONLY, they saw a white conductor coming toward them... "What you think you doin' gal?" So soon. So soon. She hadn't even begun the trip back. All the old vulnerabilities, all the old fears of being somehow flawed gathered in her stomach and made her hands tremble. (20)

Helene, who appears to have control and power in the Wright household, has no rights when entering the public sphere. For a black woman, the domestic power in the private realm, which Nancy Armstrong discusses, clearly holds no clout in the white, public realm. Ironically, Helene's "flaw" is nothing more than failure to possess white skin.



Furthermore, Helene gives white society power as she unknowingly accepts it as the norm when she strives to resemble a white middle-class woman. This further substantiates an interesting dichotomy in Morrison's work. Helene Wright tries so desperately to resemble white America in her private sphere, yet white society will never accept her based on her race. Although Helene believes that someday white society will accept her as long as she "plays the part," once she leaves the private sphere, all white people see is a black woman; therefore, the expectations Helene tries to live up to in her home are falsely constructed ideals that never fully play out. Helene fails to fully identify with white society, and, since she tries so desperately to "fit in," she never fully explores the possibility of creating her own unique identity which is not steeped in white, middle-class values.

Helene's final interaction with the conductor depicts the subordination of black to white, as well as female to male.

Then, for no earthly reason, at least no reason that anybody could understand, certainly no reason that Nel understood then or later, she smiled. Like a street pup wags its tail at the very doorjamb of the butcher shop he has been kicked away from only moments before, Helen smiled. Smiled dazzlingly and coquettishly at the salmon-colored face of the conductor. (21)

The progression of this scene shows Nel's realization of her mother's lack of power in the public sphere compared to the concrete power her mother harbors in her home. As Helene encounters the conductor, he does not treat her as an equal or even as a human

being. Morrison uses this comparison to show the mixed messages and abuse the black community experiences from white society. Helene desperately longs for acceptance and she believes that by living up to the expectations white, middle-class society has placed on her gender, she will achieve, as Logan addresses, “racial advancement” and “social respectability.” Morrison compares her to a “street pup” that continually longs for acceptance and will do almost anything to gain acceptance. Just like that pup, Morrison shows Helene continuing to strive to meet the white, middle-class standards, yet Helene continually gets pushed aside.

For Nel, the realization of her mother’s lack of power in the public sphere is a clear turning point. Not only does she see her mother recoil in front of the white male conductor, further substantiating the inferiority of her race, but she also witnesses black male soldiers refusing to help or defend her mother, authenticating the very real power which whiteness and maleness hold in society.

The two black soldiers, who had been watching the scene with what appeared to be indifference, now looked stricken. Behind Nel was the bright and blazing light of her mother’s smile; before her the midnight eyes of the soldiers. No change in the expression of the eyes, but a hard wetness that veiled them as they looked at the stretch of her mother’s foolish smile. As the door slammed on the conductor’s exits, Helene walked down the aisle to a seat. She looked about for a second to see whether any of the men would help her put her suitcase in the overhead rack. Not a man moved... She [Nel] felt both pleased and ashamed to sense that these

men, unlike her father, who worshipped his graceful, beautiful wife, were bubbling with hatred for her mother who had not been there in the beginning but had been born with the dazzling smile...It was on that train, shuffling toward Cincinnati, that she resolved to be on guard-always. She wanted to make certain that no man ever looked at her that way. That no midnight eyes or marbled flesh would ever accost her and turn her into jelly (21-22).

Morrison uses this image to show how Helene is trapped between two cultures: white and black. The black soldiers see Helene as foolish for believing that the conductor would show her any sympathy, or, even more unlikely, that she would be able to ride in the white car. They choose not to assist her in anyway because her actions show that she would rather be part of "white" society rather than "black" society. Much like the residents of the Bottom refuse to use Helene's real name because its pronunciation signifies prestige, as if they do not see her as more "proper" than them and continue to call her Helen, the soldiers see her as a woman foolishly buying in to the appeal of white society. Morrison uses the conductor to represent the unfortunate response of white society as black women strive for "racial advancement" and she juxtaposes the two to emphasize that Helene's choices put her in between cultures. Although Helene strives to be socially "accepted," she is still a black woman living in a highly segregated society. Because Helene tries to identify with white "culture," she struggles to fit in with the black community as well, which creates an internal struggle for her daughter, and as Nel grows up, she tries to figure out her place within society.

A strained mother-daughter relationship is created when Nel realizes Helene's power is an illusion, and she seeks out another person with whom to identify, a person that exudes the same type of power publically that she saw her mother hold privately. That person is Sula Peace.

In her novel, Morrison immediately sets up the immense difference that exists between the Wright family and the Peace family. Sula Peace represents the strong, independent woman Nel wishes to become: a woman much like the Helene who took control in her home, but vastly different from the cowering woman on the train. Morrison describes the matriarch of the Peace household, Sula's grandmother Eva Peace, "who sat in a wagon on the third floor directing the lives of her children, friends, strays, and constant stream of boarders" (30). This image in conjunction with the stories of Eva's lost leg, immediately establishes a clear difference between the Peace family and the Wright family. The Peace family is the antithesis of the white ideal. Eva, the matriarchal influence in Sula's life, has a much different experience with marriage than Helene. In fact, when her husband leaves, she is forced to fend for herself in order to raise her children. After using the last bit of food to relieve her son's constipation, Eva is forced to leave Medallion to find a way to support her children. Her story is much different than the romanticized life of Helene. Eva leaves her children in the care of a neighbor and returns eighteen months later with money and only one leg. Gillespie and Kubitschek discuss the differences among the families as they relate to individual choice as well as the stereotypical roles of women and how class directly relates to the connection to whiteness. They contend,

Eva, trapped with three hungry children and no money, must make a genuine sacrifice as opposed to Helene's bogus productions. Eva gives of herself, literally, to secure food for her children, while Helene feeds on her child. Middle-class status thus allows the development of patterns of caring, which, carried to an extreme, blind one to the authentic needs of the self. Poverty and racism, on the other hand, often prevent predictable social patterns from developing or recurring, as the Peace women's experiences demonstrate.

Gillespie and Kubitschek contend that lower class families, like the Peace family, are less susceptible to the influence of white society and traditional gender roles, such as heterosexual wife, mother, and caretaker, because they are further away from the center of power: white, middle-class society. They also contend that Eva's actions arise out of sheer need as opposed to Helene's, which are influenced by social expectation.

I agree with Gillespie and Kubitschek, and I believe that because Helene's class brings her closer to the center of power, which is masculine, white, middle-class society. She lets it take over her life and it is what drives her decisions and her parenting of Nel. On the other hand, Eva Peace is not driven by the need to belong to a certain social class; she is driven by survival. Morrison clearly shows that Eva is motivated by survival as she details Eva's use of the last bit of food in her home, grease, to release her son, Plum's, stool. After that Eva realizes she has nothing and leaves.

Two days later she left all the children with Mrs. Suggs, saying she would be back the next day. Eighteen months later she swept down from a wagon with two

crutches, a new black pocketbook, and one leg. First she reclaimed her children, next she gave the surprised Mrs. Suggs a ten-dollar bill, later she started building a house on Carpenter's Road... (34-35)

Unlike Helene, Eva does not think about what is proper or what will bring her the most respect from white society, rather she does what is needed to survive. As a result, Eva's experiences allow her to develop as an independent self without the influences of white society motivating her decisions; therefore, as she raises her family, the traditional female roles and expectations are not at the forefront of her household. Because she is far from "middle-class" status, she is far from being "socially respected" by white society, and she makes her decisions based on need, not based on the roles approved by white society. This upbringing allows Sula to make decisions and develop her individualism without the expectations of white society placed upon her.

Because white society has less influence over the Peace household, Sula is able to defy the expectations placed on an "average" woman. As a result, Nel sees Sula interact with boys in a much different way than Nel's mother, and she begins to see that Sula's power is not in her physical strength, but in her will and ability to reject the expectations of her sex. Unlike Helene's reaction when the white conductor confronts her, Sula is not afraid to approach conflict with white males; in fact, she stares it in the face and defeats it. One day, Nel and Sula are stopped, taunted, and harassed by a group of white, Irish boys, and Sula decides to confront them rather than run. Sula pulls a small knife and cuts herself demonstrating to the boys that she is not afraid of pain. This single act jolts the

boys out of their reality and the expectations they have for women. This is not an action they expect and, because it is contrary to traditional roles, they do not know how to react.

As the girls struggle to find “something else to be,” Sula’s determination and fearless attitude defies the gender and racial stereotypes that white society has placed upon her. Gender and feminist theorist Judith Butler describes how actions confuse, portray and represent gender in her essay, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory.” She states, “Discrete genders are part of what “humanizes” individuals within contemporary culture; indeed, those who fail to do their gender right, are regularly punished...because gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender creates the idea of gender and without those acts, there would be no gender at all” (522). Butler contends that gender is socially constructed. What we deem “male” or “female” is based on one’s actions and what we’ve traditionally seen and informally devised as a society makes up the male and female genders. In terms of what a girl “acts like,” the boys only have the “performative acts” which they have traditionally seen to compare Sula. Sula’s act of cutting her hand is not in line with the care-giving or mothering traits with which women are often associated. Sula’s encounter with the Irish boys is just one of the many scenes Morrison creates in which Sula “fails to do [her] gender.” Sula is far from the typical white “Shirley Temple, baby doll” ideal, and, by committing such an act, she positions herself even further from a reserved, white woman. The boys’ fear is a result of Sula’s lack of identification. Sula’s performance does not fit her prescribed gender. As Sula will continue to show as an adult, her ability to portray something those around her cannot categorize, gives her a certain aura of mystery.

Because Sula does not reflect the socially constructed racial norm, white, nor is she part of a class that supports a likeness to whiteness she has the ability to step outside the socially constructed norm for her gender.

Nel's choice is directly related to her experiences with her mother, and, although vastly different, Sula's experiences with the maternal figures in her life, also have an impact on her choices. Just as the Bottom serves as a symbol of a unique black culture, which middle-class, white society crushes, the mother-daughter relationships in *Medallion* are representations of how the gender expectations of white society affect relationships across generations. As a result, Nel finds herself chained to many of the same expectations and roles that her mother occupied. Furthermore, Nel's mother continually instills in her the desire to look more like a "white" person. Much like the ideal that Cynthia A. Davis references, Helene tries to mold her daughter into a more "white-like" woman. Helene often encourages her daughter to pull her nose and put a clothes pin on it at night. The act of "nose-pulling" was thought to make the nose more pointed, like a white woman, as opposed to a broad African-American nose. Helene also straightens Nel's hair every day in order to "look nice." The naturally curly, coarse African-American hair does not resemble the straightness of white women's hair. Helene wants Nel to physically resemble a white woman and she places more importance on Nel's appearance than her personal independence or intelligence. Helene believes that success is found in a woman's social position. Davis goes on to further her discussion on such trends as she discusses several of Morrison's novels.



The novels are full of characters who try to live up to an external image-Dick and Jane's family, or cosmopolitan society, or big business. This conformity is not just a disguise, but an attempt to gain power and control. There is always the hope that if one fits the prescribed pattern, one will be seen as human. (325)

Davis explains that the belief was, and often still is, that the closer one is to white culture, the closer one is to acceptance by white culture, and the closer one is to the center of power. In *Sula*, the only person that lives up to the prescribed pattern is Helene Wright, and her beliefs directly influence her daughter, Nel. Helene refuses to embrace her differences, or to create uniqueness. Instead she longs to connect with white, middle class culture and hopes the same for Nel. Sula, although held to the same societal expectations as Nel, does not experience the same pressure to conform to traditional roles. Sula rejects much of what resembles white society and forges her own type of personal freedom. Although Sula may seem to personally escape the pressure of white society for a short time, it is whiteness' influence that continually plagues her personal life, and most importantly, her friendship with Nel.

Although Nel strives to be unique and above the influence of whiteness, she still conforms to the traditional female role of wife and mother. Even though Nel is adamant at a young age about leaving Medallion and creating her own sense of self, the influence of white middle-class society as perpetuated by her mother, ultimately crushes Nel's uniqueness and she conforms to the roles her mother valued. Although the community tolerates Sula and Nel, they can never define either girl, but they finally accept Nel when

she engages in a definable act: marriage. Unknowingly, they still place value on the traditional family unit and are even more impressed if one of their residents moves toward the white ideal. Helene's dreams for her daughter come to fruition when she meets and marries Jude Greene: "Her only child's wedding-the culmination of all she had been, thought or done in this world..." (79). Everything Helene has worked for her entire life was to see her daughter marry and enter into a socially acceptable role. As Gillespie and Kubitschek observe, "Her (Helene's) insistence on clothes pinning Nel's nose symbolizes her powerful need to channel her daughter's development in socially acceptable directions" (31). In Helene's mind, the nose-pulling and hair straightening were all ways to move Nel into a more respectable social position; furthermore, in Helene's mind, Nel's marriage justifies her actions. She celebrates the culmination of her struggle to socially move her family toward white middle-class status and is impressed that her daughter had "a real wedding-in a church" which is unlike most of the couples in the Bottom (80). Helene has not only prepared Nel for marriage, but she has also brought Nel one step closer to the white ideal of the traditional wife and, eventually, mother.

After Nel's wedding, the relationship between Sula and Nel is never the same. Nel does not follow through with her vow to one day leave Medallion, but rather, by marrying Jude, she plants herself securely in the community. Nel finds security in normalcy and in the gender expectations her mother placed on her. For Sula, the idea of conforming to the white standard of wife and mother is foreign and unappealing. Unlike Nel, Sula will reject the social norms and leave Medallion. Morrison sets the tone for

part two of the novel with the concluding action of part one. As Nel and Jude's wedding winds down, Nel notices Sula's exit.

Nel smiled and rested her cheek on his shoulder. The veil she wore was too heavy to allow her to feel the core of the kiss he pressed on her head. When she raised her eyes to him for one more look of reassurance, she saw through the open door, a slim figure in blue, gliding, with just a hint of strut, down the path toward the road. One hand was pressed on the head to hold down the large hat against the warm June Breeze. Even from the rear, Nel could tell it was Sula and that she was smiling; that something deep down in that liveness was amused. It would be ten years before they saw each other again, and their meeting would be thick with birds. (85)

In this paragraph, Morrison uses several images to establish the distinct difference between Sula and Nel as their lives move in strikingly different directions. Although the image of Nel and Jude is romantic, the weight of Nel's veils symbolizes the heaviness of marriage and the burdens and expectations of her gender. Nel's veil is contrasted by Sula's large hat on to which she needs to hold. Sula's large, dark hat is a direct contrast to Nel's veil and, in turn, it symbolizes her uniqueness. Sula's dark hat symbolizes her acceptance of her refusal to submit herself to the power of whiteness; it symbolizes her embracing her cultural uniqueness and her black culture. Nel's veil, on the other hand, symbolizes not only the weight of the burden of her new expectations, but also acts of conforming to middle-class white expectations. Sula leaves the wedding so to not

become caught up in the tradition and spectacle of the wedding. As Sula leaves, she struggles to keep control of her hat, which symbolizes her control of her own life. This symbolizes her conscious awareness of the white society's confines. Her smile indicates that she is happy that Nel has found happiness, but it also indicates her own coming to consciousness about the confines of gender roles and she is consciously choosing to walk away and make her own life, her own self. By leaving the wedding and leaving Medallion, Sula will not become swept away by traditional female roles. As a result, Sula becomes free of the restrictions Nel's wedding symbolizes. The act of walking away shows that she is physically rejecting the conformity which Nel has chosen. Indirectly, whiteness and the expectations created by it, drive Sula and Nel apart.

*Sula and Nel: Black and White*

The clear contrast in choices and lifestyle by Sula and Nel at the end of Part One is further expanded in Part Two. Morrison sets the stage with Sula's return as she characterizes Sula as the antithesis of doting wife and mother, Nel. Upon Sula's return to the Bottom, her absence and antics create questions and rumors amongst the residents. Even though the Peace household was far from the conventional, traditional home, Eva still strives to categorize Sula and make sense of her choice to leave Medallion. Eva's interaction with Sula shows that even though the Peace family does not emulate or strive for whiteness, they are still heavily influenced by its power and cannot ignore the gender roles established by white society. In fact, Edna's interaction with Sula clearly shows

that if given the choice, she too would have conformed and ironically, she tries to push Sula toward the traditional family unit.

“When you gone to get married? You need to have some babies. It’ll settle you.”

“I don’t want to make somebody else. I want to make myself.”

“Selfish. Aint no woman got no business floatin’ around without no man”

“You did.”

“Not by choice.” (92).

I contend that because Eva is no longer destitute and has some financial stability, white society influences her more and more. Furthermore, regardless of her class position, no woman can ever truly achieve independence by creating a unique self void of whiteness’ influence. Eva’s socioeconomic position when Sula was young may have offered the opportunity for Sula to embrace her individuality without the pressure to conform, but whiteness still influences Eva. Due to the outside influence of whiteness, Eva struggles to find where Sula fits in society, and ultimately leads her to place Sula in the most logical mold: wife and mother. Whiteness continues to influence the small community of Medallion and as more and more residents conform to standard roles, it becomes more of the norm. Eva feels like she had no choice but to live the way she did and her idea of “success” for Sula is to become the traditional female. Eva reinforces the fact that it was not her decision to live without a man, as she tries to justify her actions.

Sula’s return is a welcome change for wife and mother, Nel, who abides by the traditions Sula clearly rejects. In terms of Nel, Morrison compares Sula’s return to the

return of sight. “It was like getting the use of an eye back, have a cataract removed. Her old friend had come home” (95). For Nel, Sula’s return provides a glimpse of and a hope for the independence she experienced as a young girl. Sula begins to take on the role of a hero for Nel. In the novel, Morrison writes, “Sula never competed; she simply helped others define themselves” (95). Sula is a symbol of individual freedom and self-awareness. Sula may appear as an outcast in Medallion and her choice to leave the town, remain single, and educate herself are all actions with which most residents of the Bottom cannot identify. In her essay, “Toni Morrison’s *Sula*: A Black Woman’s Epic,” Karen Stein positions Sula as an unlikely hero that leaves her hometown in the face of adversity and returns a new, independent person.

Unlike the stock epic tale, in which the hero, driven by inner compulsion to leave society in search of knowledge and power, undertakes a dangerous but successful journey and returns in triumph to transform a fallen world, Sula presents a tale of courage in the face of limitation and powerlessness, of self-knowledge wrested from loss and suffering, of social amelioration eked out of hatred and fear. (146)

Sula is an unconventional hero, but in the novel, her heroic act is clear; she gives others, especially traditionalist Nel, the ability to “see” their individualism and self-worth. I argue that independence and the creation of a unique self is rarely, if ever, achieved because of the boundaries built by white, middle-class society, yet Sula gives Nel the ability to “see” and remember what that uniqueness is like. Therefore, Sula serves as an unconventional hero. In *Sula*, Nel “sees” the ability to leave behind her contemporary convention for a brief time and vicariously experience the world Sula has lived. Morrison

skillfully creates a setting in which Nel experiences what she has been missing when Sula returns.

Damp-faced, Nel stepped back into the kitchen. She felt new. Soft and new. It had been the longest time since she had had a rib-scraping laugh. She had forgotten how deep down it could be. So different from the miscellaneous giggles and smiles she had learned to be content with these past few years. (98)

Nel's laughter and experience with Sula is symbolic of the elements of self that she had been missing all those years. The things she had "learned to be content with" go far beyond "giggles and smiles." This passage represents all the things Nel has settled for because she chose to surrender to traditional roles. Sula revives the old dreams and ideas Nel had for independence and freedom when they were young.

Ultimately, adult choices destroy the bond Sula and Nel forged as young girls and the friendship they rekindle when Sula returns. Not long after Sula's return, Nel's husband, Jude, is caught with Sula, and he leaves Nel. Sula's rejection of the white standards makes her unsympathetic toward Nel's attachment to her family, especially her husband. Likewise, Nel's commitment to the ideal family unit leaves her devastated and broken when she loses Jude, and Sula's lack of attachment prevents her from identifying with Nel's pain. In relation to this scene Stein observes, "For her [Sula], acting out of sheer restlessness and habit, out of whim, out of a need to challenge the very fabric of marriage itself, this liaison is as brief and unimportant as any of her others" (148). Sula's free-willed nature leads her to act without thinking. Stein is correct in her observation that Sula's experiences have left her unfazed by domestic responsibility, but I contend

that this is the result of a conscious rejection of traditional female roles that black women are urged to embrace. Furthermore, her lack of exposure to these values, growing up in a lower-class family, gives her little understanding of the “traditional” family dynamic. For that reason, Sula has no regard for marriage and Nel has a strong, social attachment to it. Although Sula participates in this sexual act with Jude, her lack of consideration ultimately reveals the unfaithful tendencies of Jude. Furthermore, as Stein contends, she challenges Nel’s beliefs about marriage. Nel does not realize that her suffering is less about the loss of her husband and more about her loss of social position. Morrison alludes to this idea as she describes Nel’s thoughts after Jude leaves. “If I could be sure that I could stay here in this small white room with the dirty tile and water gurgling in the pipes and my head on the cool rim of this bathtub and never have to go out the door, I would be happy” (108). Nel struggles with the thought of having to leave the confines of the “white” room, which symbolizes her connection to whiteness. Also, Nel knows that the respect she had in the public sphere is now gone because she lost her connection to powerful white society. In this scene, her mother’s interaction with the white conductor heavily influences Nel. Nel is aware of the power she holds within her home and painfully aware of the lack of power she holds outside her home. She is also aware of her lack of power now that she is a single mother and does not resemble the traditional middle-class, heterosexual wife. Sula’s actions devastate Nel because that one act undid everything Nel worked toward to be socially accepted, and unknowingly, more “white.”

Ironically, as Sula spends more time in Medallion, she too falls victim to the allure of house and home. Ajax becomes more than just a lover for Sula; he becomes a



male companion, something she has not yet experienced. Much like other men in Medallion, Ajax is drawn to Sula because of her independent nature and her lack of social conformity. Morrison writes,

He heard all the stories about Sula and they aroused his curiosity...So when his curiosity was high enough he picked two bottles of milk off the porch of some white family and went to see her, suspecting that this was perhaps the only other woman he knew whose life was her own, who could deal with life efficiently, and who was not interested in nailing him. (127)

In this passage, Morrison not only sets up the attraction of Ajax to Sula, but she also shows their mutual rejection of whiteness. The milk Morrison mentions is clearly tagged as “off the porch of some white family.” Through this image, Morrison shows that Ajax has little regard for white society much like Sula. Furthermore, this act positions Ajax as the perfect complement to Sula’s independent and unique personality. Morrison cleverly continues to explore Sula and Ajax’s connection that is void of whiteness by using the term “nail.” The term is casually used as a euphemism for sex, but in this case it can be read two ways. It is well known that Sula is promiscuous, so it would be unlikely that Ajax would think a sexual relationship was out of the question. On the contrary, Ajax is interested in a woman that is not interested in “nailing him down” or trying to keep him from his own independence. In that respect, Sula presents the least amount of resemblance to the white culture, which Ajax also rejects.

Once Sula is in the position to have a constant lover and companion, she begins to embody the practices of her white, middle-class womanhood, both in appearance and

action. Although Sula is well-traveled and free-thinking, the significance of white society still affects her. Once Sula begins to feel a strong connection to Ajax, she begins to project many of the traditional stereotypes, but it is not clear in the text that she has any intention of marrying Ajax or forcing him to settle down.

He [Ajax] looked around and saw the gleaming kitchen and the table set for two and detected the scent of the nest. Every hackle on his body rose, and he knew that very soon she would, like all of her sisters before her, put to him the death-knell question 'Where you been?' His eyes dimmed with a mild and momentary regret. (133)

In this scene, Sula appears to mirror Helene and Nel, but Sula's interest and plans for her future with Ajax are not clear from Morrison's text. Although Ajax rejects white, middle-class ideals, he is still familiar with them and what he sees in Sula now represents what he rejects and, what he thought Sula rejected as well. Because of whiteness' dominance in society, Ajax feels that there are only two possibilities for this relationship: one that is just about sex or one that resembles marriage; he does not see that there could be an in-between. Sula has carefully cleaned her home and rather than casually welcome Ajax, she has planned for their encounter and made it less about sex and more about the relationship. Because the outside influence of whiteness has tainted the monogamous relationship, Ajax feels as though Sula's actions can only mean that she is no longer a casual lover, but that she is looking for something more. He does not recognize that Sula may have transcended the confines of society-constructed gender expectations and created a unique self, and, in this case, a unique relationship because all societies are

deeply rooted in the values that white, middle-class society has established. Traditional female roles and standards crush Sula's chance at a long-term committed relationship. Sula is alone because Ajax did not consider that this relationship could be unique and different from the traditional white relationships. Morrison uses this scene as a clear turning point. Although Sula is independent and unique, the confines of white society and stereotypes have created a world in which there is no middle ground in terms of female roles: a woman can resemble a whore and participate in meaningless and purely sexual relationships, which white society clearly rejects, or a woman can resemble the traditional heterosexual wife, mother, and care-taker, and enter into a monogamous and marriage-like relationship, which is preferred by white society. There is no relationship that is acceptable or exists in between these two views which white, middle-class society defines. Ultimately this unwavering dichotomy destroys Sula's relationship with Ajax, and leads Sula to the realization that in some way, whiteness and its power in society will always crush her ability to be a unique individual.

Sula's abdication of the independent self leaves her nothing for which to live, and she becomes ill and alone, yet she still clings to her independent spirit and her position on traditional female expectations. As Sula struggles to reconnect with the woman she once was, she and Nel engage in a conversation that challenges both of their values and beliefs. Holding strong to her individualism and free-willed nature, Sula boasts of her self-reliance, while Nel fights to preserve her traditional ideals. Sula begins:

“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. Who is to say, I got me.”

“Lonely, ain’t it?”

“Yes. But my lonely is mine...”

“I always understood how you could take a man. Now I understand why you can’t keep one.”

“Is that what I’m supposed to do? Spend my life keeping a man?”

“They worth keeping, Sula.”

“They ain’t worth more than me.” (143)

This interaction mirrors Sula’s conversation with Eva upon Sula’s return to Medallion. Contrary to Eva’s position, Sula is clear to point out that she never needed a man nor did she want a man to tie her down. This further substantiates the argument that Sula never intended to nail-down Ajax. As seen in the text, Sula now recognizes the power of the traditional female roles created by white society, but still does not admit to longing for a committed companionship, or that she loved Ajax. Even near death, Sula refuses to surrender fully to conformity and the power of white society. Sula wants to be remembered as the rebel, the one that rejected conformity on all levels. It is clear from her interaction with Nel, that Sula knows it was her resemblance to traditional domestic roles that pushed Ajax away, she knows her intentions were not to marry or “nail down” Ajax. When Sula finally passes, it is the power of whiteness and gender restrictions that kill her. When Sula speaks to Nel for the last time, she sees that she has no place among

society since her uniqueness has no place in a binary world. For Sula, to lose her independence and submit fully to traditional roles is equal to death.

For Sula, death is not a heart-wrenching terrible endeavor; it is a beautiful, yet whimsical, journey into ultimate independence. In clear contrast to the other deaths Morrison describes in *Sula*, she allows the reader to be inside Sula's head as she passes.

Then she realized, or rather she sensed, that there was not going to be any pain.

She was not breathing because she didn't have to. Her body did not need oxygen.

She was dead.

Sula felt her face smiling. "Well, I'll be damned," she thought, "it didn't even hurt. Wait'll I tell Nel (149).

Sula's death is not just about physical passing, but it also represents her passing into complete independence, which in this case is the conscious awareness of the power of white influence. As Sula realizes that she will no longer be in pain, she realizes the absence of both physical pain and the pain of lost love and lost independence. Sula is able to feel free without breathing. Sula is independent once again without the pain, pressures and confines of gender restrictions and whiteness.

It is not until Sula is gone that Nel realizes how much she misses her. Nel's convictions regarding the roles of women prevent her from embracing her relationship with Sula. At the conclusion of the novel, Nel realizes her true feelings about her and Sula's friendship. The importance of female friendship, which Sula realized early on, becomes clear to Nel at the conclusion of the novel. Nel remarks, "All that time, all that time, I thought I was missing Jude" (174). Somewhere in the sweet southern breeze, Nel

realizes that it was never the loss of Jude she mourned; it was the loss of her friend. Her words are followed by long, bellowing cries. She weeps for the loss of her friend, but also for her innocence which has long since past. “‘We was girls together,’ she said as though explaining something” (174). Nel realizes that together she and Sula could be “girls,” unique women. Their innocence as young girls had nothing to do with class, and the expectations of their genders had not yet taken over. In the final sentences of the novel, Morrison gives Nel a moment of clarity. Nel experiences a moment of freedom, like Sula did upon her death, when she comes to the realization that she and Sula experienced different struggles and challenges, but they were ultimately both held back by white society. When all the angles of Nel’s life that are confusing, Sula, Jude, Eva, Helene, are gone, she is able to think for herself; Sula’s death has given Nel true independence. If only for a brief moment, Nel is able to understand what it means to be free, and Sula appears again as Nel’s hero. It is in that moment Nel realizes that individual freedom existed when she had little concern for her expectations, and she could enjoy the freedom and friendship of Sula Peace. Nel realizes that she was a true, independent female when she and Sula could focus on themselves, embrace their racial differences and care very little about their individual social positions.

White society and its power influences black culture and community in many ways that infringe upon female individualism and prohibit the exhibition of the female self. Furthermore, as black women give into the pressures and stereotypes of what the “traditional” family should look like, the power of white society continues to flourish. As we will see in the next chapter, differences in race, gender, and class provide unique

challenges for all women. For Sula and Nel, their individual class distinctions allowed for certain freedoms and restrictions based on their proximity to white, middle-class culture. For Nel, her mother's drive to be more like the acceptable white women of society causes her to blindly follow the guidelines of traditional gender roles and not challenge the stereotypes of what a mother, wife, and woman should be. On the other hand, white society did not influence Sula's family as much due to their distance from middle-class position. Sula's independence reigns over the oppression of female individualism in the Bottom for most of her life. Although the white, middle-class female ideals crush Sula's individualism in life, she finds peace and tranquility in death, a place where she can truly be free. Sula's death gives Nel individual freedom for a brief moment as she realizes her true independence was found within her relationship with Sula and their rejection of socially-constructed gender expectations. Toni Morrison uses Sula a symbol of defiance and autonomy. Even in death, Sula pursues independence and a unique self that embraces difference rather than conformity.

## CHAPTER TWO

### THE AWAKENING

Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* details the life of Edna Pontellier, an upper middle-class white woman who, although strikingly different from Morrison's Sula, also finds herself struggling to overcome the confines of the stereotypical gender roles that stem from the power of white society. Edna serves as the perfect contrast to Sula because she lives in an upper middle-class society and is considered part of and accepted by white society. On the surface, Edna appears to have all the privileges a woman of her class would want, but even though those privileges allow Edna to move within her race and culture, she also experiences certain restrictions because of her position. Edna's privileges do not make her more or less oppressed than Sula, or as we will see Offred, but the analysis of *The Awakening* shows that, as Patricia Collins notes, differences in race and class allow for different experiences, and, as I argue, different pressures from the white norm. I also contend that these differences allow for different restrictions that prevent Edna from achieving true independence, or the ability to transcend the barriers of white society and create a unique self.

Kate Chopin's novella, *The Awakening*, caused considerable controversy because Chopin's main character, Edna Pontellier, ignored her responsibilities as wife and mother and because the belief has traditionally been that the white female identity is morally pure, unsexed and surrounded by expectations of continuing a pure white race (Babb 90). As discussed, white society upholds these standards of motherhood and sexuality as the



norm for white women of Edna's social position. On the surface, the abjuration to Chopin's text appears to simply support defined female roles, but upon further analysis, it becomes clear that the controversy around *The Awakening* lies in the reader's response to Edna's blatant rejection of white, middle-class norms. I contend that class and race allow Edna to transcend her position since she is able to change her skin color as she chooses and "play" within other classes, such as maids and servants, but because of her position white society will always accept her. Although Edna is able to change her physical appearance and associate with the working class if she chooses, she still has certain expectations which she needs to uphold, and when she gets too close to transcending those boundaries and creating a new self, she is unable to truly gain independence because the power of the social majority, white, middle-class society, will always classify her as a leisurely, upper- middle-class woman who should be a wife and mother. I argue that Chopin deliberately depicts this connection to show the connection between race, class, and gender as it relates to the power of whiteness. The realization that the influences and confines of white society are inescapable ultimately crushes Edna's hopes for independence.

Many critics have analyzed Chopin's novella, and many have addressed the idea of female independence and the rejection of gender norms, but I enter the conversation by bridging the gap between discussions of gender and race in Chopin's text and attribute Edna's continuous struggles to the power of white society. Ivy Schweitzer discusses her view of Edna's connection to the expectations of her sex in her essay, "Maternal Discourse and the Romance of Self-Possession in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*:"

Women of the class to which Edna belongs are defined by their reproductive capacity and social caretaking role. They are meant to discover their identity through intimate relationships of interconnection, rather than through independence, autonomy, and the self-definition of work. That is, their desire should not be directed towards themselves but always towards others, children, husbands, the romantic double. (169)

Women in Edna's position are not only valued based on their ability to reproduce, but specifically their ability to continue the bloodline of wealthy, white families. Edna is not expected to have relationships outside those that support her role as wife and mother, nor is she expected to participate in laborious activity. In this respect there is a clear distinction between the working class, maids, servants, etc., and Edna's leisurely class. According to Schweitzer, simple discourse is approved as appropriate leisure activity for women as opposed to their exploration of culture and sexuality. In terms of whiteness and its ability to hinder female independence, Rebecca Aanerud also addresses Edna's role in the discussion. In her essay "Fictions of Whiteness: Speaking the Names of Whiteness in U.S. Literature," Aanerud analyzes the function of whiteness in Chopin's text. She contends,

Instead of reading Edna's whiteness as incidental to her womanhood, I see it as inextricably tied to the construction of the white gender (understood especially as motherhood) and feminine sexuality (understood as Edna's desire), and I am interested in her struggle to find a space outside those constructions. (39)

Aanerud reinforces the idea that women are forever tied to the role of wife and mother and that their struggle to move outside those confines is unending. I too am interested in Edna's search for independence and her embodiment of the standard female roles, but I contend that Aanerud missed an important relationship between whiteness and class. I argue that Edna's class allows her to participate in leisurely activities which give her the opportunity to see the relationship between her race, class, and social position. Therefore, because of her class and race, Edna is able to have moments of free-thinking consciousness where she realizes white; middle-class society is the driving force behind her inability to truly become independent.

In order to investigate the power of race, class, and gender in Chopin's text, I will substantially build upon Schweitzer's and Aanerud's ideas. I contend that it is the power of whiteness that ultimately tells women their "desire should not be directed towards themselves but always towards others." Whiteness in conjunction with class and gender expectations creates an unrealistic environment for Edna to truly, and fully, awaken from the confines of her life. I contend that Edna progresses to the ultimate realization that as long as white privilege exists and enforces the roles she is trying to escape, she will never be a unique woman. I see three clear stages in Chopin's text and Edna's awakening. First, white privilege and its relation to Edna's social position are established, and we see Edna's ignorance as it relates to her race. Second, although Edna does not fully understand the connection between race, class, and gender, she begins to recognize and reject the foundations of whiteness and seeks to create something new, a race free from social standards or expectations. Third, Edna makes a conscious choice to escape the

confines of her position and the restrictive nature of her race, class and gender through the only means possible: suicide.

Edna's suicide dominates the majority of criticism written on *The Awakening*. My contention, as it relates to the finality of Chopin's text, is most closely aligned with Peter Ramos' view as he details in his article "Unbearable Realism: Freedom, Ethics and Identity in *The Awakening*." Ramos states,

I would like to suggest another way to read the ending of *The Awakening*, and that is as a subtle, but intentionally crafted, warning. In this reading, Edna's final actions serve as an example of what can happen to a protagonist whose unwillingness to continue dedicating herself to any of the available social roles leads her to abandon all of them in favor of an enticing yet ever elusive freedom, the kind one associates with a tantalizing, idyllic childhood.

(148)

I agree that Edna sees no clear alternative to her social responsibilities, nor is she able to endure a life full of mindless, cultureless gender assigned duties. But as I will show, Ramos and I differ on our reading of the ending. I believe Chopin's depiction of Edna's suicide and choices in no way represent an idealistic utopia and Chopin positions Edna's choice as calculated and conscious rather than childishly immature. Edna sees that there are few choices for a woman in her position, and, even though she makes choices that transcend the white stereotypes, she will never truly be free. Through observations of images of white privilege, lack of cultural identity, and her rejection of whiteness, Edna

makes a bold choice to take her own life. This choice signifies the very real and rigid power and control of white, male-dominated, middle-class society.

### *White Privilege*

To define the white race as human beings that simply possess white skin would be an oversimplification of a complex and diverse concept, but to ignore the role skin plays in the representation of whiteness would also eliminate a large portion of the discussion. In Chopin's text, skin plays an important role in the representation of whiteness, class and privilege, and female possession. Early in the novel, Chopin establishes Edna's social stature and race through images of tanning and burnt skin. The first scene of the novella shows Edna returning from the beach, and her skin is burnt from the sun. The image of tanned, burnt skin works on two levels in Chopin's text: it establishes Edna's class, but it also exposes her vulnerability as a white, upper middle-class woman. Leisurely activities such as tanning and lying on the beach are activities reserved for individuals of a certain class. Such activities suggest residual time to relax and not work. In addition to simply symbolize the possession of leisure time, Edna's ability to "tan" shows that she can, if she wishes, change the color of her skin. In relation to this idea, Richard Dyer, in his book *White*, observes, "Not only does tanning bespeak a wealth and life style largely at white people's disposition, but it also displays white people's right to be various, literally to incorporate into themselves features of other peoples" (49). Edna can, as Dyer suggests, change her appearance, something not available to characters like Sula whose race does not allow for such physical modification. Edna's social status coupled with her

race allows for certain freedoms such as sun bathing and the opportunity to morph into someone else by simply changing her skin color. As a white person, Edna chooses to alter her skin; her skin will recover and become “normal” again, but at any time, she can easily alter her “color.” Although Edna is not aware of the implications of the act of tanning this early in the novel, this image foreshadows the change she will long for as she uncovers her racial barriers.

Skin change is a prime example of the duality of whiteness in Chopin’s text; it represents Edna’s “right to be various” and her ability to participate in leisure activities, but it also creates a connection between women’s roles and male possession. Chopin makes that connection by introducing Edna to the reader through Léonce’s eyes. Edna appears in a surreal, angelic scene which positions her against many other colors in her surroundings and, in turn, establishes Léonce’s perception of his wife.

He [Léonce] fixed his gaze upon a white sunshade that was advancing at snail’s pace from the beach. He could see it plainly between the gaunt trunks of the white-oaks and across the stretch of yellow chamomile. The gulf looked far way, melting hazily into the blue of the horizon. The sunshade continued to approach slowly. Beneath its pink-lined shelter was his wife, Mrs. Pontellier, and young Robert Lebrun. (2)

The white sunshade symbolizes Edna’s purity and whiteness, and the slow pace in which she approaches Léonce creates a serene, heavenly, and angelic tone. In addition, the reference to Edna’s pace represents the reality of her leisure. Edna has no reason to rush

back from the beach for she has few domestic duties to which she needs to attend. Chopin introduces Edna through Léonce's eyes to depict the pure, unaltered light in which Edna is perceived. This surreal, leisurely scene sets the stage for whiteness, male perceptions, and class distinction. Once Léonce sees the effects of the sun upon Edna, he reacts to her damaged skin. Chopin creates a clear contrast between Léonce watching his white wife approach and then noticing her damaged skin. She writes, "You are burnt beyond recognition," he [Léonce] added, looking at his wife as one looks at a valuable piece of property which has suffered some damage" (2). Although Edna has the ability to transform her skin and alter her appearance, Léonce rejects her desire to do so, therefore, asserting his power over her. The angelic image created as Edna returns turns into a scene of distaste when Léonce realizes the effects of Edna's sunbathing. Not only does Léonce see Edna as a damaged piece of property, but he sees that she has damaged her most visible link to her social status: her pure, white skin. By tanning, Edna is not only changing her white skin, but she also begins to resemble a member of the working class, one who has been outside laboring. Edna is neither changing her race, nor is she working outside, but to resemble another race or a member of the lower, working class is not acceptable.

Edna also serves as a symbol of Léonce's connection to white upper middle-class society. In order for Léonce to continue to be accepted into the society he occupies, he must control Edna's actions and behavior, a task that proves challenging as the novel progresses. In her essay "Relating to Privilege: Seduction and Rejection in the Subordination of White Women and Women of Color," Aida Hurtado discusses the

connection between male possession and whiteness: “ White women are persuaded to become the partners of white men and are seduced into accepting a subservient role that meets the material needs of white men” (845). Hurtado’s contention reinforces the connection between female roles and white society. Subservient partnerships, like that of Edna and Léonce, reinforce the stereotypical gender roles and power of the white race. Léonce admires the image of his wife in an almost angelic fashion, but when his “possession” does not resemble the ideal state, Léonce rejects her appearance and tries to project another, more acceptable appearance on her. Chopin’s opening scene is carefully constructed to portray the interworking of race, class, and gender and how the perception of all three relates directly to white privilege. In addition, Chopin’s opening of the novel shows how race, class, gender, and white privilege work together to stifle Edna’s ability to transcend the expectations placed upon her. Edna’s social position allows for leisure and her white skin allows for her to modify her skin color, but she is never truly free to express her individualism since it is Léonce that ultimately controls her appearance and white society that establishes what appearances are acceptable for a white woman in her upper middle-class society.

Chopin exposes gender roles as operating in conjunction with expectations related to class as well as race. Expositions of white privilege and class privilege create a scene in which Edna appears to have all the luxuries of privilege, yet something is wrong. In chapter nine, a party commences at Madame Lebrun’s home in which indulgences and privileges are on display. The guests dance, dine and entertain each other. Children indulge in sweets and stay up late. These privileges are obviously available to the



Lebruns and the Pontelliers because of their wealth, but also because of their whiteness. In this case, whiteness and social status go hand-in-hand. To further this connection, Chopin uses materials of advantage to show the superiority and privilege associated with upper-class white society. The indulgent treats served at the party demonstrate the distinct difference between the races involved in the party.

The ice-cream was passed around with cake—gold and silver cake arranged on platters in alternate slices; it had been made and frozen during the afternoon back of the kitchen by two black women under the supervision of Victor. It was pronounced a great success—excellent if it had only contained a little less vanilla or a little more sugar, if it had been frozen a degree harder, and if the salt might have been kept out of portions of it. (33)

This classic party is a haughty display of whiteness and wealth. As the party commences, the unnamed black women prepare the food in the kitchen. Even though the dessert is decadent and carefully displayed, the white party-goers have pretentious criticisms. As cooking duties are typically a woman's work, the privilege of being white and having class distinction allows for women to be leisurely rather than labor in the kitchen. Chopin's juxtaposition in the text shows the clear distinction between the working class women in the text and those that embody leisure. Chopin's juxtaposition not only exposes a privilege in Edna's society, but it also exhibits a common practice in Chopin's novel: representing nameless black characters. In the text, all characters of color are nameless or referred to by their percentage of black heritage (quadroons, mulattos, etc.), and are

consistently working or serving. By doing this, Chopin makes race classed because we only see other races as member of the lower, working class, and, for the same reason, class is raced; to be white is to be among and accepted by a privileged class. Chopin incorporates these characters into her text in scenes and situations in which she can juxtapose them with named, leisurely white characters. In her article “‘Alien Hands’: Kate Chopin and the Colonization of Race,” Michele Birnbaum discusses this phenomenon in relationship to Chopin’s novella.

The "black," the "mulatto," the "quadroon," and the "Griffe" are subtle indices to social status in the white community. Named according to the ratio of "Negro blood" in their veins, these representative figures function not as indictments of an arbitrary colorline, but as reminders and reinforcements of cultural tiering. (308)

As Birnbaum states, the black women represented in the novella are never named, but they are strategically placed to show the hierarchy of class and race in Edna’s society. I agree with Birnbaum, but I also see the nameless and voiceless women of color as a reminder of the presence of white privilege. Black characters are positioned in scenes in which their labor directly contrasts with the leisurely white women with whom they share the scene. These images reinforce the idea that white women do possess certain privileges, like leisure, but they also serve as a social marker for Edna. Because Chopin does not name these women, they can be seen as unimportant. I argue that this is a deliberate choice that represents not Chopin’s, but society’s pejorative actions: with whiteness and wealth comes importance. Images like the Lebrun’s party commonly

occur in *The Awakening* and serve to ground the reader in Edna's racial status and, in turn, her social position.

During her evening at the Lebrun's, Edna begins to recognize that something about her sense of self is not right. A strange reaction surfaces when Mademoiselle Reisz plays an ironically-named piece, *Solitude*. As narrated, "It was not the first time she [Edna] had heard an artist at the piano. Perhaps it was the first time she was ready, perhaps the first time her being was tempered to take an impress of the abiding truth" (35). In the middle of Mademoiselle Reisz's piece, Edna is moved to tears. "She was trembling, she was choking, and the tears blinded her" (35). I see this reaction as a clear shift in the novella, which showcases Edna's consciousness of the confines of white, upper-middle class society. It is after this emotional response that Edna begins to assert her independence and take notice of the differences around her. This lavish exposition of whiteness and wealth makes her "tempered to take an impress of the abiding truth." The title of Mademoiselle Reisz's piece is also symbolic. The title foreshadows Edna's solitude, not that she will be physically alone, but that she will be alone in her beliefs, her personal transformation, and her rejection of social gender norms. Chopin deliberately creates the party scene in order to blatantly display whiteness, which results in Edna's realization that she is stifled. Although this party should represent the ultimate freedoms a wealthy white woman experiences, for Edna, it depicts the chains that hold her to the confines of her gender, her race, and her social position. Through the words and notes of Mademoiselle Reisz's song, she feels the constraint.

The result of Edna's emotional and cultural shift emerges at the beginning of chapter 12. The morning after the lavish party, Edna calls on Robert to accompany her to the marshy *Chênrière*. When she arrives at his residence, she tells the servant to wake Robert and have him join her on the boat. Although Edna finds herself escaping one relationship to engage in another, her relationship with Robert allows her certain powers her relationship with Léonce does not. "She had never sent for him before. She had never seemed to want him before. She did not appear conscious that she had done anything unusual in commanding his presence" (45-46). The relationship between Robert and Edna empowers Edna in a new way. She no longer embodies the submissive woman to whom Schweitzer refers. Edna is beginning to shift and test the boundaries that white society, middle-class society has placed upon her gender. Edna does not set out to shed whiteness or her class position per se, but she does begin to challenge the foundation of the expectations placed upon her because of her gender, race, and class. Ironically, it is Edna's class and race that allow her to participate in leisurely activity with Robert and "order" the servants to call Robert. Edna's social position and her race allow her certain freedoms that women like Sula and Nel cannot experience. Sula was able to push the boundaries of her gender because of her lack of social position, yet met unique challenges because of her race; in Edna's case, and, in a much different way, Edna is able to challenge the boundaries of white, upper-middle class society because of her social position and race. By calling for Robert, Edna begins to create a new personality, one that is not founded on expectations of gender, race or class affiliation. Her choice to be

something different continues to unfold as she challenges what is expected of her as a perceived, “proper” white woman.

### *The Culture of Race*

Early in her novel, Chopin successfully establishes the privilege and peril associated with Edna’s class, race and gender, but, in order for Edna to “awaken,” *she* must recognize this association. Edna’s personal progression throughout the novella shows her beginning to take notice of cultural differences and her own lack of uniqueness. When compared to cultures steeped in tradition and history, white individuals lack racial definition; hence, the struggle to identify what constitutes a member of the white race. In her book *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness*, Ruth Frankenberg writes, “For a significant number of white women, being white felt like being cultureless” (196). Much like Frankenberg observes, Edna realizes there is nothing unique or distinct about her. Chopin explores Edna’s lack of cultural definition through discussion of Edna’s upbringing. “Mrs. Pontellier talked about her father’s Mississippi plantation and her girlhood home in the old Kentucky blue-grass country. She was an American woman, with a small infusion of French which seemed to have been lost in dilution” (5). This description emphasizes Edna’s lack of culture. Just as the cultural distinction “American” lacks a clear definition in terms of heritage, so does the definition of the white race. Defining a person as white or American and perceiving it as the societal “norm,” magnifies the lack of culture in the white race. Edna recognizes that her culture or lack thereof, offers very little to her self-identity.

Edna's only cultural definition, French, is qualified as diluted. The dilution of the French in Edna's heritage begs the question: dilution into what? It is clear that as one becomes more and more like the norm (in this case white-American), cultural definition dwindles. In turn, Edna is not able to identify with any one race. Beyond Edna's self-definition of her heritage, Chopin avoids indentifying Edna with any race or cultural distinction, so, as a result, Chopin continues to define Edna by what she is not.

Edna's relationship with Robert Lebrun ultimately serves to fill the void of uniqueness she feels among Creole society, but Edna does not recognize that the definition of oneself goes beyond race and culture and that it also encompasses class and gender, which create unique challenges for all women. Edna's relationship with Robert serves as an outlet for her exploration of life outside the standards of white society, but, as we will see later, fails to meet her expectations of variance. Edna's trip with Robert to the *Chênrière* (the small island) allows Edna to observe norms outside her culture including one of cultural beauty. Chopin uses an encounter with a young Spanish girl, Mariequita, to juxtapose Edna's lack of culture with rich diversity and distinctiveness. I acknowledge that Mariequita has her own limitations and restrictions because of her race, class, and gender, but I am interested in the ways she is able to bring Edna to the realization that being non-white can be celebrated and beautiful. As Chopin describes, "The girl was deprecatory at one moment, appealing to Robert. She was saucy the next, moving her head up and down, making 'eyes' at Robert and making 'mouths' at Beaufort" (46). While on the trip, Edna sits back and observes. She is quiet and demure; quite the opposite of Mariequita. Mariequita's sultry, appealing nature contrasts

with Edna's plain, reserved demeanor. In this scene, Edna becomes increasingly aware of her whiteness and her differences when compared to Mariequita. Aanerud also comments on the interaction between Mariequita and Edna, but she sees Mariequita as the embodiment of the sexuality for which Edna longs (41). Although I agree that she embodies a certain sexuality Edna does not, I argue that what Edna sees in Mariequita is more than just a freedom to express sexuality. Edna is now able to look at Mariequita as someone who is unique and special rather than simply the "other." This meeting does not stir up feelings of jealousy, but rather a realization of the confines of race as Edna begins to long for the nonconformity Mariequita represents. At this point in the novella, Edna does not recognize that race or culture does not define a woman's identity, as Patricia Collins states, but her interaction with Mariequita is enough to start Edna's awakening and realization that the class and race she represents perpetuates, upholds, and controls women's positions in society. After this encounter, Edna begins to separate herself from the confines of her gender, while also separating herself from the confines of her race, and class; she now acts on the self-realization she experienced at the Lebruns' party. For many readers, whiteness and feminine purity are so closely aligned and accepted as the norm, that this small interaction is often ignored as a turning point for Edna. "Sailing across the bay to *Chênière Caminada*, Edna felt as if she were borne away from some anchorage which had held her fast, whose chains were loosening...Robert spoke to her incessantly; he no longer noticed Mariequita" (47). Mariequita symbolizes more than the sexual freedom for which Edna longs; she symbolizes the uniqueness which she desires. Mariequita has distinction, and she appears to have personal freedoms that Edna does not.

Mariequita serves as enlightenment. As Edna begins to realize what is holding her back and as she identifies what she needs to truly find independence she feels “as if she were borne away from some anchorage” (47). That anchorage is the narrow mold which whiteness has established for women. Edna starts to see that in order to be an individual she needs to recreate herself with a distinction and free spirit like that she sees in Mariequita. Once Edna starts to feel free, Robert’s gaze moves onto her showing Edna’s transition from non-sexual wife and mother to a sexualized, free woman. Edna’s exposure to cultural difference paired with the effects of the Lebrun’s party, allows her to be open to understanding the confines of her gender, her race, and her social position and continues Edna’s awakening.

As Edna begins to awaken to the reality of the confines of whiteness, Chopin consciously uses white imagery to show how white society still slightly influences Edna, and also to foreshadow the ultimate affect whiteness will have on Edna’s life. When Robert and Edna embark on their afternoon boat ride, Edna arrives and takes refuge in an intense and lengthy nap. The details of Edna’s room signify her role as a white woman, “The whole place was immaculate clean, and the big four-posted bed, snow-white, invited one to repose” (50). The bedroom scene is strikingly similar to the white sunshade scene at the beginning of the novel. Again, this beautiful room with its pure white ensemble symbolizes the tight niche that white women are expected to fit into: pure, feminine, clean and virginal. In addition, Chopin uses this scene to show that even though Edna is mentally reassigning herself, whiteness will always engulf her. Chopin



continues to set up scenes like this in order to constantly remind her audience that whiteness and its effects are nearly impossible to escape.

The whiteness of the room represents lack of dirt and sin associated with white women, but ironically, Edna is walking a fine line between fidelity and infidelity as she enters the room and drifts off to sleep. Critics such as Michele Birnbaum view Edna's frequent slumber and Chopin's many references to sleep as a representation of Edna's transitions in and out of consciousness. Birnbaum contends, "Hence Edna's dozing is seen as an attempt to dispose of 'that fictitious self,' and her ennui as a kind of out-of-culture experience" (300). As Birnbaum suggests, these actions allow Edna to transcend reality and culture and see life on a higher level. Upon waking, Edna has clarity. Her sleep allows her to introspectively weigh the choices she has made, and, as portrayed in this scene, she looks beyond race. Upon waking, Edna finds Robert alone and speaks to him, "the whole island is changed. A new race of beings must have sprung up leaving only you and me as past relics" (52). Edna is joking with Robert about the length of her slumber, but it is no accident that she refers to race. Although she exaggerates the length of her slumber, she does not exaggerate her newfound sense of reality and race. After her encounter with Mariequita, the Lebrun's party, and her experiences with Robert, Edna uncovers a new view of race and responsibility. Edna's reference to "a new race" also signifies her desire to create a new persona that is not defined by the boundaries of white, middle-class society. The length of time which she jokes about represents the idea that someday, over time, the confines of race, gender and class may be transcended, but the whiteness of the room serves as a reminder that society's progress is far from Edna's

ideal, and the expectations of her race, class, and gender still surround her. Throughout the course of the novel, Edna begins to see the importance placed on race and struggles to identify with any particular race, hence the creation of her own. Chopin is playing with race in this sequence as Edna is attempting to not only defy whiteness, but play upon the thought of creating something entirely new out of her actions, creating a new race that does not follow the standard practices and roles of whiteness.

### *Good-bye to Whiteness*

Even though Edna struggles to create her own identity, she cannot escape the functionality of race within her life, and she literally must cast away whiteness in order to escape it. Edna overtly rejects the comforts associated with her class and race when she decides to move out of her large estate and move into “the pigeon house,” a small cottage down the road. This small move, from a lofty, expansive mansion to a small cottage, is a large step in Edna’s attempt to shed the expectations placed on her as a white, upper middle-class woman. As Edna prepares for a dinner to celebrate her move, she literally rolls up her sleeves, gets on her knees, and scrubs the floor right alongside a servant.

Arobin found her with sleeves rolled, working in company with the housemaid when he looked in during the afternoon. She was splendid and robust, and had never appeared handsomer than in the old blue gown, with a silk handkerchief knotted at random around her head to protect her hair from dust (117).

The image of Edna as a working woman puts her in a different category. She is no longer, pure, dainty white Edna; she is now unkempt and dusty, taking care of her own

cleaning, working side-by-side with her own maid. Again, we see the irony as Edna is able to move between classes, in this case the working class and the leisure class. She is able to resemble a lower class, working woman in the same way tanning allowed her to resemble another race or class. Clothing also allows Edna to resemble not only another class, but also another race. Chopin skillfully uses the silk handkerchief, a classic image tied to African-American women, to show Edna's progression away from whiteness. In her essay, "The African American Woman's Headwrap: Unwinding the Symbols," Helen Bradley Griebel details the significance of the African-American headwrap.

In style, the African American woman's headwrap exhibits the features of sub-Saharan aesthetics and worldview. In the United States, however, the headwrap acquired a paradox of meaning not customary on the ancestral continent. During slavery, white overlords imposed its wear as a badge of enslavement. Later it evolved into the stereotype that whites held of the "Black Mammy" servant.

The headwrap works on two levels. One, it symbolizes the oppression of slavery, and two, it is an image typically associated with a black servant. Chopin uses this image in the same way. The headwrap makes Edna look more like her black counterpart and, in turn, makes her look less white. Furthermore, the image of enslavement is also powerful since her husband's and whiteness' control will forever confine Edna. The image of Edna cleaning also symbolizes Edna's desire to be in control of her own life. To her, keeping up the appearance of white culture has become mundane and lifeless; she throws away her leisure and physically works. This image of Edna as an equal to her house-maid is a

very important step in Edna's transformation out of whiteness. It is important to note that Edna is now as "handsome" as Arobin has ever seen her and it is as if his desire for Mrs. Pontellier increases as she steps out of her white roles and is no longer a reflection of sexual morality or the angelic white wife and mother. By stepping out of her expected role, Edna is able to briefly escape her race and class and create a persona that is far removed from the Edna at the beginning of the novella.

Fully escaping whiteness requires more than simply donning a handkerchief and physically cleaning the floor. As a result, Edna finds herself once again pulled back into white society as she hosts a grand dinner on her last night in the mansion. This dinner mirrors the lavish affair at the Lebruns', depicted earlier in the novel, but this event has a much different purpose; it is Edna's good-bye to whiteness gala. The elaborate dinner, with all of her friends in attendance, consists of the finest food, drink and dinnerware possible. It seems fitting that Edna would produce the most expansive "white" dinner party for her friends before she moves into her humble new residence. Whiteness and its traditions are a real part of Edna's life, and in order to appreciate the life she is about to enter, one she believes will bring her individual freedom, she must observe a lavish gathering once more with a new set of eyes. Edna sits back and takes in the spectacle she has created: an appropriate homage to whiteness.

There was a soft fall of lace encircling her shoulders. It was the color of her skin, without the glow, the myriad living tints that one sometimes discovers in vibrant flesh. There was something in her attitude, in her whole appearance when she

leaned her head against the high-backed chair and spread her arms, which suggested the regal woman, the one who rules, who looks on, who stands alone.

(123)

There are many realizations in terms of white femininity associated with this sequence that clearly support my contention that this is Edna's last indulgence in white privilege and that it is necessary in order for her to see the façade such an event emotes. The first is the image of Edna's skin, the vibrancy and the glow that Chopin describes is a classic example of the light often associated with white skin. Richard Dyer observes, "Idealized white women are bathed in and permeated by light. It streams through them and falls on them from above. In short, they glow." The glow Dyer refers to is clearly represented as Edna sits back and observes the party she has put together. As Edna prepares to move, she basks in the privilege of whiteness one last time, but this time she sees herself as one "who stands alone" and sees the pretentious and stifling ideals such an event represents. As Edna sits back and observes her guests, she appears to be alone, as if she is an outsider looking in. On some level, Edna has already, on many occasions, been able to break away from the socially constructed roles of white women. As she sits back and observes her guests, it is as if she knows something they do not. Through her awakening, Edna has given in, although briefly, to desire, interrupted her daintiness and become a working woman and given up the privilege of a large home and is now taking a giant step back, and looking at those who still fit neatly into the boring norm created by white society's "rules." Edna is the only one that recognizes the irony of her situation, and she will try to escape this loftiness and pursue a more subtle existence that is not

defined by boundaries established by white, middle-class society. As previously discussed, Edna cannot escape the confines of her race, nor can she identify with another. As she says “good-bye” to whiteness, she knows that in order to truly be independent, she must create an identity that is uniquely her own, but escaping race, especially whiteness, is not that easy.

Edna discovers the reality of white influence and the expectations that come with it after she moves to the Pigeon house and learns of Robert’s intentions. Edna attempts to associate herself with the sexuality that Mariequita portrays, as Rebecca Aanerud contends, and she tries to identify with a new culture, something unique and her own, not her boring white self, but she is quickly jolted back into the reality of her whiteness when Robert makes his intentions clear. Edna sees that no matter how she changes herself or her image, the stereotypes associated with her sex will always follow and haunt her. To Robert, Edna still exemplifies the ultimate white female role: wife and mother. Robert reveals that he cannot stand to be in the presence of Mrs. Pontellier if he cannot be with her sexually and have her as his wife.

“Something put it into my head that you cared for me; and I lost my senses. I forgot everything but a wild dream of your some way becoming my wife.”

“Your wife!”

“Religion, loyalty, everything would give way if you cared.”

“Then you must have forgotten that I was Léonce Pontellier’s wife.”

“Oh! I was demented, dreaming of wild, impossible things, recalling men who had set their wives free, we have heard of such things.” (150)

Robert's words clearly show that he intends on having a traditional relationship with Edna. He alludes to the fact that Edna is a possession and her husband might set her free, but only to then take her as his own. Much like Sula's relationship with Ajax, Edna realizes that the only frame of reference that exists for many men is the traditional white mother and wife. A woman is to be either a sexual plaything or the traditionally submissive wife; there is no in-between or alternative. Ultimately, in a heterosexual, male-dominated upper middle-class society like Edna's, women's worth and sexuality are determined by their ability to be a wife and mother. Edna represents these things and, for Robert, she appears to be the perfect woman to fulfill his needs as a white, heterosexual man. Due to her newfound freedoms and revelations of individualism, the revelation that Robert had intentions of marrying her, startles Edna. Edna longs for something outside the norm. Up to this point, Edna has seen Robert as an escape, a chance to be sensual and go against the sexual constraints of whiteness, but, as she learns of his overall intentions, she is unsure of the implications. She addresses his remarks,

You have been a very, very foolish boy, wasting your time dreaming of impossible things when you speak of Mr. Pontellier setting me free. I am no longer one of Mr. Pontellier's possessions to dispose of or not. I give myself where I choose. If he were to say, 'Here, Robert, take her and be happy; she is yours,' I should laugh at you both. (151)

This scene is the culmination of Edna's journey, of her awakening. Her words exude independence and are a far cry from the woman Robert and Léonce want Edna to be. Notice the similarity between Edna's speech and that of Sula at the end of her novel (See page 21-22). Both Edna and Sula assert their independence and clearly state that they are not possessions of men. This scene is a clear contrast to the beginning of Chopin's novel when Léonce looks Edna over as his damaged possession. Edna is trying to create her own identity that is not steeped in whiteness; she is trying to create an independent self. She longs for a different type of relationship. She tells Robert, "I love you," she whispered, "only you; no one but you. It was you who awoke me last summer out of a life-long, stupid dream...Now you are here we shall love each other, my Robert. We shall be everything to each other" (151). Edna's words give her a sense of power in the relationship Edna tries to establish a relationship in which they will be equal; they will be "everything to each other." Edna tries desperately to create a unique personality void of the stereotypes and constraints placed on her. She longs to identify a new type of relationship.

As Edna strives to make her relationship with Robert work while also attempting to make it something unique, she cannot escape the power whiteness has in her social class. Ultimately, the disappointing end to Edna's relationship with Robert is the catalyst that begins Edna's journey to suicide. The disappointment is not the romanticized loss of her lover, but rather the realization that she cannot escape the expectations of society. Edna is looking for something more, a new race, an existence void of racial and gender traditions and expectations. Robert enforces the confines Edna is trying so desperately to



escape. Robert's final letter indicates his love is much different than Edna's, "I love you. Good-bye because I love you" (158). Robert's note insinuates that it is because he knows he cannot be Edna's husband that he must leave. This smothering reality coupled with the pressures to conform to society lead to Edna's choice to end her life.

Even when contemplating death, the symbols of whiteness and its influences surround Edna. As Edna sits outside her home to contemplate her existence she thinks,

There was no one thing in the world that she desired. There was no human being whom she wanted near her except Robert; and she even realized that the day would come when he, too, and the thought of him would melt out of existence, leaving her alone. The children appeared before her like antagonists who had overcome her; who had overpowered and sought to drag her into the soul's slavery for the rest of her days. But she knew a way to elude them. (161)

Chopin consciously references several aspects of Edna's life that have anchored her, dragged her down. Robert symbolizes the pressure to conform to white society's norms, and she realizes that she will never have what she wants with Robert which is a uniquely different relationship. Furthermore, her children symbolize the female ideal of doting mother that Edna has never completely embodied. As long as she is alive the children will serve as the constant reminder of her expected role. Edna has a moment of clarity as she realizes that she can never truly elude any of these pressures as long as she is alive.

As Edna submerges into the water, the images of whiteness continue to permeate. As Edna looks down at her feet she notices,

The foamy wavelets curled up to her white feet, and coiled like serpents about her ankles. She walked out, The water was chill, but she walked on. The water was deep, but she lifted her white body and reached out with a long, sweeping stroke. The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace.

(162)

Edna is clearly aware of the whiteness of her body and not just in a physical way; she now sees the hold white privilege has on her freedom. As she examines her own skin, it is as if all of the social norms have caught up to her and are engulfing her like the waves. Edna is truly awakened and fully conscious of the confines of her race, class, and gender. Although she realizes the confines of whiteness, Edna sees that the society which she is a part of will never be able to think beyond the restrictions of whiteness, and those around her will continue to see whiteness as normalness, and see women as wives, mothers and caretakers. Therefore, much like Sula, Edna is engulfed in the realization that the power of the majority, white, middle-class society will continue control the boundaries of her gender. Much like the waves, Edna finds the power of whiteness overwhelming and she sees no other release than death. Edna's suicide serves as a statement of freedom. The individual unique self Edna cannot attain through her life, she hopes to encounter and embrace through suicide.

Edna's final choice can be seen as a bold decision to show rejection of women's roles or as a selfish decision made by a woman who could not cope with reality. Based on my analysis of the text, I see Edna's suicide as an attempt to reach true independence

and break free of all the confines placed upon her because of her race, class, and gender. Edna, much like Sula, realizes that although she may reject whiteness, society is so engrained in the power of whiteness that those around her will never truly awaken to realize its negative and restrictive power. Edna's struggles, just like Sula's, are unique due to her race and class. In her novella, Chopin challenges the boundaries placed on women in Edna's time and uses irony and symbolize to show that Edna can take on traits of other classes and genders because of her social position, but she can never fully escape society's gender expectations.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### THE HANDMAID'S TALE

In her prized novel *The Handmaid's Tale*, Margaret Atwood depicts a dystopian society in which women are valued based on their fertility and seen as merely walking wombs. In terms of female independence and society-generated gender roles, Atwood's position is clear: if women's roles were carried through to their logical end, Gilead would be the result (Neuman 857). I contend that *The Handmaid's Tale* is a direct, and logical, progression of the boundaries placed on Sula and Edna, and, although differences in class, race, and gender are prevalent in Atwood's novel, white privilege has the most powerful influence on the restrictions placed on the women in Gilead. Atwood's novel depicts the logical conclusion for societies steeped in the belief that whiteness is the norm, the belief that women are to resign themselves to the roles of wife and mother, and the position of the middle or upper class is the superior and most respected class. The society Atwood creates, Gilead, clearly values whiteness as the preferred race. Much like Sula's struggles with racial expectations and Edna's efforts to overcome the exclusivity of her class and the perils of whiteness, Offred struggles to identify with her role as handmaid in a very restrictive, Puritan-based society. Offred is aware throughout the novel that the boundaries placed upon her by society are due to her gender, but as she progresses through her life in Gilead, she begins to realize that what appears on the surface as Puritan-based society heavily steeped in Christian doctrine, has many secrets and many hypocritical leaders. Offred and the other handmaids completely lose their

unique identities, and are forced to conform to certain duties, dress codes and limitations on communication. Due to her social position and race, Offred may appear to have small freedoms in comparison to other women in Gilead, but there is no true freedom for women in this society. In essence, Offred's story is about class privilege and white privilege as it relates to women's freedoms and independence. Atwood uses classic "white" symbolism to portray the political influence and social implications of reproductive rights, interpersonal relationships, and female power to showcase the influence of whiteness in *The Handmaid's Tale*.

The political influences and social implications portrayed in *The Handmaid's Tale* show the repercussions of the expectations and restrictions portrayed in *Sula* and *The Awakening*. In order to see this conclusion, we must look at the severity of Gilead's restrictive culture. In their article "Feminist Implications of Anti-leisure in Dystopian Fiction," Margaret Daniels and Heather Bowen discuss the enslavement of women in Gilead based on their lack of leisure activity. "Controlled access to leisure reinforces the Handmaids' enslavement. They are not allowed to read, to play or to even talk freely" (427). Daniels and Bowen argue that the lack of leisure is what defines the handmaids' enslavement. The argument that restricted leisure is a key reason for the handmaids' enslavement is to argue that they are in some way restricted from being part of a "leisurely class" as portrayed in *The Awakening*. I recognize that class does play a part in the Handmaids' enslavement, but I argue that whiteness and the preservation of the white race has a much larger impact on the women's freedom and journey toward independence. It is clear from the severe restrictions placed on the handmaids in

Atwood's text that they are in no way free to express their independence or to explore their sense of self. This is in direct contrast to the Morrison's and Chopin's texts. Although the restrictions of whiteness ultimately impale Sula and Edna, they do experience certain freedoms. In Atwood's text, Offred and the other handmaids have no true freedom. She is offered what appear to be small glimpses of self, but she is forced to conform to the rules of Gilead on a daily basis. I contend that the restrictions placed on Sula and Edna serve as a precursor to the enslavement portrayed in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Therefore, Atwood's novel serves as a literary example of the horrific end result if white society continues to construct boundaries for women and is able to control how much women can "push" those boundaries. Offred's daily duties, clothing, sexual partner, language, and physical activity are determined based on her race, gender and social position, but privileged white society ultimately establishes all the rules for these experiences.

Atwood sees white privilege as dangerous and she uses overt references to the expression of white values and white imagery to show the logical progression of white values. Throughout the novel, it is clear that the white, Christian race is highly prized and valued as other races are forced to leave Gilead. Jews, or Sons of Jacob, are forced to either convert to Christianity or return to their homeland. African-Americans, or Children of Ham, are resettled to "Homeland One," which Offred reveals is located in North Dakota (107). Those in power of Gilead focus solely on repopulating only the white, Christian race. At the conclusion of the novel, the Historical Notes provide an interesting insight on the origins of Gilead. Professor Pieixoto notes,

Men highly placed in the regime were thus able to pick and choose among women who had demonstrated their reproductive fitness by having produced one or more healthy children, a desirable characteristic in an age of plummeting Caucasian birthrates, a phenomenon observable not only in Gilead but in most northern Caucasian societies. As discussed in previous chapters, white society. (384)

In conjunction with eradicating all non-whites and non-Christians, those in Gilead are specifically concerned about the decline of the Caucasian race, and, as a result, they look to the solution of surrogate mothers and polygamists fathers. The influence of white society portrayed in *Sula* and *The Awakening* comes to a head in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Gilead perpetuates traditional female roles: wife, mother, and caretaker. These are the same roles and restrictions that crushed Sula's independence and left Edna no other choice but to take her life. In Gilead, women are made to look as much alike as possible; their uniqueness and culture is not celebrated, but rather it is repressed. Women are given clear roles: Wife (legal wife), Handmaid (surrogate mother), Martha (domestic care-taker), Aunt (Handmaid trainer). All of these elements not only signify the loss of female independence, but they also signify the importance placed on the roles supported by white society. Although many analyses of Atwood's work focus on the women's roles and responsibilities, I aim to extend these ideas and show that they are, in fact, ideas that represent the carefully crafted expectations placed on women by the predominantly white, male society and each role is carefully crafted to represent each woman in Gilead's race and class.

Even though the distinction of whiteness and race play a huge role in Atwood's text, it is important to also recognize the social position of Offred and the other handmaids and how those positions play into the ruling class of Gilead. Atwood portrays the dynamic between the wealthy Commanders' handmaids and the lower-class Econowives through an interaction during a procession of mourning. In this procession, the lower class Econowives pass by Offred and Ofglen. As they pass, the Econowives scowl at the handmaids and one even spits at them. The Econowives dislike the handmaids and project a dark appearance which is a stark contrast to the handmaids' pure, clean, white image. Offred's reflection on Aunt Lydia's comments sheds light on the position of the Econowives. "Some day, when times improve, no one will have to be an Econowife" (59). Aunt Lydia's comment represents the mindset of Gilead. Not only is Gilead's mission to become a Christian, white society, but "when times improve," it will be a place in which no one is of a lower-class distinction. This interaction is a clear example of the close relationship between race, class, and gender. It also shows that although class is important to society, but the lower class women are allowed to stay in Gilead and eventually become part of the "norm" once their social status improves. Those that are not white are not able to stay, but are moved out of Gilead. This shows that although one's class may determine what they can and cannot do within Gilead, it is ultimately one's "whiteness" that determines if they are allowed to stay within the society; therefore, it reinforces that whiteness is the norm and the preferred race.

In order to clearly see how white privilege takes shape in Atwood's text, it is important to look at some of the criticisms of the novel, and how these ideas ultimately



relate to whiteness. In her essay “The World as It will Be? Female Satire and the Technology of Power in *The Handmaid's Tale*,” Stephanie Barbé Hammer addresses the satirical undertones of Gilead. Hammer notes the hypocritical nature of all the characters as they often lie and cheat to keep up appearances. She contends,

Within this demonic scheme even the victimized handmaids are forced into an existence which is no less hypocritical than that of their oppressors; in order to survive they and the narrator among them are constantly obliged to pretend to espouse a system of values which denigrates and threatens to annihilate them. In this manner, an allegedly profoundly Christian society ironically transforms every citizen into a sinner in so far as each person must become a liar and a hypocrite in order to exist within the system. This is, of course, the supreme irony of Atwood's fictional future world; this is a theocracy where not one person is devout and where such notions as faith and morality simply have no meaning. (39)

Hammer's rich analysis of the text focuses on the ironic yet hypocritical state of Gilead as those who have pledged to uphold the foundational Christian values are the very ones that violate it daily. From Offred's secret meetings and outings with the commander to Sereena Joy's hidden stash of black market cigarettes, each character has hidden secrets that contradict the foundations of the society. Hammer argues that these actions demonstrate Atwood's satirical approach. To build on Hammer's argument, I contend that it also upholds the idea of white privilege. For the members of Gilead, the sole purpose of the state is to repopulate, and, in order to do that, they hide behind Christian values. As Professor Pieixoto notes in the Historical Notes,

The need for what many call birth services was already recognized in the pre-Gilead period, where it was being inadequately met by “artificial insemination,” “fertility clinics,” and the use of “surrogate mothers” who were hired for the purpose. Gilead outlawed the first two as irreligious but legitimized and enforced the third, which was considered to have Biblical precedent. (386)

From the beginning, the founders of Gilead used Christianity to provide justification for their actions. In order to establish a society steeped in the belief that women were to serve as wife, mother, and caretaker and to use fertile women as surrogates to continue the race, Gilead’s founders used the Bible to justify their choices. As stated previously, the Gilead regime is only interested in preserving and populating white society. Therefore, the constant violation of their foundational beliefs as seen in the text shows that the Christian justification was simply a façade that allowed Gilead to come to fruition. Although satirical and ironic, the hypocritical acts of the Gileadians serve as further proof that whiteness and the preservation of white society were the foundation of Gilead, and the link to Christianity was only a necessary justification for the procreation of whiteness.

### *Imagery: Black and White*

The white imagery in Atwood’s text further substantiates the position of whiteness; it is the most influential factor in determining women’s ability to transcend society’s boundaries. The white imagery begins with the Handmaid’s attire, most importantly the winged veils that accompany their red habits. The whiteness of the veil

is no accident. Critic David Coad explores the veil imagery in Atwood's novel by analyzing the costumes, masks and hidden faces of Gilead in his 2001 article "Hymens, Lips and Masks: The Veil in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*." He sees the covering of the face as necessary in order to "help conceal and hide the women as well as to prevent women from seeing. It helps render the handmaids as anonymous" (55). Coad's reading of the veils is accurate in the literal sense that Gilead's purpose for imposing the veils was to avoid eye contact of any kind, and make the women look essentially the same. Building on that idea, I argue that Atwood uses the image of the veil to reiterate the idea explored by whiteness theorists McIntosh and Dyer: whiteness is the accepted social norm. In order to uphold this norm all handmaids must appear the same, and appear white, and pure. Also, Gilead must differentiate these women from the Economies and show that they belong to the white, wealthy, commanders. For the handmaids, as long as they dress similar and look similar, they will signify the "norm" for the role of handmaid. Offred longs for her uniqueness to be seen; she longs to embody a unique self void of the white veil which signifies normalness, an upper-level social class, and whiteness. As she daydreams of Nick upon their first meeting she wonders,

What if I were to come at night, when he's on duty alone-though he would never be allowed such solitude-and permit him beyond my white wings? What if I were to peel off my red shroud and show myself to him, to them, by the uncertain light of the lanterns? (29)

Offred's thoughts symbolize a clear connection between Coad's contentions and my theories on the whiteness of the veil. Offred dreams of no longer being "anonymous." In addition, she wishes to be seen as a unique person. She wants Nick to see "beyond [her] white wings" and see past her whiteness and her position as a wealthy man's handmaid. Atwood deliberately uses the white veil to provide a communication barrier, but also to provide a reminder to all those that see Offred and the others, that beneath the veil is whiteness, and that she belongs to a wealthy man, and, with their plan in place, the powers of Gilead plan to keep it as pure and anonymous as possible.

Although the handmaids are in a position to continue the white race and embody the gender expectations for white women, the handmaids' lives bear a striking resemblance to that of the antebellum African-American slave. The most apparent comparison between the handmaids and slaves is physical ownership. In her article, "Subjectivities of Whiteness," Sarah Nuttall discusses whiteness and power in relation to several slave novels. She observes, "Whiteness, then, is not only a matter of how one perceives oneself, but also of how one is perceived by others. For many blacks (and whites as well), whiteness is still bound up with ownership" (133). Although Nuttall does not address *The Handmaid's Tale*, I believe that the same aspects of visibility and ownership are at play in Atwood's novel. The handmaids possess verbal and physical markers of being "owned." The handmaids' names are the first indication of their place. Their names are directly related to their assigned Commander: Offred, Ofwarren, and Ofglen. They are all the handmaid "of" a man and it is apparent from their name that no one else is allowed to "have" the handmaid until she is passed on to another household.

Since reading and writing have been forbidden, each handmaid is branded with a tattoo. “Four digits and an eye, a passport in reverse. It’s supposed to guarantee that I will never be able to fade, finally, into another landscape” (84-85). Just as antebellum slaves longed to be free and were often branded, Offred knows that even if she escapes or the country reverts back to the way it was, she is forever marked as once being a handmaid, a sexual slave. Lauren Rule, author of the article “Not Fading into Another Landscape: Specters of American Empire in Margaret Atwood’s Fiction,” also comments on Offred’s tattoo: “The tattoo around her [Offred] ankle serves as a type of figurative shackle that within Gilead’s referential space metonymically chains her to a particular place (the home of Commander Fred) and position (Handmaid) within Gilead’s society” (629). Rule offers a very smart reading of Atwood’s imagery and compares Offred’s tattoo to that of shackles binding her to a particular person and a particular role. The tattoo is a “shackle” much like the chains and restraints used to imprison African-American slaves. Rule goes on to say, “By drawing such direct attention to the tattoo in the passage, Atwood ensures that the reader, too, cannot avoid envisioning the tattoo and considering the way in which it exemplifies containment and subordination of Offred’s body within Gilead’s landscape” (629). Rule uses a unique angle to show that not only does this tattoo symbolically represent Offred as being owned, but it is a physical image and reminder to the reader that Offred’s position is not one of honor or duty (although she is urged to think that way), but rather a position equal to that of an enslaved and owned person. Much like the handmaids, slavery represented a clear distinction in class and race. The families who owned slaves were a part of upper-middle class society and were predominantly white.

By comparing the handmaids to slaves, Atwood shows that Offred and the other handmaids represent wealth and whiteness. Even if she is able to “escape” Gilead, Offred will always carry with her the memory of being an “owned” woman void of her personal freedoms, a representation of the power of a white, wealthy society.

### *The Reproduction of White Society*

In Gilead, one of the clearest connections to white values which is justified by Christian doctrine is the control of reproductive rights and the female body. Gilead is a society that values birth, outlaws anything that prevents it (abortion, birth control, and abstinence), and classifies those, adults and babies alike, that do not fit the purified mold as “unhuman.” I base this contention on Susan Faludi’s discussion of similar rules and restrictions in nineteenth century United States. She observes,

Then as now, late-Victorian religious and political leaders accused women who postponed childbearing of triggering a “race suicide” that endangered (white) America’s future. They were, in the words of President Theodore Roosevelt, “criminals against the race” and objects of contemptuous abhorrence by healthy people. (49)

Much like what is seen in Gilead, Faludi’s example clearly depicts the importance placed on the white race. As she discusses, the government began to abhor white women that did not reproduce as the political leaders saw fit. Faludi’s argument mirrors the progression of events described in the text that led to the establishment of Gilead.

Faludi's discussion of historical politics of The United States, paired with Atwood's puritan basis for *The Handmaid's Tale* provide a fertile ground for discussion of the influence of whiteness on women's reproductive rights.

It is clear that the intention of Gilead is to further white Christian values, but it is also important to note that with whiteness comes power. As the women band together on one side or another, they are ignorant of the racial undertones of the society and collectively fall into the traps of whiteness. Just as Peggy McIntosh sees white privilege as invisible in today's society, the same hierarchy is at play in Gilead. McIntosh states, "Keeping most people unaware that freedom of confident action is there for just a small number of people props up those in power, and serves to keep power in the hands of the same groups that have most of it already" (80). For Gilead, this is truer than ever, and, by continuing the practices of procreation and supporting the systems put in place, all the residents of Gilead, whether they agree or disagree with the current state, are upholding whiteness. Furthermore, even if the state of Gilead fails (which it ultimately does), the doctrines and practices of its time, will only serve to enable white privilege.

Because of the steep decline in the Anglo-Saxon race, ending or preventing a pregnancy is no longer an option in Gilead, for any reason, but the abolition of abortion and the control of birth are more about political gain, white privilege, and the control of women. Doctors who once performed abortions are hung outside the old college to set an example. "Each has a place card hung around his neck to show why he has been executed: a drawing of a human fetus" (43). Abortion is a theme that reoccurs in *The Handmaid's Tale*, but just as the dismissal of "unbabies" is more about perfecting the

race than repopulating it, I argue that this is also the case for the abolishment of abortions. In their 2004 article “Abortion, Race, and Gender in Nineteenth-Century America,” Nicole Beisel and Tamara Kay address the politics behind outlawing abortion in the mid-nineteenth century,

The arguments that physicians made to convince the public and politicians that abortion endangered society suggest that abortion politics in the mid-nineteenth century were part of an Anglo-Saxon racial project. While laws regulating abortion would ultimately affect all women, physicians argued that middle-class, Anglo- Saxon married women were those obtaining abortions, and that their use of abortion to curtail childbearing threatened the Anglo-Saxon race. (499)

This argument is in direct correlation with Susan Faludi’s argument and the laws and goals of Gilead. Abortion has always been a highly political issue, but prohibiting it and other types of birth control ultimately aims to control the independent choices of women, and that control is solely for the purpose of maintaining the white population. A circle of control is created. Women’s bodies and reproduction are controlled behind the mask of Christianity, which ultimately upholds the restrictive female expectations. As seen in the previous novels, as the roles of women are maintained and continue to be upheld, white privilege continues to reign in society. In order to maintain that power and privilege, women must continue to breed white babies and society must control their reproductive rights in order to ensure the circle of control.

The control of women’s bodies in Gilead is blatantly clear, but Atwood also demonstrates this loss of personhood and independence through the thoughts of Offred as



she showcases Offred's realization that she is part of a society that upholds whiteness and the continuation of the white race. Offred describes her relationship with her body in the time before Gilead. "I used to think of my body as an instrument, of pleasure, or a means of transportation, or an implement for the accomplishment of my will. I could use it to run, push buttons of one sort or another, make things happen. There were limits, but my body was nevertheless lithe, single, solid, one with me" (95). Offred reflects on the control she once had to do as she pleased with her body, to use it how she saw fit. She laments the loss of her individuality and the relationship she once had with her body when it was hers to control. Atwood continues Offred's reflection, "Now the flesh arranges itself differently. I'm a cloud, congealed around a central object, the shape for a pear, which is hard and more real than I am and glows red within its translucent wrapping" (95). In sharp contrast to Offred's earlier thoughts, she now sees herself as merely flesh protecting her womb. She points out her womb is "more real than I am." Offred is no longer a person of freewill and choice, but rather a protector of a womb that does not bring the joy of a planned or wanted child, but rather the sole purpose of her existence: create a perfect white child to maintain the privileged race. Atwood's depiction of Offred's life paired with Beisel's and Kay's and Faludi's arguments show that the limitations explored in Gilead are clearly aimed to maintain white dominance in society, and, by looking into Offred's internal thoughts, we begin to see that she starts to realize that her position is not just about being a woman, but it is about continuing a "perfect" race.

### *Relationships and Whiteness*

In the text, Atwood further explores the power of whiteness and its connection to traditional female roles and class through interpersonal relationship and collectivism. Much like Chopin and Morrison, Atwood uses relationships to show how whiteness impacts individualism and female roles and has the most influence over women's journey toward true independence and a unique self. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the roles of women are not hidden beneath subtext; they are overt. Atwood is able to use classic symbols of whiteness and female responsibility to achieve a successful commentary on the role relationships play in the struggle to escape the confines of whiteness. Furthermore, the ruling class of Gilead positions women against each other and justifies their actions through Christian doctrine in order to maintain order and ensure obedience.

The most significant relationships that exist in Gilead are the relationships between the handmaids which bring to light issues of secrecy, hypocrisy and white privilege. These relationships allow for small glimpses of personhood and identification with the pre-Gilead lives, and these relationships showcase the secret polarization of Gilead. This polarization is represented in the obvious choices Offred faces throughout the novel which present her with the decision to either join Gilead's cause or join those who resist it. In her article, "From Irony to Affiliation in Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*," Jennifer Wagner-Lawlor explores the irony of Offred's choices. She argues that Offred is hesitant to act on any level in the early stages of the novel since she does not know where she fits in; she avoids making choices. As Wagner-Lawlor so eloquently states, "This exemplifies the great risk, as well as the great possibility of the conscious

employment of irony: the risk of betrayal, the possibility of affiliation and of freedom” (85). Wagner-Lawlor points to a clear struggle within the text. The Handmaids can either choose to obey the restrictive roles and buy into the fallacies of Gilead’s Christian doctrine, or they can risk death by opposing the regime.

It is my contention that through these choices, Offred is unknowingly choosing to uphold the values and supremacy of whiteness if she obeys her role restrictions or go against the white, Christian doctrine of Gilead if she disobeys them. Atwood depicts the turning point in the text in which Offred is presented with a choice to either adhere to the communication standards of Gilead or go against them. It is at this point that Offred begins to see the influence of whiteness and class separation and Gilead and as she chooses to try and push the boundaries and strive for independence in an immensely restrictive culture.

She [Ofglen] holds my stare in the glass, level, unwavering. Now, it’s hard to look away. There’s a shock in this seeing; it’s like seeing someone naked for the first time. There is risk. Suddenly, in the air between us, where there was none before. Even this meeting of eyes holds danger. Though there’s nobody near. At last Ofglen speaks. “Do you think God listens,” she says, “to these machines?” ... I could scream. I could run away. I could turn from her silently, to show her I won’t tolerate this kind of blasphemy, heresy, all rolled into one. I steel myself. “No,” I say. She lets out a breath, in a long sigh of relief. We have crossed the invisible line together. (217)

This scene portrays Offred's first significant choice in relation to the other handmaids and a point in which Offred and Ofglen make a conscious choice to disobey the "approved" language of Gilead. Offred can choose to live within in the confines of her restricted gender role in Gilead and give in to the power of whiteness, or she can choose to disobey the restrictions placed upon her. She consciously weighs the choices. She could join the cause and expose Ofglen, which subsequently means supporting the privilege of the white, middle-class, or she could take a great risk and speak, which would give her a small glimpse of independence. I contend that that "possibility of affiliation or freedom" not only refers to the regime and the resistance in Gilead, but also the support or the rejection of white society's power. The tension and risk is clearly portrayed in the women's reactions to the conversation. As Offred "steals" herself, her actions are twofold. One, she must protect herself, make herself like steel and prepare for the possibility of punishment for stepping outside of the standards. Two, Atwood is also playing with the language since Offred also "steals" herself and "steals" her individuality to answer Ofglen with her own thoughts and words. Offred and the other handmaids face a no-win situation. If they oppose the new principles of society and continue to serve as handmaids, they perpetuate Gilead's mission to repopulate the Anglo-Saxon race. If they willingly continue with their duties, they silently resign themselves to the idea of white superiority.

Throughout the novel, the relationship between women and their bodies becomes a symbolic representation of women's roles and the exploitation of their commitment to the white race. I believe that additional irony of choice lies in the handmaids' use of their

bodies to provide some sense of power and control in a society in which women have little control. As the handmaids cling to practices that will benefit them if the country ever reverts back to the time before, they do not realize that they are holding on to practices that objectify women. Because society is often blind to the power of white privilege and the effects of it, as many of the handmaids band together to try and escape the confines of the handmaid's role, they do not recognize that the things they cling to are practices that support socially constructed gender roles. In the first chapter of the novel, Offred comments on the handmaid's desire to get the attention of the Angels. They realize that they still have power in their bodies and continue to think that they could possibly use their bodies to influence their captors.

The Angels stood outside it with their backs to us. They were objects of fear to us, but something else as well. If only they would look. If only we could talk to them. Something could be exchanged, we thought, some deal made, some trade off, we still had our bodies. That was our fantasy (4).

Because the handmaids have been entrenched in a society which grants power to women only in the capacity of their bodies and sexuality, the women see this as their chance to find some freedom. Herein lies a paradox specific to *The Handmaid's Tale*; the women look for ways to break away from their restrictive roles within Gilead, but they feel one way to do this is through the use of their bodies. These acts further objectify the women. The correlation between their thoughts and the political atmosphere of pre-Gilead and Gilead is found in the fundamentalist doctrines of the past. Shirley Neuman addresses

this idea in her essay “Just a Backlash’: Margaret Atwood, Feminism, and *The Handmaid’s Tale*.” She explains, “Right-wing wives such as best-selling Phyllis Schlafly made a handsome income telling other women to return home, to let their husbands provide, and to use their femininity and feminine wiles as the core of their success and fulfillment as women” (860). Neuman compares much of what Gilead was founded on to the ultra-conservative values expressed by Schlafly and media icons like Rush Limbaugh. These values are steeped in Christian morality and aim to keep women in the home to support the white male-dominated society. Collectively, the handmaids fall into these roles and because of the past political and social messages they received, they see no other way to achieve freedom or power than through the use of their “femininity” or “feminine wiles.”

These roles are much more than serving a commander for procreation, but rather the historically coy and aloof woman catering to her man. The irony in this situation is that women often use their bodies to manipulate men even to find a small piece of power, yet the handmaids’ sole purpose for sex is reproduction. Even as Offred is years into her duty as a handmaid, she still uses her body to manipulate men. She succumbs to her role, but recognizes the power her body still holds which ultimately upholds the restrictive female standards.

As we walk away, I know they are watching, these two men who are not yet permitted to touch women. They touch with their eyes instead, and I move my hips a little, feeling the full red skirt sway around me. It’s like thumbing your nose from behind a fence or teasing a dog with a bone held out of reach, and I’m

ashamed of myself for doing it because none of this is the fault of these men, they are too young. (30)

Offred acknowledges what she has done, and she knows it is cruel, but she has become rooted in this culture and without realizing it, she is using her “feminine wiles” to gain a small semblance of power. Even though Offred has a very restrictive role in Gilead, she is able to play within the boundaries of her position. Offred is not able to push as far as Sula and Edna are able to push, but she does have mere moments where she can challenge the strict boundaries of her role. The men she teases know what she is doing and allow her to challenge the limitations of her role just slightly. Offred realizes there is little if anything to gain from this act, but in order to gain a sense of self, she must find ways, even if they are minute, to resemble the person she once was. Left with no other outlet or power, Offred tries to regain personal strength any way she can.

Even though Offred tries to find ways to establish a unique identity, she cannot help but become entrenched in the “way of life” in Gilead. The birthing scene encapsulates all the themes of women’s relationships, reproduction, class, race, and power in Gilead. Although the handmaids like Offred have stepped outside the confines of Gilead in one way or another, they have all, in some way, started to participate in the collective nature of Gilead. As the handmaids are picked up in the birth mobile, they are excited and nervous. They share their Gilead-given names (i.e. Offred, Ofglen, etc.) and embrace with excitement. It is evident that a common interest brings them together, but the reasons for their excitement vary. They are excited at the possibility of one of them succeeding in producing a child because it gives them hope. They are also glad to

experience a day that is different from their typical mundane existence. Since becoming pregnant and producing a healthy child is so rare in Gilead, they speculate the result of the pending birth. “What will Ofwarren give birth to? A baby, as we all hope? Or something else, an Unbaby, with a pinhead or a snout like a dog’s or two bodies, or a hole in its heart or no arms, or webbed hands and feet?” (143). The women have become so deep-rooted in this society that they are thoughtlessly speculating about the baby as if it were an animal. The women have become calloused by the power of the collective and the ideas of Gilead. Birth is no longer a personal experience based on a personal choice; it is now a public display that is forced upon the handmaids if they are “lucky” enough to become pregnant.

This conversation is also another example of the value of whiteness in Gilead. Whiteness transcends white skin; it symbolizes the norm. A baby, no matter how important to the survival of society, if not perfect, is discarded. Not only does it represent the power of whiteness, but it shows how the dominant class in Gilead controls every aspect of life, starting from birth and makes sure the new “life” is in line with the white ideal. Offred remarks, “We didn’t know exactly what would happen to the babies that didn’t get passed, they were declared Unbabies. But we knew they were put somewhere, quickly away” (144). I contend that because the society seeks to prove their means are necessary in order to maintain humanity, if imperfect babies are born, they threaten the validity of Gilead’s message. In Gilead, it is not about repopulating the human race; it’s about repopulating a perfected, white, Christian race that follows the



traditional gender roles of society that have been upheld by the white race for hundreds of years.

The most explicit example of the handmaids' camaraderie coupled with the fulfillment of the assigned female role, is Janine's (Ofwarren's) "Birth Day." In this scene the women gather to witness the spectacle created when Janine gives birth. This sequence not only exudes images of whiteness, but it also shows how the women have begun to buy into the teachings and importance of Gilead's mission. As stated earlier, although some of the handmaids are secretly against the ideals and mission of Gilead, the power of its teachings are inescapable in the instance of birth. The handmaid's are gathered around Janine as she labors, while the Wives are acting out their own birthing ritual, pretending the Wife is laboring, too. The handmaids showcase collectivism and the power of Gilead's teachings as they band together and chant, "Breathe, breathe. Hold, hold. Expel, expel, expel" (158). Collectively these women are encouraging and supporting Janine, but as Offred explains, the handmaids' only taste of freedom happens when one of them has fulfilled their duty, lived up to the expectation of her assigned role: give birth to a white child. "On this day, we can do anything we want. I revise that: within limits" (143). In a sense, the women are rewarded with a small glimpse of freedom, but Offred has a clear moment of consciousness when she realizes that she is still controlled even though she is led to believe she has freedom.

The importance placed on whiteness is not only seen through the presence of a child, but also in the symbolism and imagery Atwood creates during the birthing scene. As Janine begins to give birth, Atwood describes a classic image of mothering and

whiteness. “In the dim light, in her white gown, she glows like a moon in a cloud” (162). Janine’s motherly “glow” reaches far beyond the classic reference to the pregnancy glow. Richard Dyer explains in his book, *White*, “Idealized white women are bathed in and permeated by light. It streams through them and falls on them from above. In short, they glow” (122). Atwood intelligently crafts this image of Janine, an image of purity and motherhood. Not only is Janine depicted as permeating light, but Atwood describes her as “a moon in a cloud,” a heavenly image. The images of whiteness and purity in this scene are apparent. Even as Janine prepares to give birth, she and her “wife” are draped in white cotton nightshirts. The color choices for garments in Atwood’s text are deliberate in order to stress the importance of whiteness, cleanliness, and purity in Gilead. As the only women in their social class that are allowed to have intercourse and carry children, they are the ones carrying on the white race. Atwood deliberately uses this imagery to show the desire for whiteness as well as the power whiteness holds. Janine is put on display; her fellow handmaids encourage her, and she is seen as a prized handmaid. As the women chant around Janine, Offred sees her in this light. The collectivist thinking, the handmaids banding together, along with the ideals of Gilead preached daily, begin to do what they are intended to do: create a way of thinking and seeing that supports white privilege and power.

The images of whiteness portrayed in the birthing scene are the culmination of white purity and power in Atwood’s dystopian society. These handmaids resign themselves to being walking incubators, and they celebrate the culmination of their struggles in the powerful birthing scene. Ultimately, the scene symbolizes everything

that Gilead represents as women are put on display and celebrated for embodying the traditional view of womanhood. In order for women to truly find self-worth in Gilead, they must fulfill their obligation to produce a child; in this corrupt society, there is no other way for them to experience a feeling of fulfillment.

After the birthing scene, Offred becomes introspective, and we see her questioning the reality of Gilead; what is really behind the power and control.

Maybe none of this is about control. Maybe it isn't really about who can own whom, who can do what to whom and get away with it, even as far as death.

Maybe it isn't about who can sit and who has to kneel or stand or be down, legs spread open. Maybe it's about who can do what to whom and be forgiven for it.

Never tell me it amounts to the same thing. (174)

Offred begins to question the purpose and goal of Gilead, which is key in her progressions toward the realization that whiteness ultimately controls Gilead. It is clear from this passage that she was aware that Gilead had more to do with control than anything else, but now she even begins to question that aspect. In this scene, Offred is moving beyond what Gilead means and she questions what she represents. When she thinks "Maybe it's about who can do what to whom and be forgiven for it", she begins to see that even her secret meetings with the Commander are all about what people can get away with and how far they can push their own boundaries and the boundaries of the women they control.

At the end of the novel, Serena Joy finds out that Offred has been using her cloak and assumes she has been sneaking out with the Commander, which Offred has

done. It is at that point that Offred realizes that she has been secretly allowed to play within the confines of her role as handmaid at the discretion of the commander. Once the commander's wife finds out what she has been doing, there is no hope for Offred's future in Gilead, nor is there hope for Offred to fully reach independence. Atwood describes the scene:

“Look,” she says. She brings her free hand from behind her back. It's her cloak she's holding, the winter one. “There was lipstick on it,” she says. “How could you be so vulgar? I *told* him...” She drops the cloak, she's holding something else, her hand all bone. She throws that down as well. The purple sequins fall, slithering down over the step like snake-skin, glittering in the sunlight. “Behind my back,” she says. “You could have left me something.”

Sereena knows that Offred has been seeing the Commander outside of the approved norm. Again, the Commander and others within Gilead knowingly test the rules they have put in place, and allow women, the handmaids especially to take part in certain “special” privileges. The men that do this think that they are giving the women a sense of freedom, but in reality, they are further objectifying these women, treating them as escorts, and asserting their class position and male dominance. In this case, the Commander allows Offred to “play” until it becomes too real and his wife uncovers their secret. Now, Offred is in jeopardy of being shipped off to the colonies or possibly losing her life.

Offred realizes that she cannot escape the confines of the dominant class and race in Gilead, and she contemplates escaping and contemplates suicide, a parallel between

her and Edna. It is at this point that Offred realizes that she is completely controlled. All the symbols and images of white privilege and power are now clear; just like Sula and Edna, Offred does not see a way to escape the grasp of whiteness. She contemplates her choices: “Instead I could noose the bedsheet round my neck, hook myself up in the closet, throw my weight forward, choke myself off” (374). In all three novels the central female characters turn to death in one way or another after realizing the power whiteness has in society.

For Offred, she is eventually “taken” by what Nick tells her is Mayday, the secret society that organizes and runs the Underground Femalerailroad. Just as slaves were rescued and moved along their own underground railroad, Offred is given no other choice but to leave with the men who claim to be her salvation. This action is significantly different from the endings of *Sula* and *The Awakening*, but whiteness still prevails in Gilead. Although leaving with Mayday seems to be the best possible scenario for Offred given her circumstances, she is not able to choose how she will leave or how she will handle the situation; she must leave at the hands of two white men. Ultimately, it is Nick, a white male, who is in control of her escape and in the Historical Notes, the professor, again speculates on Nick’s motivation.

He [Nick] could, of course, have assassinated her himself, which might have been the wiser choice, but the human heart remains a factor, and, as we know, both of them thought she might be pregnant by him. What male of the Gilead period could resist the possibility of fatherhood, so redolent of status, highly prized?” (394).

Even though the Historical Notes represent mere speculation by future scholars, they show how the “future” minimizes women’s struggles during the Gilead period. Furthermore, by questioning Nick’s motives, it is clear that he, and many other men, are rarely motivated by crushing the power of the white, Gilead regime, but rather that they were more interested in their own salvation and procreation. At the end of the novel, the message is not the salvation of Offred or the dissolution of Gilead, but rather the drive of white men in that period to continue their race and achieve a preferred social “status.”

Although a birth is the ultimate goal of Gilead, it is clear from Atwood’s text that there is more to the story than simply sustaining the human race. Atwood uses her novel to comment on women’s position in society and how class and race work together to create certain expectations. Offred represents the ultimate loss of independence. When compared to Sula and Edna, it is clear that the issues of race, class, and gender vary tremendously, but the biggest influence, whiteness, remains in control. Through the analysis of profound white and non-white imagery and political use of women’s reproductive rights, it is clear that Atwood develops many levels of commentary in her text. Gilead is nothing more than a society breeding the perfect white society; one that is wealthy, white, and, in their eyes, perfect.

## CONCLUSION

Through the analysis of these three texts, it is clear that issues of race and class create unique experiences for Sula, Edna, and Offred, and present different challenges for each as they embark upon their journeys toward independence. Ultimately, no matter the social context, the influence of whiteness and its privilege and control is inescapable. As Peggy McIntosh states, “As a white person, I realized I had been taught about racism as something which puts others at a disadvantage, but had been taught not to see one of its corollary aspects, white privilege, which puts me at an advantage” (76). As McIntosh states, white privilege does exist and is often unrecognized and unacknowledged even in discussions of race, and, as I argue, gender and class. The women of these three novels clearly represent the variety of challenges women experience at the hand of whiteness as a result of their class, race, and gender. In order to fully understand the complexity of the struggles these women endure, we must also recognize the effects of whiteness. For Sula, Edna, and Offred, their lives are filled with unrealistic expectations that are a direct result of the white, male-dominated society that exists around them.

## WORKS CITED

- Aanerud, Rebecca. "Whiteness in U.S. Literature." *Displacing Whiteness*. Ed. Ruth Frankenberg. Durham and London: Duke UP, 1997. 35-59. Print.
- Atwood, Margaret. *The Handmaid's Tale*. First Ballantine Books ed. New York: Ballantine Books, 1987. Print.
- Armstrong, Nancy. "Chapter 19: From Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel." *Theory of the Novel*. Ed. Michael McKeon. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 2000. 467-75. Print.
- Babb, Valerie Melissa. *Whiteness Visible: The Meaning of Whiteness in American Literature and Culture*. New York: New York UP, 1998. Print.
- Beisel, Nicola, and Tamara Kay. "Abortion, Race, and Gender in Nineteenth-Century America." *American Sociological Review* 69.4 (2004): 498-518. *JSTOR*. Web. 8 Mar. 2011.
- Birnbaum, Michelle. "'Alien Hands': Kate Chopin and the Colonization of Race." *American Literature* 66.2 (1994): 301-23. *JSTOR*. Web. 11 Oct. 2011.
- Butler, Judith. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Theatre Journal* 40.4 (December 1988): 519-31. *JSTOR*. Web. 9 Aug. 2011.
- Chopin, Kate. *The Awakening*. Barnes & Nobel Classics ed. New York: Barnes & Noble, 1995. Print.



- Coad, David. "Hymens, Lips and Masks: The Veil in Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale." *Literature & Psychology* 47 (2001): 57-67. *JSTOR*. Web. 13 Sept. 2011.
- Collins, Patricia Hill. "Some Group Matters: Intersectionality, Situated Standpoints, And Black Feminist Thoughts." *Feminist Frontiers*. 6th Ed ed. New York: McGraw Hill, 2004. 66-84. Print.
- Daniels, Margaret, and Heather Bowen. "Feminist Implications of Anti-leisure in Dystopian Fiction." *Journal of Leisure Research* 35.4 (2003): 423-40. *JSTOR*. Web. 1 Nov. 2011.
- Davis, Cynthia A. "Self, Society, and Myth in Toni Morrison's Fiction." *Contemporary Literature* 3rd ser. 23.Summer (1982): 323-42. *JSTOR*. Web. 11 Nov. 2011.
- Dyer, Richard. *White*. 1st ed. New York: Routledge, 1997. Print.
- Faludi, Susan. *Backlash: The Undeclared War against American Women*. 1st ed. New York: Doubleday, 1991. Print.
- Frankenberg, Ruth. *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1993. Print.
- Gillespie, Diane, and Missy Dehn Kubitschek. "Who Cares? Women-Centered Psychology in Sula." *Black American Literature Forum* 1st ser. 24.Spring (1990): 21-48. *JSTOR*. Web. 17 Feb. 2012.
- Griebel, Helen Bradley. "The African American Woman's Headwrap: Unwinding the Symbols." *Art, Design, and Visual Thinking*. Charlotte Jirousek, 1995. Web. 06 Apr. 2012. <<http://char.txa.cornell.edu/Griebel.htm>>.

- Hammer, Stephanie Barbé. "The World as It Will Be? Female Satire and the Technology of Power in "The Handmaid's Tale." *Modern Language Studies* 20.Spring (1990): 39-49. *JSOTR*. Web. 20 Sept. 2011.
- Hurtado, Aida. "Relating to Privilege: Seduction and Rejection in the Subordination of White Women and Women of Color." *Signs* Summer (1989): 833-55. *JSTOR*. Web. 8 Aug. 2011.
- Logan, Shirley W. *We Are Coming: the Persuasive Discourse of Nineteenth-century Black Women*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois UP, 1999. Print.
- McIntosh, Peggy. "White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming To See Correspondences through Work in Women's Studies." *Race, Class, and Gender: An Anthology*. Ed. Margaret Anderson and Patricia Hill Collins. Wadsworth, 1992. 70-81. Print.
- Morrison, Toni. *Sula*. New York: Plume, 1987. Print.
- Neuman, Shirley C. "'Just a Backlash': Margaret Atwood, Feminism, and The Handmaid's Tale." *University of Toronto Quarterly* 75.4 (2006): 857-68. *Project MUSE*. Web. 23 Sept. 2011.
- Nuttall, Sarah. "Subjectivities of Whiteness." *African Studies Review* 44.2 (2001): 115-40. *JSOTR*. Web. 20 Sept. 2011.
- Ramos, Peter. "Unbearable Realism: Freedom, Ethics and Identity in The Awakening." *College Literature* 37.4 (2010): 145-65. *JSTOR*. Web. 22 Sept. 2011.

Rule, Lauren A. "Not Fading into Another Landscape: Specters of American Empire in Margaret Atwood's Fiction." *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 54.4 (2008): 627-53.

*Project MUSE*. Web. 4 Nov. 2011

Schweitzer, Ivy. "Maternal Discourse and the Romance of Self-Possession in Kate

Chopin's *the Awakening*." *boundary 2*. 17.1 New Americanists: Revisionist

Interventions into the Canon (Spring, 1990): 158-186. *JSTOR*. Web. 2 Oct. 2011.

Stein, Karen F. "Toni Morrison's *Sula*: A Black Woman's Epic." *Black American*

*Literature Forum* 18.4 (1984): 146-50. *JSTOR*. Web. 14 July 2011.

Wagner-Lawlor, Jennifer A. "From Irony to Affiliation in Margaret Atwood's *The*

*Handmaid's Tale*." *Critique* 45.1 (2003): 83-96. *JSTOR*. Web. 11 Oct. 2011.