

# **Motherhood in Selected Works by African American Women Writers of Three Generations**

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## **ABSTRAKT**

Tato práce se zabývá tématem mateřství v dílech *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) Harriet Jacobsové, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) Zory Neale Hurstonové a *Barva nachu* Alice Walkerové a dále analyzuje jejich tři hlavní hrdinky Lindu Brentovou, Nanny Crawfordovou a Celie. Rovněž porovnává témata, která tyto postavy symbolizují, a hledá mezigenerační souvislosti mezi autorkami těchto románů.

Klíčová slova: afroamerická žena, Alice Walkerová, *Barva Nachu*, Celie, Harriet Jacobsová, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Linda Brentová, matka, mateřská láska, mateřství, Nanny Crawfordová, otroctví, rasismus, sen, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, womanismus, Zora Neale Hurstonová

## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis analyses the theme of motherhood in the novels *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) by Harriet Jacobs, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) by Zora Neale Hurston, and *The Color Purple* (1982) by Alice Walker, as well as individually deals with their three protagonists Linda Brent, Nanny Crawford and Celie. The thesis also compares and contrasts the most important common motifs and symbols of those characters and analyses the intergenerational connection between the authors.

Keywords: African American woman, Alice Walker, Celie, *The Color Purple*, dream, Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Linda Brent, maternal love, mother, motherhood, Nanny Crawford, racism, slavery, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, womanism, Zora Neale Hurston

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**DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY**

I hereby declare that the work presented in this thesis is my own and certify that any secondary material used has been acknowledged in the text and listed in the bibliography.

May 14, 2009

*M. J. J. J.*  
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## INTRODUCTION

In my bachelor thesis, I want to first introduce the concept of the African American mother, which is the main topic of my whole thesis. I want to show the importance of a seemingly insignificant “little” and still colossal black mother, who is always going to suffer more than a black man or a white woman, and incomparably more than a white man. Bringing up and explaining this theme, I would like to list the most important African American women writers who dealt in their work with the theme of motherhood.

Secondly, I will choose three most relevant authors, describe their cultural and literal background and pick from their work the most suitable protagonists to analyze. I am going to concentrate on the influence of their role models, the importance of incidents they face on their life journey or analyze the connection of the mothers with their sons, and especially daughters.

Last but not least, I intend to compare and contrast the common features of the analyzed characters and find similarities between the chosen novels. At the same time, I want to discover in what ways the protagonists differ from each other. Based on those findings and quotations of the authors, I would be able to state whether the African American women writers influence each other, or in other words, whether the literary mothers have an impact on their daughters.

# 1 AFRICAN AMERICAN MOTHER IN AMERICAN LITERATURE

## 1.1 The Mother

The African American mother can be seen from a numerous, often contradictory points of view: she is a woman, who could be analyzed on the basis of psychology or gender studies; she is a feminist, a civil rights fighter or an artist. Black mothers have a lot of faces and layers; however, what is to be emphasized is the mother inside each and every one of them.

In order to draw a clearer picture of an African American mother, one must take into account all the hardships and sufferings she, her mothers and grandmothers were forced to face. In her essay “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens,” (1974) Alice Walker describes how a black woman was seen ever since the times of slavery: “Black women are called, in the folklore that so aptly identifies one’s status in society, ‘the mule of the world,’ because we have been handed the burdens that everyone else—*everyone* else—refused to carry.”<sup>1</sup> Walker adds that they have also been called “Matriarchs,” “Superwomen,” “Mean and Evil Bitches,” “Castraters,” or “Sapphire’s Mama,” and states that “when [black women] have pleaded for understanding, [their] character has been destroyed.”<sup>2</sup> She shows the difficult position of African American mothers, and states that they are who they are also because of all the suffering they had to undertake. What I want to highlight, however, is the fact that African American women have to suffer twice. First of all, they have to face the masculine oppression given by nature and culture. As it happens so often in black families, black men suppress their wives, partners or daughters, even though they know how it feels to be colored. Secondly, they are met with racial prejudices and discrimination even by white women who know the deal of being a woman.

Nevertheless, Walker claims, using first person in plural, that they will not stand aside and that they will always fight for themselves: “To be an artist and a black woman, even today, lowers our status in many respects, rather than raises it: and yet, artists we will be.”<sup>3</sup> She does not only refer to literary mothers; though Walker saw an “artist” in every black mother or woman. All needed to express in an artistic way in order to preserve their own

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<sup>1</sup> See Alice Walker, “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens,” in *The Norton Anthology of African American literature*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay (New York: Norton, 2004), 2431.

<sup>2</sup> Walker, “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens,” 2431.

<sup>3</sup> Walker, “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens,” 2430.

selves. Some became writers, painters or sculptors, others created art by sewing, singing or gardening.<sup>4</sup>

## 1.2 African American Female Writers

According to Gates and McKay's *Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (2004), the African American tradition goes back to the African roots with the celebration of the tribal ceremonies and the cult of matriarchal representation. The woman was seen as a symbol of fertility, which gave her the power over man.<sup>5</sup> Of course, some of the tribal traditions were based on the patriarchal power, nevertheless for our purposes, I will concentrate on the figure of woman.

Concerning the Vernacular Tradition, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. explains that in African American culture, "the vernacular refers to the church songs, blues, ballads, sermons and stories that are part of the oral, not primarily the literate tradition of black expression."<sup>6</sup> There are a lot of examples of the occurrence of the theme of motherhood within the Vernacular Tradition. The oldest works see mothers as the life givers and celebrate fertility.<sup>7</sup>

Women writers from the period of the Literature of Slavery and Freedom (1746–1865) introduce a self-confident woman trying to escape from slavery and her dream of freedom. In addition to Harriet Jacobs, Gates sees as the most acknowledged women writers of this period Phillis Wheatley, Lucy Terry, Maria W. Steward or Harriet Wilson.<sup>8</sup>

The most important protagonists of the Literature of the Reconstruction to the New Negro Renaissance (1865–1919) are, according to Gates, Charlotte Forten Grimke, Anna Julia Cooper, Pauline E. Hopkins and Alice Moore Dunbar Nelson.<sup>9</sup> Those writes introduce a more independent woman, who not only fights for freedom, but also wants to have a career and who starts to put her needs and dreams in the first place.

Harlem Renaissance (1919–1940) brings a return to the traditional concept of mothers. The womanhood is connected to the African American culture and the bond towards the

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<sup>4</sup> See Walker, "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," 2435.

<sup>5</sup> Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay, *The Norton Anthology of African American literature* (New York: Norton, 2004), 3.

<sup>6</sup> Gates and McKay, *The Norton Anthology*, 3.

<sup>7</sup> See Gates and McKay, *The Norton Anthology*, 3.

<sup>8</sup> See Gates and McKay, *The Norton Anthology*, 151.

<sup>9</sup> See Gates and McKay, *The Norton Anthology*, 541.

ancestors becomes stronger. This period is, according to Gates, fore mostly represented by Angelina Weld Grimke, Anne Spencer, Georgia Douglas Johnson, Zora Neale Hurston, Nella Larsen, or Helen Johnson.<sup>10</sup>

The era of American Realism, Naturalism and Modernism (1940–1960) brings a lot of new concepts of dealing with motherhood and the representation of women. The most influential women writers of this period are Dorothy West, Ann Petry, Margret Walker and Lorraine Hansberry.<sup>11</sup>

Mari Evans, Sonia Sanchez, Lucille Clifton, Jayne Cortez, Maulana Karenga, and Carolyn M. Rodgers represent the female part of The Black Arts Era (1960–1975), which was most importantly the period of black civil rights movements.<sup>12</sup>

Richard Ruland and Malcolm Bradbury believe that the leaders of American literary scene after 1975 are Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison and Alice Walker.<sup>13</sup> Gates lists as other important figures of this period Adrienne Kennedy, Clarence Major, Sherley Anne Williams Octavia Butler, Gloria Naylor, Rita Dove or Harryette Mullen.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> See Gates and McKay, *The Norton Anthology*, 953.

<sup>11</sup> See Gates and McKay, *The Norton Anthology*, 1355.

<sup>12</sup> See Gates and McKay, *The Norton Anthology*, 1831.

<sup>13</sup> Richard Ruland and Malcolm Bradbury. *From Puritanism to Postmodernism: A History of American Literature*. (New York: Viking, 1991), 381.

<sup>14</sup> See Gates and McKay, *The Norton Anthology*, 2127.

## 2 HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE ANALISED WORKS

In order to choose the most appropriate protagonists created by women writers of three periods of African American history, I took into account the authors' importance within their period of time. At the second stage of my research, I concentrated on their protagonists' perspective of life, representation of freedom, and most importantly I was looking for three heroic mothers.

The reason for my choosing Harriet Jacobs, Zora Neale Hurston and Alice Walker is that they proudly represent their period and are of great importance to the African American heritage in general. According to me, Linda Brent, Nanny Crawford and Celie are the ones, who represent the black mother most accurately.

All three of them are so different from each other. Each of them is a unique character with her own way of dealing with life incidents and perceiving the world. Even though all three of them went through different events at different times and had to face their own hardships under various circumstances, they are connected by the fact that they are mothers.

### 2.1 Harriet Jacobs

Harriet Jacobs (1813–1897) was a reformer, Civil Right and Reconstruction relief worker, and antislavery activist. She was born as a slave in North Carolina and managed to run away to the North where she started to write about her life experience. Ean Fagan Yellin acknowledges her contribution to literature and claims that “like other abolitionists, Jacobs eagerly involved herself in the effort to transform the developing Civil War into a war of emancipation.”<sup>15</sup>

Jacobs was, as Gates reveals, the first black woman who published a slave narrative in the United States. He explains that before Jacobs published her *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), Jarena Lee or Zilpha Elaw had already written about their life experience in their autobiographies. However, unlike the two afore mentioned authors, Jacobs's successful struggle for freedom and the independence of her two children is a great example of a mother's undefeatable spirit, which is why he regards Jacobs's *Incidents*

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<sup>15</sup> Jean Fagan Yellin, “Harriette Ann Jacobs 1813–1897,” in vol. B of *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*, ed. Paul Lauter (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), 2030.

along with Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life Of Frederick Douglass* as the most valuable heritage of the African American literature of slavery.<sup>16</sup>

Gates sees Jacobs's *Incidents* as an "unprecedented mixture of confession, self-justification, and societal exposé" by which she turned her work into a "unique analysis of the myths and the realities that defined the situation of the African American woman." As a result of this, he asserts that Jacobs earned a proud position in the history of African American, as well as American women's literature.<sup>17</sup>

Yellin credits the uniqueness of Jacobs's *Incidents* to two facts. The first one is that her story is a "first-person tale of a heroic mother who rescues her children from slavery" and the other one is, according to him, a "first-person confession of a 'fallen woman.'" It presents, as Yellin states, a brave protagonist and her devotion to family relationships, her quest for freedom and independence, which represents the quest of the entire black community, as well.<sup>18</sup>

## 2.2 Zora Neale Hurston

Zora Neale Hurston was born in Eatonville, Florida in 1891, attended Howard University and in 1928 graduated from Bernard College in anthropology. She was an African American novelist, folklorist, and anthropologist, who is seen by Robert E. Hemenway as a unique creator of "fictional and factual accounts of black heritage."<sup>19</sup> Hurston moved to New York in the twenties and with Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, and others founded "The Harlem Renaissance."

Hurston died in poverty in 1960 and now, as Hemenway believes, "holds a posthumous reputation which she might not have imagined."<sup>20</sup> He also thinks that the significance of Hurston's impact lies in her folk wisdom and in the fact that Hurston's work "celebrates black culture, and leads us to an appreciation of the courage and humor, art and intellect, life and society."<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> See Gates and McKay, *The Norton Anthology*, 279.

<sup>17</sup> See Gates and McKay, *The Norton Anthology*, 279.

<sup>18</sup> Yellin, "Harriette Ann Jacobs 1813–1897," 2030.

<sup>19</sup> Robert E. Hemenway, "Zora Neale Hurston 1891-1960," in vol. D of *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*, ed. Paul Lauter (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), 1577.

<sup>20</sup> Hemenway, "Zora Neale Hurston 1891-1960," 1577.

<sup>21</sup> Hemenway, "Zora Neale Hurston 1891-1960," 1577.

Hemenway considers as Hurston's most appreciated and best-known work her novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, which was published in 1937 and has sold over 200,000 copies since its first publication. He describes the novel as a "chronicle of Janie Crawford, a black woman who marries three times before she finds a man who is as concerned about her happiness as about his own" and as celebration of "one individual's triumph over the limitations imposed on her mainly by sexism and poverty." Furthermore, he argues that the triumph of the main character, Janie Crawford lays in a "mature understanding of life and of the acknowledgement of forces superior even to romantic love, which can blind women to the necessity of seeking emotional and intellectual independence as individuals in a complex world."<sup>22</sup>

### 2.3 Alice Walker

Alice Walker was born in 1944 and grew up in the small town of Eatonton, Georgia. She is by Gates considered as the best known African American writer of the second half of the twentieth century, especially because as the first African American woman ever, Walker was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for her novel *The Color Purple* (1982). The list of her other literary achievements includes five other novels, five volumes of poetry, four essay collections, two children's books, and three short story collections. Gates sees *The Color Purple* as a "point of demarcation in Walker's oeuvre in that it is both the completion of the cycle of novels she announced in the early 1970s and the beginning of new emphases for her as a writer."<sup>23</sup>

Walker created the term "womanism," by which she shows her commitment to exploring her literary mothers' lives and work. Richard Gray explains that she derived the term from an African American expression "womanish" and Walker preferred it to feminism because it "honors a long-standing tradition of strength among black women."<sup>24</sup> She defines the term in her essay "In Search of our Mothers' Gardens" as a form of black feminism that "appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's flexibility and women's strength."<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Gates and McKay, *The Norton Anthology*, 1020.

<sup>23</sup> Gates and McKay, *The Norton Anthology*, 2425.

<sup>24</sup> Gates and McKay, *The Norton Anthology*, 2426.

<sup>25</sup> Richard Gray, *A History of American Literature* (Malden: Blackwell, 2004), 695.



As Gray pointed out, Alice Walker looks for inspiration in African American history and culture. One of the writers who influenced Walker the most was, according to Marilyn Richarson, a novelist, folklorist and anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston. Walker admires her work, as she confesses in “Mothers’ Gardens.”<sup>26</sup>

Gates claims that only few works in the history of African American literature have created as much controversy as Walker’s *The Color Purple*. According to him, the admirers of the novel highlight its honesty, originality and its usage of vernacular English. He also shows that in spite of all the awards the novel received, such as the already mentioned Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Award and the American Book Award, its opponents “censored the novel for its representation of incest and domestic abuse in African American families as well as the depiction of lesbianism.”<sup>27</sup> However, in spite of all the criticism, the book has got numerous admirers and Celie’s life story continues to be read world wide.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Marilyn Richarson, “Alice Walker b. 1944,” in vol. E of *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*, ed. Paul Lauter (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), č 2822

<sup>27</sup> Gates and McKay, *The Norton Anthology*, 2425.

<sup>28</sup> See Gates and McKay, *The Norton Anthology*, 2425.

### 3 THREE MOTHERS

#### 3.1 Linda Brent

Linda Brent is the main character of Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. She is a female slave, whose horrifying life incidents are now a base of the African American heritage. This character has, according to Gates, become an icon because she "represents the struggle for freedom, the preservation of family and the plight of black African American women."<sup>29</sup>

##### 3.1.1 Linda Brent's Role Models

In order to be able to see Linda Brent as a complete character and especially understand where her sense of motherhood and the commitment to family ties stem from, it is necessary to concentrate on the influential figures in her life.

Even though Linda was born into a slave family and was therefore seen as the property of her parents' master since her birth, her early childhood was not actually influenced by this fact to larger extends. On the contrary, as Jacobs states at the beginning of her story, she "was born as a slave," but she "never knew it till six years of happy childhood had passed away".<sup>30</sup> It can be clearly seen that her parents lived in relatively better conditions compared to other African American slaves. They were able to provide Linda with loving care and a sufficient amount of means to ensure that she would not only enjoy her early childhood as much as she could but enable her to develop a valuable sense of herself. The fact that her parents did not tell her that she had been a slave and wanted her to consume as much of an infant's joy of life as she could, gives her, next to the possibility for her to create a strong self-worth and self awareness, the strength to over come the upcoming obstacles.

The author of the introduction to *Incidents* Myrlie Evers-Williams highlights the importance of the strong family bonds that Linda shared with her relatives. She states that "her family unit was intact up until the time of her mother's death."<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, she adds that "hers was no life burdened by the division of the father from the mother, mother

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<sup>29</sup> Gates and McKay, *The Norton Anthology*, 279.

<sup>30</sup> Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (New York: Signet Classic, 2000), 1.

<sup>31</sup> Myrlie Evers-Williams, introduction to *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, by Harriet Jacobs (New York: Signet Classic, 2000), vi.

from child, as was so commonly practiced during that time.’<sup>32</sup> Evers-Williams shows that the importance of Brent’s relatively happy childhood is one of the most important reasons for developing such a strong mother’s love. As the author of the introduction revealed, until the death of her mother, Linda had unlike an overwhelming majority of other American slaves a complete family. Not only could she even under the difficult conditions of slavery enjoy the attention of both her parents, she was also sharing a household with her brother and a nearby living grandmother.

When Jacobs describes her family, she shows that her parents “lived together in a comfortable home” and that she “was so fondly shielded.”<sup>33</sup> She reflects an overall satisfaction with their situation through child’s naive eyes. However, when she looks back, Jacobs realizes that she “never dreamed that [she] was a piece of merchandise, trusted to them [her masters] for safe keeping, and liable to be demanded of them at any moment.”<sup>34</sup> We see that even though she had lost her naivety at a really early age, it was of vital importance to Brent that she grew up in a secure and loving environment.

After her mother’s death, and the realization of her real situation, it was Linda’s father who wanted to fulfill the dream of buying his children out of slavery—a strong wish that had been rooted into Linda since she was a girl. Nevertheless, he never managed to do so, since he died one year after his wife’s death. On one hand, the father basically disappeared from the children’s lives after the mother’s death; however, he was still trying his hardest to free his children, even though they had been separated because of the claim of their owners. As Evers-Williams states, “he did attempt to exercise parental guardianship on whatever occasion and to the best extend possible,”<sup>35</sup> which can be seen in Chapter 1, “His strongest wish was to purchase his children; but, though he several times offered his hard earnings for that purpose, he never succeeded.”<sup>36</sup> In spite of all his effort, and the fact that he even collected the necessary money, Linda’s father given his social standings as a slave never managed to fulfill his dream.

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<sup>32</sup> Evers-Williams, introduction to *Incidents*, vi.

<sup>33</sup> See Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 1.

<sup>34</sup> Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 1.

<sup>35</sup> Evers-Williams, introduction to *Incidents*, vii.

<sup>36</sup> Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 1.

When Linda Brent reaches the age of six, she is sent to her deceased mother's mistress, who had promised that "her [mother's] children will never suffer for anything."<sup>37</sup> She indeed treats Linda as her own, teaches her how to read or spell and becomes actually her substitute mother. Linda saw her kindness and was enjoying her good treatment, as we can see in Chapter 1,

When she thought I was tired, she would send me out to run and jump; and away I bounded, to gather berries or flowers to decorate her room. Those were happy days—too happy to last.<sup>38</sup>

Linda could see a mother in her and loved her because of her attention: "I loved her; for she had been almost like a mother to me."<sup>39</sup> The mistress showed Linda how important attention, good caring and maternal love are and was an important influential model during Linda's growing up.

However, in my opinion Linda's most important and influential relative was her grandmother, Aunt Martha, as she was commonly called. She was both a perfect role model devoted to her family, as well as something that Linda did not want to become. Linda describes how her grandmother was let free with the rest of her family by her father, and how she was consequently captured and enslaved again. In order to free her children she was working at nights saving money "for a fund to purchase her children."<sup>40</sup> We can see that the urgent drive to free one's children goes all the way back to Linda's great-grandfather, who wanted the same for them as his children for theirs. On one hand the need for freedom is a natural instinct and we want it especially for those who we love. However, on the other hand, it must be noted how much had the fact that she saw the devotion of her relatives to the family influenced Linda.

Gray states that even after Aunt Martha's children were divided among her master's ancestors, "[Martha] still hoped to purchase the freedom of her children; she ran a bakery in her home and had lied up three hundred dollars from the proceeds of her work to that purpose."<sup>41</sup> Nevertheless, she did not manage to buy the members of her family out of slavery, for her mistress borrowed this money and never returned them back. The grandmother is the embodiment of maternal love and stands as an example for Linda. She

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<sup>37</sup> See Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 4.

<sup>38</sup> Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 4.

<sup>39</sup> Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 4.

<sup>40</sup> See Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 1-2.

sees how hard she works and how devoted she is to guarantee freedom to her children, even when she would put her own freedom on stake.

As I have already mentioned, Aunt Martha also represented a negative side of the maternal love. After her son had fled to freedom she mourns his escape, even though he was being violently abused. She would rather see him back in slavery, which would mean closer to her, rather than being free and far away. Another example of her selfishness in love can be seen in the repeating scenes where she persuades Linda not to run and rather stay in her attic room, which was actually her prison. In Chapter 29, Aunt Martha urges her granddaughter not to run away to the North, ““Oh, don’t think of it child. You’ll break my heart.””<sup>42</sup> We should not forget that the grandmother was driven by love and deep affection, but she was not able to be torn apart from her loved ones. She wanted freedom for her children, but at the same time could not stand the separation.

### 3.1.2 Linda Becoming a Mother

If we want to understand what kind of mother Linda was and where the drives to bring her children out from slavery into freedom stem from, we must also concentrate on the events that precede her becoming a mother.

Evers-Williams describes the situation when Linda moves to a new master Dr. Flint who “sees her as his possession and soon starts to make claims over her.” She also says that “It was when she was an adolescent at the age of fifteen when Dr. Flint began his obsessive pursuit of [Linda] as his concubine, making certain to instill in her that she was made for his use, made to obey his command in every thing.”<sup>43</sup> Dr. Flint could have raped her at any time, for she was his possession. Nevertheless, it is more important for him to force her into submission than only to have sex with her. Even though he could have just used the powers as her master and take her, he was enjoying the act of pursuit and breaking her. He repeatedly tries to force her to go to a cottage in the woods where he could sleep with her, however, Linda persist on her resistance.

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<sup>41</sup> Gray, *A History of American Literature*, 149.

<sup>42</sup> Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 168.

<sup>43</sup> See Evers-Williams, introduction to *Incidents*, ix.

At last, he came to me and told me the cottage was completed, and ordered me to go to it. He said, "I have heard enough of such talk as that. You shall go, if you are carried by force; and you shall remain there".<sup>44</sup>

"Oh, what days and nights of fear and sorrow that man caused me,"<sup>45</sup> Jacobs confesses. Linda was forced to make a choice. She could either submit herself to the persisting master and lose her already little self-respect as a female slave or take the matters into her hands and turn to desperate measures. She chooses the latter over being broken by her master.

Linda therefore finds a lover, a white single lawyer called Mr. Sands. "Though she knew that she risked losing her reader's respect by speaking out," Gates states, "Jacobs refuses to suppress the truth about her sexual exploitation in slavery or her use of her own sexuality as a weapon against such exploitation."<sup>46</sup> Moreover, the character risks resentment of the people in her surroundings, especially her grandmother, who would see her as a villain and as a woman of low morals; her grandmother, who should sympathize with her more than anyone else.

I knew that I was the greatest comfort of her old age, and that I was a source of pride to her that I had not degraded myself, like most of the slaves. I wanted to confess to her that I was no longer worthy of her love; but I could not utter the dreaded words.<sup>47</sup>

We see that Linda felt humiliated for her action, but still we must understand that it was her only option to protect herself from her master.

Even though Linda gives herself to another man, she does it freely and prefers this to being taken by force.

There is something akin to freedom in having a lover who has no control over you, except that which he gains by kindness and attachment. A master may treat you as rudely as he pleases, and you dare not to speak; moreover, the wrong does not seem so great with an unmarried man, as with one who has a wife to be unhappy.<sup>48</sup>

In this passage, Linda explains several motives for her action. She states that she enjoyed a feeling of freedom when she could decide to give herself to Mr. Sands in whom she even saw a friend. At the same time she tries to justify herself, to show that she was forced into this desperate action, and she also sees a bright point in the fact that she chose a single man

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<sup>44</sup> Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 61.

<sup>45</sup> Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 83.

<sup>46</sup> See Gates and McKay, *The Norton Anthology*, 279.

<sup>47</sup> Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 60.

<sup>48</sup> Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 59.

who had no wife to hurt. We must understand that this justification was Linda's only way how to preserve her own self-respect, for it helped Linda to see herself better in her own eyes. Another motive of Linda's was not only to stop Dr. Flint, but to create in him resentment towards her, which might, according to her, result in selling Linda:

I knew nothing would enrage Dr. Flint so much as to know that I favored another, and it was something to triumph over my tyrant even in that small way. I thought he would revenge himself by selling me, and I was sure my friend, Mr. Sands would buy me.<sup>49</sup>

Linda was convinced that Dr. Flint would feel disgusted with her and sell her, especially if she became pregnant.

When Linda tells Dr. Flint, "In a few months I shall be a mother,"<sup>50</sup> in the cottage in the woods, "He stood and looked at [her] in dumb amazement, and he left the house without a word."<sup>51</sup> She succeeded in her mission to save herself from her master; she managed to stand for herself and made him stop his pursuit of her for the time being. Nevertheless, even though she thought she would "be happy in her triumph over him"<sup>52</sup> she was not. On the contrary, she came to a realization that she will become an outcast even to her relatives, as if her self-respect could be any lower concerning the fact that she was a slave, a piece of merchandise belonging completely to a white man.

But now that the truth was out, and my relatives would hear of it, I felt wretched. Humble as were their circumstances, they had pride in my good character. Now, how could I look at them in the face? My self-respect was gone!<sup>53</sup>

Linda Brent reveals. We can see her difficult position; even though she manages to get rid of the man who was pursuing her, she does not find consolation. On the contrary, she feels wretched; she realizes that her actions were humiliating even to her own self.

Linda is not even able to confess to her grandmother. She fears that she would feel disgusted and resentful. "I went to my grandmother. My lips moved to make confession, but the words stuck in my throat. I sat down in the shade of a tree at her door and began to sew."<sup>54</sup> Aunt Martha therefore thinks that Linda has been involved with Dr. Flint and loathes her. She even throws her out of her house in disgust.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 59.

<sup>50</sup> Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 61.

<sup>51</sup> Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 61.

<sup>52</sup> See Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 61.

<sup>53</sup> Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 61.

<sup>54</sup> Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 61.

<sup>55</sup> See Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 61.

“O Linda! Has it come to this? I had rather see you dead than to see you as you now are. You are a disgrace to your dead mother.” She tore from my fingers my mother's wedding ring and her silver thimble. “Go away!” she exclaimed, “and never come to my house, again.”<sup>56</sup>

After the grandmother had found out the real truth about Linda's suffering and the constant persistence of Dr. Flint lasting over years, she is finally able to understand her granddaughter, nevertheless, aunt Martha is not capable of forgiving Linda,

She listened in silence. I told her I would bear any thing and do any thing, if in time I had hopes of obtaining her forgiveness. I begged of her to pity me, for my dead mother's sake. And she did pity me. She did not say, “I forgive you;” but she looked at me lovingly, with her eyes full of tears. She laid her old hand gently on my head, and murmured, “Poor child! Poor child!”<sup>57</sup>

### 3.1.3 Linda's New Ties to Life

In the chapter called The New Tie to Life, Linda gives birth to her first baby, in whom she soon finds a new bond to life. As she describes in this chapter, she often thought of death as a way out of her suffering, but she found a new meaning of life, as she writes in this passage,

When my babe was born, they said it was premature. It weighed only four pounds; but God let it live. I heard the doctor say I could not survive till morning. I had often prayed for death; but now I did not want to die, unless my child could die too.<sup>58</sup>

Some could see this confession negatively, however Linda wanted the best for her baby and admitting that death would be better for him was an example of the strength of her maternal love. “I could never forget that he was a slave. Sometimes I wished that he might die in infancy.”<sup>59</sup> She continues to think about death and argues whether slavery or death is worse.

I had prayed for his death, but never so earnestly as I now prayed for his life; and my prayer was heard. Alas, what mockery it is for a slave mother to try to pray back her dying child to life! Death is better than slavery.<sup>60</sup>

She sees an outcome in death, but at the same time, she was praying for her sick son the live.

Linda soon starts to see a new meaning of life in her son. She loves him unconditionally and sees in him a way out of her suffering, “When I was most sorely

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<sup>56</sup> Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 61.

<sup>57</sup> Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 63.

<sup>58</sup> Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 63.

<sup>59</sup> Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 66.



oppressed I found a solace in his smiles.”<sup>61</sup> She was in a difficult position. Her master saw in the baby the man who stole Linda from him and the biological father could not take the baby because it was in possession of another man. However, her son becomes everything to Linda, the reason to live, the reason to continue.

When Linda gives birth to her second baby, she returns to speculations about life and death again. The fact that her newborn was a girl makes her think about her difficult situation, because not only was she a slave, her situation was far more difficult because of the fact that she was female. “When they told me my new-born babe was a girl, my heart was heavier than it had ever been before. Slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women.”<sup>62</sup> Up until now we could have seen the fight of Linda for freedom, however, since she had become a mother, all she longs for is to get her children out of slavery.

#### 3.1.4 Linda as a Mother

Linda always dreamt about freedom, however, her dream has changed and the only thing she now wants is to set her children free. She dreams of having a family, which would not be under the conditions of slavery.

Linda was sent to work at Dr. Flint’s relative’s plantation in order not to be close to him and his wife. Her children lived at first with the grandmother in relative comfort but Linda later learned that Dr. Flint was planning to send them to work at the plantation. She therefore decides to run away because she believes that Dr. Flint would sell the children afterwards. Although Linda’s children were fathered by a white man, the children of slaves inherit the fate of the mother. Therefore, as Evers-Williams explains, “this man—an equal to Dr. Flint—could not restore honor to his progeny; neither could he purchase another man’s ‘property’ if it were not for sale.”<sup>63</sup> Therefore, Mr. Sands could not buy Linda’s children, and be a father to them, unless Flint would decide to sell them first.

After her successful escape, she could see that Dr. Flint actually sold her children to Mr. Sands, who permitted them to stay with her grandmother. Even though being a fugitive

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<sup>60</sup> Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 66.

<sup>61</sup> Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 68.

<sup>62</sup> Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 85.

<sup>63</sup> Evers-Williams, introduction to *Incidents*, x.

slave, Linda managed to get one step closer to fulfilling her dream—her children were no longer in the hands of her violent master and she was on her way to freedom.

### 3.1.5 Linda's Loophole of Retreat

Now, when Linda was on a flight, she had two options. She could have followed her independent nature and fulfill her dream about freedom by escaping to the North where she could lead a better life, however she chose to follow her new dream of being close to her children, for whom she wanted nothing but the same as for her—freedom.

Linda therefore hides in her grandmother's attic garret, which becomes her new kind of prison. It was so tiny that she could not even sit inside, as she describes in chapter 21,

The highest part was three feet high, and sloped down abruptly to the loose board floor. There was no admission for either light or air,' and she continues to describe the attic room as following, "The air was stifling; the darkness total."<sup>64</sup>

Linda shows us the unbearable conditions she had to cope with every day, however, she continues with the reason why she preferred hiding in this small room.

But I was not comfortless. I heard the voices of my children. There was joy and there was sadness in the sound. It made my tears flow. How I longed to speak to them! I was eager to look on their faces; but there was no hole, no crack, through which I could peep.<sup>65</sup>

The reason to do so was only to stay with her children. She saw joy in hearing their voices, and all she was longing for was to tell them that she was nearby, as can be seen in the next passage,

"At last I heard the merry laugh of children, and presently two sweet little faces were looking up at me, as though they knew I was there, and were conscious of the joy they imparted. How I longed to tell them I was there!"<sup>66</sup>

Linda could not talk to her children, because she could be revealed. Nevertheless, she made a small hole through which she could see the faces of her children. For the sake of her children, Linda is willing to undertake great suffering; the fact that she imposes herself into imprisonment only to save her children and to be close to them shows us how much she cared and how much she loved them. She suffers physically, as well as psychologically. We see how much the deal of slavery and the claim of Dr. Flint influences her life,

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<sup>64</sup> Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 128.

<sup>65</sup> Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 128.

<sup>66</sup> Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 130.

however, choosing hiding in the attic garret is her own choice, and it symbolizes her freedom.

Gray sees here Linda's heroic battle over the institution of slavery, over the manhood and cruelty represented by Dr. Flint's pursuit, but especially her fighting for her freedom and for freedom of her two children.<sup>67</sup>

### 3.1.6 Linda's Flight to Freedom

Linda was forced to spend seven horrible years in the attic room, seven years during which she suffered greatly on her health, seven years during which she was watching her children growing up without being even able to talk to them. "Season after season, year after year, I peeped at my children's faces, and heard their sweet voices, with a heart yearning all the while to say, 'Your mother is here.'"<sup>68</sup>

Nevertheless, after Mr. Sands took Linda's daughter Ellen with him to Washington, she realizes that Mr. Sands, who is now the owner of her children, might never free them. She therefore decides to flee to the North. She starts her active fight for her and her children's freedom here. She flees to the North on a boat and reunites with Ellen, who works for Mr. Sands's cousin. Since Linda had hidden in the attic garret, she had only one opportunity to meet her children in person. This reunion means therefore a great achievement and is particularly emotional, as she describes in the chapter called The Meeting of Mother and Daughter, "I turned, and there stood my Ellen! I pressed her to my heart, then held her away from me to take a look at her."<sup>69</sup>

Being still pursued by Dr. Flint Linda flees to Boston where she reunites with her son Benny, who had been left at the grandmother's care but later left with his uncle to the North, as well. Now, when the family is together again, Linda thinks about how she could start a real life with her children and how to provide them with sufficient means. "It made me sad to think that I could not give her a home till I went to work and earned the means; and that might take me a long time."<sup>70</sup> Linda was now living in Boston with those she loved and for whom she fought, they even went for a trip to Britain where Brent saw that people could see her also without racial prejudices. Nevertheless, they were still under a

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<sup>67</sup> See Gray, *A History of American Literature*, 151.

<sup>68</sup> Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 167.

<sup>69</sup> Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 187.

<sup>70</sup> Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 188.

constant threat. Even after Dr. Flint's death, Linda had to face constant obstacles, such as being followed by Dr. Flint's daughter Emily, who makes a claim over Linda's children, or the Fugitive Slave Act passed by the Congress, which made Linda even more vulnerable in her situation.

Eventually, Linda is offered by her former New York employee's daughter that she would buy her out of slavery and give her freedom. "In a few days one came from Mrs. Bruce, informing me that my new master was still searching for me, and that she intended to put an end to this persecution by buying my freedom."<sup>71</sup> Linda refuses, because she does not want to be a piece of property that could be sold from one owner to another. She feels that she would lose her self-respect if someone paid money for her freedom. "The more my mind had become enlightened, the more difficult it was for me to consider myself an article of property."<sup>72</sup> However, at the end, Mrs. Bruce does so and sets Linda and both her children free. She ends her story with those lines,

Reader, my story ends with freedom; not in the usual way, with marriage. I and my children are now free! We are as free from the power of slaveholders as are the white people of the north; and though that, according to my ideas, is not saying a great deal, it is a vast improvement in my condition. The dream of my life is not yet realized. I do not sit with my children in a home of my own, I still long for a hearthstone of my own, however humble. I wish it for my children's sake far more than for my own.<sup>73</sup>

Linda is free at last. She is unconditionally grateful to Mrs. Bruce and all those that helped her to get through all the obstacles. Nevertheless, she realizes that the dream of making a real home for her children has still not been fulfilled.

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<sup>71</sup> Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 225.

<sup>72</sup> Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 225.

<sup>73</sup> Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 227.

### 3.2 Nanny Crawford

Nanny Crawford is a character of one of Zora Neale Hurston's most appreciated novels *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. She is the grandmother of the main character Janie, whom she raises after her mother ran away. Janie never met her real mother or her father. Therefore, Nanny is much more than only her grandmother. She cares about her granddaughter with a real maternal love and is determined to provide her with a way to a have a successful life.

Gray describes Nanny as an ex-slave who suffered most of the abuses that can happen to a black woman in slavery.<sup>74</sup> She therefore wants for her granddaughter everything that she could never have, including a secure life, an outstanding social position and welfare.

Ah was born back due in slavery so it wasn't for me to fulfill my dreams of whut a woman oughta be and to do. Dat's one of de hold-backs of slavery. But nothing can't stop you from wishin'. You can't beat nobady down so low till you can rob them of their will.<sup>75</sup>

The concept of a wish which Nanny describes as one of the basic human rights, which cannot be taken or stolen, led her through her difficult life. What she wants for Janie is not only to have dreams, but also to fulfill them.

Nanny's life as a former slave was full of horrible incidents and hardships. She was raped by her master, who went soon after her daughter Leafy's birth to fight in the Civil War. Nanny's mistress knew about the raping and knew who the girl's father was because she could see her husband's resemblance, "Nigger, what's yo' baby doin' wid gray eyes and yaller hair."<sup>76</sup> Nanny was now exposed to the rage of her mistress, who was planning to have her whipped and sell the baby. "Ah wouldn't dirty my hands on yuh. But first thing in the mornin' de overseer will take you to de whippin' post and tie you down on yo' knees and cut de hide offa yo' yaller back,"<sup>77</sup> threatens the mistress Nanny.

Worrying about herself and about her daughter, Nanny decides to flee. Fortunately, Nanny managed to escape and was hiding in the swamps until the end of the war. Consequently, she started to work for a white family and was planning to provide her daughter with a better life. However, her dream was ruined because Leafy was raped by a

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<sup>74</sup> See Gray, *A History of American Literature*, 515.

<sup>75</sup> Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2006), 16.

<sup>76</sup> Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, 17.

<sup>77</sup> Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, 18.

schoolteacher, as Hurston revels in chapter 2, “Dat school teacher had done hid her in de woods all night long, and he done raped mah baby and run on off just before day.”<sup>78</sup> After she gave birth to Janie, she “took drinkin’ likker and stayin’ out nights,”<sup>79</sup> and eventually ran away. At this moment Nanny transforms her hopes and dreams towards her granddaughter.

Her first step was to give Janie a real home and become independent from the white family, where they lived. Janie’s classmates were making fun of her because she was playing with white children and often wore clothes that she had been given by their mother.

“And, Janie, maybe it wasn’t much, but Ah done de best Ah kid by you. Ah raked and scraped and bought dis lil piece uh land so you wouldn’t have to stay in de white folks’ yard and tuck yo’ head befo’ other chillun at school.”<sup>80</sup>

Nanny narrates how she tried her best to provide her granddaughter with a real home and how important it was that Janie knew she was free. Nanny wants her to become a self-conscious and independent woman.

### 3.2.1 Nanny’s Protective Nature

When Janie starts to be curious about her sexuality and about love, Nanny refuses to discuss those topics with her granddaughter. She does so because of two reasons: the first one is to simply protect her granddaughter from a broken heart or from sacrificing a good life for love. She knows how vulnerable a young girl can be and wishes that Janie would not grow up so fast. The other reason is to give her an opportunity to find a wealthy husband who would take care of her and with whom she could later explore the things she was so curious about. Nanny does so because she loves Janie and because she wants to prevent her from the same mistakes she or Janie’s mother did.

Janie often sits under a blossoming pear tree in the garden, where she watches the bees on the opening flowers. The blossoming tree stands here as an important symbol of fertility and sexuality. Janie is deeply moved by this image and sees it as an act of real love and compares it to marriage.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, 19.

<sup>79</sup> See Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, 19.

<sup>80</sup> Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, 19.

<sup>81</sup> See Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, 11.

She saw a dust-bearing bee sink into the sanctum of a bloom; the thousands sister-calyxes arch to meet the love embrace and the ecstatic shiver of the tree from root to tiniest branch creaming in every blossom and frothing with delight. So this was marriage!<sup>82</sup>

Hurston describes how Janie starts to think about sex and expresses her need for answers. Janie wishes to “be a pear tree—any tree in bloom,”<sup>83</sup> and she wants to be kissed by “bees singing of the beginning of the world.”<sup>84</sup> The author compares the act of love to the nature. The tree and the blossoms stand there for feminine love or fertility and the bees obviously represent man. Janie believes that this connection is something perfect and wishes she could be a tree, as well.

Being refused important answers by her grandmother, Janie seeks for fulfillment of her curiosity in a local boy, who she kisses over the fence by the house.

Through pollinated air she saw a glorious being coming up the road. In her former blindness she had known him as shiftless Johnny Tator, tall and lean. That was before the golden dust of pollen had beglamored his rags and her eyes.<sup>85</sup>

She states, that she never noticed him before but now cannot deny how attracted to him she feels. Moreover, watching him “through pollinated air” under the peach tree Janie finds out that he might be the answer to her questions.

Later, Nanny catches her with the boy and a part of her dream seems to disappear. What she was worried about the most has actually happened and now she had to start acting. She calls Janie home and talks to her, “‘Janie, youse uh’ ‘oman, now, so—’”<sup>86</sup> Janie does not want to be a woman yet and argues against her grandmother, who answers, “‘Yeah, Janie, youse got yo’ womanhood on yuh. So Ah mount ez well tell yuh whut Ah been savin’ up for uh spell. Ah wants to see you married right away.’”<sup>87</sup> As we see Nanny decides to put an end to the thread, that Janie could ruin her life, by forcing her into marriage.

### 3.2.2 Love or Manipulation

Soon after the kiss Nanny decides to talk to Janie, however she lies to her and puts into her head an image of a socially acceptable position that is necessary to obtain in order to

<sup>82</sup> Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, 11.

<sup>83</sup> Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, 11.

<sup>84</sup> Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, 11.

<sup>85</sup> Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, 11-12.

<sup>86</sup> Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, 12.

become a respectable woman and tries to convince her to change her naive ideas about love, sex and marriage.

Nanny therefore arranges a marriage to Logan Killicks, a local respectable man. One of the Nanny's reasons is that she was born into slavery and had little choice over her own destiny. As Edwidge Danticat proposes, Nanny missed small comforts of a free wife, such as "sitting idly on a porch," and wants her granddaughter to have all "those little things," along with money and status.<sup>88</sup> Nevertheless, Nanny also tries to manipulate Janie; she is not concerned with the fact that she will suffer from the lack of emotions. From the very beginning, Nanny knew that the marriage was going to be loveless. However, she manipulates Janie to believe that she would eventually fall in love. Finally, after Nanny's talk, she made comfort for herself. Janie was convinced by her that she will eventually come to loving her husband, because "husbands and wives always loved each other, and that was what marriage meant."<sup>89</sup> Although Janie was not looking for a commitment, she came to love the idea of marriage; especially after being reassured by her grandmother about the upcoming happiness. What Nanny may not have considered was the fact that Janie had her own ideological concept of freedom. Before we start to judge Nanny, we have to keep in mind that she wanted for her granddaughter the best; she wanted her to live her own deferred dream. However, Janie had a dream of her own, of which she was later deferred by her grandmother.

After the wedding, Janie moves with her new husband to his isolated house and starts waiting for the promised love to come. As Hurston writes, "The house was absent of flavor, too. But anyhow Janie went on inside to wait for love to begin."<sup>90</sup> However, unlike her grandmother promised, nothing happened. Janie had no feelings for her husband and after she had spent two months at his house, she visits Nanny to whom she wants to confess. When the grandmother asks why Janie came, she answers, "'Cause you told me Ah mus gointer love him, and, and Ah don't. Maybe if somebody was to tell me how, Ah could do it."<sup>91</sup> Janie still believes in what her grandmother told her, which is that love will

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<sup>87</sup> Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, 12.

<sup>88</sup> Edwidge Danticat, foreword to *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, by Zora Neale Hurston (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2006), xvi.

<sup>89</sup> Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, 21.

<sup>90</sup> Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, 22.

<sup>91</sup> Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, 23.



come in marriage with time. Nevertheless she comes for and advice, because she starts to lose hopes. Nanny again convinces her to be patient:

“If you don’t want him, you sho oughta. Heah you is wid de onliest organ in town, amongst colored folks, in yo’ parlor. Got a house bought and paid for and sixty acres uh land right on the big road and... Lawd have mussy! Dat’s de very prong all us black women gits hung on. Dis love. Dat’s just whut’s got us uh pullin’ and uh haulin’ and sweatin’ and doing from can’t see in de mornin’ till can’t see at night.”<sup>92</sup>

Nanny tells Janie that she should love her husband and once again tries to reassure her that she eventually will. She states that a commitment is sometimes hard work, but a woman is capable of learning how to love.

She believes that she acts in Janie’s best interest and therefore does not see anything wrong in manipulating her granddaughter. She does not believe in the foolish romantic concept of love, as Janie does, and continues with forcing her to stay with her husband, not caring whether her granddaughter would be happy or not. What Nanny actually believes in is that she will fall in love with Killicks money and property, however, this is not what impresses Janie.

### 3.2.3 Janie’s Forgiveness

When Janie leaves, Nanny starts to pray for her granddaughter; she asks God for understanding and tries to justify her doings. She expresses that all she did, was to find happiness and comfort for her granddaughter: “Nanny entered this infinity of conscious pain again on her old knees. Towards morning she muttered, “Law, you know mah heart. Ah done de best Ah could do. De rest is left to you.”<sup>93</sup>

After Janie returns to Killicks farm, she still does not find love; on the contrary, her situation becomes even worse. Her husband step by step tries to turn Janie into a laborer and claims that she is spoiled. She is unhappy and no matter how hard she tries, her husband does not become any closer to her, on the contrary, she now dislikes him even more and the only think she feels towards him is resentment.

Janie realizes that marriage is not what makes love, and she now sees that she has been betrayed by her grandmother. Her dream about marriage and love is over and she feels lost. “She knew now that marriage did not make love. Janie’s first dream was dead, so she

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<sup>92</sup> Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, 23.

<sup>93</sup> Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, 24.

became a woman.”<sup>94</sup> Years after her grandmother’s death Janie talks to her friend Phoebe and recalls:

”She was borned in slaver time when folks, dat is black folks, didn’t sit down anytime dey felt lak it. So sittin’ on porches lak de white madam looked lak uh mighty fine thing tuh her. Dat’s whut she wanted for me—don’t keer whut it cost.”<sup>95</sup>

Janie is finally able to understand why her grandmother forced her into marriage and realizes that she did it with her maternal love and because she wanted a good life for Janie. Moreover, Janie even comes to be able to forgive her.

Nanny dies approximately one month after Janie first visited her to complain about the loveless marriage. Nanny realizes that she failed as a mother, therefore she turns to God and asks him to have mercy with her granddaughter. She is aware that she forced Janie into a loveless marriage, but claims that she wanted to provide her with a good social standing and security.

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<sup>94</sup> Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, 25.

<sup>95</sup> Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, 114.

### 3.3 Celie

Gray sees Walker's *Color Purple* is acknowledged as a masterpiece of African American literature. Her protagonist Celie is a victim of racial and sexual oppression and represents the discovery of identity and community.<sup>96</sup> She is a different kind of mother, who was not given a chance to fight for freedom and happiness of her children, and who was because of all her suffering not able to respect and love her own self.

Because of the abuse committed to her, she thinks that her only possibility of survival is to become silent and invisible. Her letters to God are the only way how she releases her pain and the only means of self-expression.<sup>97</sup>

Dear God,  
I am fourteen years old. ~~I am~~ I have always been a good girl. Maybe you can give me a sign letting me know what is happening to me.<sup>98</sup>

With this letter, Celie starts her series of letters addressed to God. Before she starts to narrate her horrifying incidents of suffering, raping and oppression, she asks God to understand that she always tried to be "a good girl"<sup>99</sup> and asks for explanation of why all those odds are happening to her.

#### 3.3.1 Celie Becoming a Mother

In the first letter, Celie confesses her horrifying experience with her own father Alfonso, who makes Celie his sexual toy because his wife does not satisfy his sexual demands.<sup>100</sup> His constant abuse of Celie results in the reality that she becomes pregnant. She is only fourteen years old and she is already pregnant with her second child.

Celie is broke because of the fact that she has been a victim of raping and incest. In her letters, she describes those incidents as following:

Just say You gonna do what your mammy wouldn't. First he put his thing up gainst my hip and sort of wiggle it around. Then he grab hold my titites. Then he push his thing inside my pussy. When that hurt, I cry. He start to choke me, saying You better shut up and git used to it.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> See Gray, *A History of American Literature*, 696.

<sup>97</sup> Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (Orlando: Harcourt, 2003), 1.

<sup>98</sup> See Walker, *The Color Purple*, 1.

<sup>99</sup> See Walker, *The Color Purple*, 1.

<sup>100</sup> See Walker, *The Color Purple*, 1.

<sup>101</sup> Walker, *The Color Purple*, 1.

The cruelty of her father is unbelievable, and the fact that Celie describes it with such a calm voice makes those incidents look even worse and she continues with stating that she “never git used to it.”<sup>102</sup>

Celie has been destroyed by the fact that her children were conceived by her own father and that they were a result of incest. As she towards the end of the book finds out, Alphonso was not her biological father. Therefore, Celie feels at least a little bit relieved. The fact that she has been raped does not change; however, the new revelation changes her perception of the creation of her two children.

Celie later writes that Alfonso took her first baby when she was sleeping and killed it in the woods: “He took it. He took it while I was sleeping. Kilt it out there in the woods.”<sup>103</sup> She is afraid that he would do the same with her new baby, as she writes in the following letter, “[He will] kill this one too, if he can.”<sup>104</sup>

Celie gives birth to her second baby prematurely. It happens suddenly while she is standing by her dying mother’s death bed:

When I start to hurt and then my stomach start moving and then that little baby come out my pussy chewing on it fist you could have knock me over with a feather.<sup>105</sup>

Celie is exhausted physically, as well as psychologically. She is fourteen years old and she has already given birth to two babies. She is regularly being raped by her abusive father, and still has to do the household chores, take care of her sister and sick mother, who constantly requires to know who is the father of Celie’s babies, “She ast me bout the first one Whose it is? I say God’s. I don’t know no other man or what else to say.”<sup>106</sup> Celie’s mother continues to be unaware of her husband’s actions until her death. Alphonso later does take her second baby but Celie hopes that he would not kill it this time and sell it to a married couple: “He took my other little baby, a boy this time. But I don’t think he kill it. I think he sold it to a man and his wife over Monticello.”<sup>107</sup> Celie is confused—she is a teenager, she is broken, she has a lot of questions but no one to answer them. Therefore, she constantly turns to Gog in her letters.

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<sup>102</sup> See Walker, *The Color Purple*, 1.

<sup>103</sup> Walker, *The Color Purple*, 2.

<sup>104</sup> Walker, *The Color Purple*, 2.

<sup>105</sup> Walker, *The Color Purple*, 2.

<sup>106</sup> Walker, *The Color Purple*, 2.

<sup>107</sup> Walker, *The Color Purple*, 3.

After the death of Celie's mother, her father brings home a new wife. However, this does not mean an end of the constant sexual, as well as physical abuse. Celie finally manages to become independent from her father by marrying to a man, who she calls only as Mr. \_\_\_\_\_. After being raped by the man she believed to be her own father, she is battered and abused in a loveless marriage. Nevertheless, states Gray, she gradually learns "how to do it," how to grow into being and companionship.<sup>108</sup> Marrying Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ was Celie's largest mistake. He abuses her, cheats on her, and uses her only as a housewife, who does all the chores at home. Even though he had children of his own, they never became hers. She was only a maid to them. Her own children were either lost or dead or far away from her.

### 3.3.2 Celie's Mentors

Celie never talked about her mother as someone who has a great deal of influence on her. She only recalls a few stories about her mother, none of which are recollections of love, attention or caring. She did not see beauty in her mother and describes her only when she was sick and dying.

Her father cannot definitely be taken into account as a possible positive influence on Celie. When we want to understand who influenced Celie's sense of self-respect, who was her role model and in whom she might find love and attention, we cannot consider her parents. The mentors of her life were, according to Gates, three other women.<sup>109</sup> Those three do not only represent advisors, they also stand for Celie's missing maternal attention and love. Celie who was always lacking disclosure, attention, and love finally has someone to look up to and someone she can learn from.

The first one is Celie's friend Sofia. She is a large independent woman, who refuses to submit to whites, men, or anyone else who tries to dominate her. After defying a white, she is sentenced to twelve years in prison, which is later changed to twelve years of working as a maid.

She say to Sofia, All your children so clean, she say, would you like to work for me, be my maid?  
Sofia say, Hell no.  
She say, What you say?

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<sup>108</sup> Gray, *A History of American Literature*, 697.

<sup>109</sup> See Gray, *A History of American Literature*, 697.

Sofia say, Hell no.<sup>110</sup>

Her story is full of hardship and abuse. Sofia is a symbol of resistance, and Celie admires her for this quality. Nevertheless, resistance is the reason for all Sofia's hardships and it reminds Celie that she should be careful and silent.

Another one is Celie's sister Nettie who gives her a more complex lesson especially through her lessons from Africa. She went there to work on a mission and disclosed to her sister the tradition of African American culture. She teaches Celie, states Gray, to be proud of who she is and to be proud of her inheritance.<sup>111</sup>

Did you know there were great cities in Africa, greater than Milledgeville or even Atlanta, thousands of years ago? Than the Egyptians who built the pyramids and enslaved the Israelites were colored? That Egypt is in Africa? That the Ethiopia we read about in the Bible meant all of Africa?<sup>112</sup>

Mr. \_\_\_\_ hid all the letters from Celie, who later finds them and starts to respond to her sister's conversation. She turns from addressing only God in her letters and discloses to her sister. Nettie is of great importance to her sister—not only was she Celie's only friend when she was experiencing hardships at her father and Mr. \_\_\_\_'s houses, she became a mentor to Celie. In spite of being younger, she becomes an advisor, a source of inspiration and information.

Ironically, the most influential figure in Celie's life is Mr. \_\_\_\_' lover Shug Avery. She is the one who helps Celie to find her own self, to explore her sexuality and to show her what it means to really believe in something. She is the first person for whom Celie for the first time in her life feels physical attraction. When she sees a picture of Shug, Celie cannot help herself and considers the jazz singer "the most beautiful woman [she] ever saw."<sup>113</sup> Moreover, Celie thinks that Shug was "more pretty than my mama,"<sup>114</sup> and, "bout ten thousand times more prettier than me [Celie]."<sup>115</sup> Shug teaches her about her own sexuality, her body and even offers her that she could show her sexual pleasure.<sup>116</sup> Thanks

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<sup>110</sup> Walker, *The Color Purple*, 87.

<sup>111</sup> See Gray, *A History of American Literature*, 697.

<sup>112</sup> Walker, *The Color Purple*, 132.

<sup>113</sup> Walker, *The Color Purple*, 6.

<sup>114</sup> Walker, *The Color Purple*, 6.

<sup>115</sup> Walker, *The Color Purple*, 6.

<sup>116</sup> See Gray, *A History of American Literature*, 697.

to Shug, Celie explores her body and finds out that sex can mean even pleasure, not only something during which women must suffer:

Listen, she say, right down there in your pussy is a little button that gits real hot when you do you know what with somebody. It git hotter and hotter then it melt. That is good part. But other parts good too, she say. Lot of sucking go on, here and there, she say. Lot of finger and tongue work.<sup>117</sup>

Shug then gives Celie a mirror and tells her: “Here, take this mirror and go and look at yourself down there, I bet you never seen it, have you?”<sup>118</sup> They together explore Celie’s sexual organs and Shug explains their functions. Celie feels attracted to Shug because of her beauty, her experience and her affectionate behavior. She later even develops stronger feelings for her husband’s mistress.

Shug leads Celie by example. She represents a self-confident independent woman Celie would like to become and she admires Shug for being her own self and for the ability to “positively fill the space she occupies.”<sup>119</sup> Shug encourages Celie to believe in herself and gives her new perspectives, opens doors to new things. Even more importantly, Shug shows her that the concept of believe, stemming from the male white aristocratic culture, is not the right one.

She shows to Celie that one can believe in anything they choose, and the most important thing is to believe.<sup>120</sup> This individual concept teaches Celie to believe in her own self. Shug as a mentor manages to help Celie to become a self-confident woman, and enables her be able to have dreams about her future and independence.

### 3.3.3 Reunion

Since Alfonso took Celie’s children, she had only one opportunity to meet them. She was not sure, however, she thought that the girl she met in town was her daughter, as she writes in one of her letters, “I seen my baby. I knowed it was her.”<sup>121</sup> Nevertheless, Celie continues doubtfully, “I think she mine. My heart say she mine. But I don’t know she mine.”<sup>122</sup> The girl had Celie’s resemblance and their eyes looked the same: “She got my

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<sup>117</sup> Walker, *The Color Purple*, 78.

<sup>118</sup> Walker, *The Color Purple*, 79.

<sup>119</sup> Gray, *A History of American Literature*, 697.

<sup>120</sup> See Gray, *A History of American Literature*, 697

<sup>121</sup> Walker, *The Color Purple*, 13.

<sup>122</sup> Walker, *The Color Purple*, 13.

eyes just like they is today.”<sup>123</sup> Celie starts to believe that her father had not killed her children but sold them to someone. From now on she could dream about being once reunited with them.

When Celie discovers the hidden letters written by Nettie, she finds out that her sister, who left to Africa with a missionary couple, takes care of their two adopted children, Olivia and Adam. She saw her sister’s features in the children and therefore asks their father about their origin. “And what was my surprise when a little girl opened the door and she had your eyes set in your face.”<sup>124</sup> Nettie realizes that they are Celie’s lost children and Samuel, the father confirms her suspicions. The truth calms Celie’s long-life worries about the loss of her children and gives her strength to continue to fulfill her dream about independence.

After the adoptive mother’s death, Nettie marries Samuel and they return with the children to America. Finally, at the very end of the book, Celie meets her children and even though she is old, she feels younger than ever before. She describes the reunion in the following passage, “When Nettie’s foot come down on the porch I almost die. I stand swaying, tween Albert and Shug. Nettie stand swaying tween Samuel and I reckon it must be Adam.”<sup>125</sup> After so many years she finally meets her sister and sees her grown up son. “Me and Nettie finally git up off the porch and I hug my children.”<sup>126</sup> She felt “a little peculiar round the children. For one thing, they grown,”<sup>127</sup>

After a life-long suffering, she is finally independent, has her own house and reunites with her long missing sister and children. Celie never became an actual mother, nevertheless she finds piece at her old age. Not only she finds out that her children are not dead, she can see that they have enough love and attention and have all the opportunities she could only dream about.

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<sup>123</sup> Walker, *The Color Purple*, 13.

<sup>124</sup> Walker, *The Color Purple*, 127.

<sup>125</sup> Walker, *The Color Purple*, 292.

<sup>126</sup> Walker, *The Color Purple*, 293.

<sup>127</sup> Walker, *The Color Purple*, 294.



#### 4 IDENTIFICATION OF INTERGENERATIONAL CONNECTIONS BETWEEN THE ANALYZED WORKS

All three mothers analyzed in this thesis are individual and original characters not only within the African American heritage, but also American literature in general. They are different from each other on many levels. First of all, the authors who created them lived in different periods of time and were influenced by their own historical and literary contexts. Nevertheless, I am going to show that the authors were influenced by each other and their protagonists do actually share some common features.

As Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* "occupies a crucial place in the history of both African American and American's women's literature,"<sup>128</sup> and her work deals with timeless themes, such as "the struggle for self-identity, self-preservation and freedom,"<sup>129</sup> it has been, according to Gates, for decades a source of inspiration for numerous writers.

When we take a detailed look at Jacobs's *Incidents* and Hurston's *Their Eyes* we might notice that Linda's grandmother and Nanny Crawford share more than the same color of their skin. Both grandmothers take care of their granddaughters, whose mothers either died or ran away. They do not hesitate for one second and take their daughters' daughters as their own and become their substitute mothers. They both want the best for the girls, however, they also both must equally watch them suffer. Nanny Crawford mirrors Aunt Martha in her permanent need to manipulate her granddaughter because she knows, what not a young girl might consider as important, is actually the best for her. Aunt Martha would rather see Linda in slavery if it meant that she would be at close, and Nanny Crawford lies to Janie about love in order to provide her with a socially acceptable position.

When we concentrate on the importance of Zora Neale Hurston's work, in which she glorifies African American folklore and celebrates the journey of black women, we will realize her importance and understand why Hurston has such a huge number of admirers.

One of her admirers Alice Walker, as Hemenway describes, even made a pilgrimage to Fort Pierce to erect a memorial, where Hurston was lying buried in an unmarked grave in a

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<sup>128</sup> Gates and McKay, *The Norton Anthology*, 279.

<sup>129</sup> Evers-Williams, introduction to *Incidents*, v.

segregated cemetery.<sup>130</sup> “As fascinating as her life is, however, Hurston’s influence arises from her art,” as Hemenway claims, and adds that, “We love Zora Neale Hurston for her work, first.”<sup>131</sup> For Alice Walker and for thousands of Hurston’s admirers, she is one of the greatest writers of the century. Walker said that if she was sent to a desert island with ten books, she would choose, two of Hurston (*Mules and Men* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.)<sup>132</sup> When Walker once talked about *Their Eyes*, she said, “There is no book more important to me than this one.”<sup>133</sup> It is clear that Hurston was of great influence to Alice Walker, who celebrates her literary ancestor in her work, for example in her essays “I search of Our Mothers’ Gardens” or “In search of Zora Neale Hurston.”

Walker’s mother was known for her incredible gardens, which her daughter commemorated in her essay “I search of Our Mothers’ Gardens.” Gates states that Walker learned from her mother that “African American women’s experience and art are based on spirituality, especially as it relates nature.”<sup>134</sup> Walker refers in this essay not only to her biological mother; she addresses all black mothers, especially her literary ancestors, who of course included Harriet Jacobs and Zora Neale Hurston to whom Walker refers as the “freest of all women writers.”<sup>135</sup>

To understand Hurston’s impact on Alice Walker, the first step could be to compare the titles of the two books analyzed in this thesis. While in Hurston’s novel **their eyes** were watching God, in *Color Purple*, which symbolizes Celie’s own concept of belief, the **protagonist** talks to God. Both Hurston and Walker’s titles of the books symbolize the spiritual quest of the protagonists to find themselves and to realize their own believes. Both Janie and Celie have to overcome numerous obstacles to encounter their dreams, while those obstacles are put in the way by the mystical natural world.

All of the three analyzed characters can be seen in the same light as any other African American mother. As well as the majority of their black sisters, they had to face racial discrimination, whose victims they so often painfully become. Those three mothers were trying to become independent from men, who they either did not love or by whom they

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<sup>130</sup> See Hemenway, “Zora Neale Hurston 1891-1960,” 1576.

<sup>131</sup> Hemenway, “Zora Neale Hurston 1891-1960,” 1576.

<sup>132</sup> Gates and McKay, *The Norton Anthology*, 1019.

<sup>133</sup> Danticat, foreword to *Their Eyes*, xiv

<sup>134</sup> See Gates and McKay, *The Norton Anthology*, 2425.

<sup>135</sup> Walker, “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens,” 2435.

were put into suffering. All three of them were longing to fulfill their own dreams. As well as other black women and girls, they have dreams about freedom, finding love and happiness. All three of them were human beings who had to suffer so much because some people did not see them in the same light as I am showing them right now.

## CONCLUSION

In the first part of my bachelor thesis, I introduced the theme of motherhood within the African American culture and showed the importance of black mothers to the whole literary tradition, which I outlined in the same chapter. Black mothers often have to face the worst suffering one can imagine, however they get stronger by being exposed to hardship and are eager to defend themselves and those they love.

I believe that choosing Jacobs, Hurston and Walker's novels was a wise decision, for in the analysis, I showed that each of the mothers was different, but still the outcome is that they do share common features, that their life incidents are in some aspects similar and that each of them does represent an image of a black mother. Those three characters are timeless and anyone should be able to sympathize with them, regardless their age, sex or race. To hear such horrible stories of physical and sexual abuse, of constant pursuit, of unfulfilled dreams and violence makes us realize how hard the life of a black mother must be.

In the last part of my thesis, I managed to find a sufficient number of examples that show that those three novels to a particular extent mirror each other and that the authors were not only aware of their literary ancestors; they did see inspiration in their "mothers" and they might play an important role to their "daughters." At this point, I am going to slightly change the concept that I have developed in this work and I am going to say, that those mothers are also an inspiration to their "sons."

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