“Anaconda Love” in the Novels of Toni Morrison

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"Anaconda Love" in the Novels of Toni Morrison

by

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A Thesis

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Anaconda Love in Toni Morrison’s Novels

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Introduction: Anaconda Love, a weapon of destruction

Toni Morrison repeatedly writes novels rooted in the heritage of African Americans. These are tales of mythic proportions with themes that delve into humankind’s darkest obsessions and compulsions. Such themes have recurred in great literature since the beginning of the written word: incest, infanticide, rape, social and family exile, and excessive fixation, or what Morrison calls “anaconda love.”

Throughout this thesis, the term “anaconda love” will be paired with the terms “parental enmeshment” and “extremist love.” While the theory behind the terms is similar, the terms themselves are not interchangeable. Morrison first published the term anaconda love in 1977 when it appeared in her second novel Song of Solomon. While exact definitions vary from novel to novel, anaconda love is often an extreme emotion, usually love, that causes excessive behavior towards a person usually resulting in damaging psychological and emotional effects for all persons involved. Gary Storhoff also discusses this theme of excessive fixation, but prefers to use the term “parental enmeshment” which he defines as “the suffocating bond parents occasionally create with their children” (291).

While Storhoff couples “anaconda love” with “parental enmeshment,” I am inclined to use the term extremist love, since it is not only parents who become involved in these emotions. I believe that extremist love is a more encompassing term that can be used to include the parent, the child, and the lover. During my analysis of each of Morrison’s three novels, I will discuss how each term is used and specifically defined.
This thesis will discuss anaconda love in three of Morrison's novels: Song of Solomon, Beloved, and The Bluest Eye. These novels were chosen using simple criteria. They were the Morrison novels that I was the most familiar with, and I was able to extract solid evidence in the anaconda love theory from each one. I felt compelled to stay strictly within the realm of Morrison's novels in order to trace the extremist love theme throughout her career and investigate how the term "anaconda love" came to be.

There is a specific order to each of the chapters. I start with the chapter on Song of Solomon since it was in this novel that Morrison first used the phrase "anaconda." Chapter two will investigate the extremist love scenario in Morrison's Pulitzer Prize winning novel, Beloved. Structurally, the anaconda love situations between these first two books are similar, which is why I followed one with the other. Each novel involves a parent and child entwined in anaconda love. The third book, however, introduces a variation on anaconda love, the "self-anaconda." This theory will be explained in Chapter three, which discusses Morrison's first published novel; The Bluest Eye.

Morrison first uses the expression "anaconda love" to refer to Hagar, a supporting character in her 1977 novel, Song of Solomon. To describe Hagar's love for the main character Milkman Dead, Morrison writes, "[I]totally taken over by her anaconda love, [Hagar] had no self left, no fears, no wants, no intelligence that was her own"(137). An anaconda is a "a large South American snake that suffocates and kills its prey by constriction"(Merriam-Webster Dictionary 42). Morrison utilizes this visual image when explaining the depth of love Hagar feels for Milkman.
Anaconda love is also played out in Song of Solomon between Milkman Dead and each of his parents, Ruth Foster and Macon Dead. The Dead household is dysfunctional because the family cannot support its members emotionally. Instead, both mother and father, throughout the plot, respond to growing stress in ways that prohibit more-productive interactions, instead becoming more fearful, more rigid. It is on this basis that each of the parental anacondas feed and grow in power. While each one operates in a different way, their goal is the same. Both parents want control over their son’s emotional and physical state.

Also evident in Song of Solomon is Strohoff’s theory of parental enmeshment. While Strohoff applies this theory to the relationship between Milkman and his parents, I feel it is more appropriately used when examining the relationship between Hagar, her mother and her grandmother. This triad clearly defines enmeshment when Pilate ‘becomes so overly involved in her granddaughter’s life that she is unable to clearly mark appropriate parental boundaries and emotions.

However, suffocating enmeshment involves not only the players in Song of Solomon but also those in Beloved whose very theme is infanticide. It is overly simplistic to call Beloved, the single novel among the three examples used in this thesis that is not placed in near-real time, a slave narrative. The book reviews the issues of human ownership, slave ships, criminal brutality and the struggle for freedom, but these alone are not necessarily inflammatory. What makes Beloved stand out is Morrison’s ability to express both the degradation of the spirit and unfathomable love between mother and child. This relationship provides a clear example of anaconda love in
Beloved. This chapter will analyze the relationship between Sethe and her daughters, Denver and Beloved.

Sethe, the main character in Beloved, in true mythical fashion, battles the spirit of her daughter, a daughter that she herself murdered as a toddler in order to save her from a life of unquestionable horror. It is this attempt to protect her daughter from slavery that creates Sethe’s anaconda. In order to portray this devastating emotion, Morrison uses emotionally charged dialogues between Sethe and Paul D, and Beloved and Denver, to reveal the incredible horror and unimaginable love that has occurred in Sethe’s life. A look at Sethe’s personal history shows dots of joy among a background of inhuman suffering.

Although the term “anaconda love” did not surface in Morrison’s works until Song of Solomon in 1977, the theory of extremist love can be found in her very first novel, The Bluest Eye, which will be discussed in chapter three. Even though it was her first novel, it will be placed last in this thesis due to the varied anaconda that was not present in the first two novels; the self anaconda. In this novel Morrison introduced what she would later call “the crime of innocence” (Tar Baby, 242). Overlapping good and evil is a recurring theme in Morrison’s work. The integration of “good” characters exhibiting what society labels “bad” behavior, and vice versa, lays the base for the anaconda love present in this book.

Chapter three will investigate the creation of a different anaconda, an anaconda that is created by, and consumes, its own host. Simply stated, The Bluest Eye is a chronicle of the life of a poor, black girl who, from her earliest memory, is ostracized, ignored, made to feel worthless at every turn. Her developmental deficiency is so
severe that she is driven to a life of irrational wishes and fantasy. She becomes convinced that her life will miraculously become good if she only gets blue eyes, her constant prayer: The Bluest Eye is the story of incest and family rape; the victimization of the weakest member.

Morrison has called her characters "the combination of virtue and flaw, of good intentions gone awry, of wickedness cleansed and people make whole again. If you judge them all by the best that they have done, they are wonderful. If you judge them by the worst that they have done, they are terrible" (McKay 23). The Bluest Eye, Song of Solomon and Beloved are peopled with players who perfectly fit these parameters. They are complex, multi-layered, propelled by motives both unique and universal. In each of these three narratives, one or more protagonists is the exerciser or the object of emotional crisis brought on by love so extreme that it brings with it dysfunction, anxiety, and ultimately, self-destructive behavior.

It is important to remember that Toni Morrison pulled many aspects of her novels from her personal background. Morrison was raised in the small town of Lorain, Ohio in the 1930s and 1940s, and during that time in most of the United States, communities like Lorain were segregated by race. While there can be no denying that segregation in the United States was abhorrent, the positive elements of that social structure were a particularly strong sense of community within "colored-towns" and a diverse population of educated, economically advantaged African Americans not in evidence in today's isolated urban ghettos. This important inner-structure has been described by several African American authors, including the one-hundred-plus year old Delany sisters. Living in Morrison's community were African
American doctors, attorneys, teachers, bankers and property owners. Residents also included the poor, uneducated who were the brunt of bigotry times two: the white community and the higher class blacks within their community. All would provide models for Morrison’s stories.

While Morrison’s background provides some insight into the creation of her characters, we are left wondering how she became so familiar with the theory of extremist love and enmeshment. In his article, “Theoretical Foundations: Key Concepts of Systems Theory,” Michael S. Nystul, discusses his research on relationships between symptoms and family functioning and writes: “Enmeshed families inhibit acceptance of oneself as an individual, promoting expectations of external achievement and control. [Often, there is] excessive closeness between members, a poor sense of autonomy and a great need to be loyal to members. Hierarchies may provide so much structure that the individual loses autonomy”(532). This loss of the self is a recurring element in each of the three novels. The anaconda has the ability to swallow its victim, and Morrison uses this symbol to depict the swallowing of one character by another. The characters involved in Morrison’s anaconda love scenarios are so emotionally crippled that they begin to show the signs of a person literally being swallowed by the snake. They suffocate under the persistent attention, they slip farther and farther into the clutches of the beast until, finally, they are no longer distinguishable from the animal itself; thereby losing all sense of self-identity.

Anaconda love, terrifying compulsion and forbidden obsession, knits together the lives of Pecola, Sethe and Milkman in their separate novels. In these books,
Morrison gives voice to these composite, historic ghosts in all their complexity, complete with mutated love and emotional defects.
Chapter 1: *Song of Solomon*: How the Anaconda Came to Be

[Hagar] loved nothing in the world except this woman’s son, wanted him alive more than anybody, but hadn’t the least bit of control over the predator that lived inside her. Totally taken over by her anaconda love, she had no self left, no fears, no wants, no intelligence that was her own. (137)

Toni Morrison introduced us to the theory of anaconda love in 1977 when she published her second novel, *Song of Solomon*. The term was originally devised to explain the emotional devastation that Hagar, one of the characters, feels because of her relationship with Milkman, the protagonist. Gary Storhoff believes that “anaconda love” is synonymous with his theory of parental enmeshment, the “suffocating bond parents occasionally create with their children” (291). While it is true that anaconda love and parental enmeshment share some similarities, I argue that anaconda love occurs in more extreme cases, and can be seen in relationships other than that of parent/child. In this chapter, I will examine three relationships in which this novel explores the complexities of anaconda love: Milkman Dead and his parents, Hagar and Pilate, and Milkman and Hagar.

We can trace anaconda love and parental enmeshment through three different relationship scenarios in *Song of Solomon*. In the first case, Macon Dead and Ruth Foster attempt to gain ultimate control over their son Milkman, thereby unleashing
their anacondas on their son. Secondly, Hagar is enmeshed when her mother, Reba, and her grandmother, Pilate, over-involve themselves in her life. The primary difference between these two parent/child situations is that parental enmeshment suffocates the child, but doesn’t swallow the victim. In contrast, anaconda love stalks, suffocates and swallows its prey.

The third relationship is the clearest example of anaconda love and is the source of this chapter’s epigraph. Due to her relationship with her mother and grandmother, Hagar is primed for her destructive relationship with Milkman. Milkman falls prey to Hagar’s anaconda love. It is this relationship that gives birth to Morrison’s entire concept of anaconda love.

Since the term anaconda love was created to describe the dependent relationship between a man and a woman, it would be easy to place only male/female relationships under this category. Perhaps that is why Storhoff prefers the term enmeshment when discussing extreme relationships involving parents and children. However, when examining The Dead household and the relationship between Milkman and each of his parents, it is necessary and appropriate to use Morrison’s term anaconda love because of the severity of the relationship and the extreme measures to which the anacondas go in order to capture their prey.

Milkman’s struggle against his parents’ anacondas began before birth. In fact, the anaconda breeding ground was cultivated just after Macon and Ruth were married. It was during this time that Macon and Ruth began to realize how different they were. They also started to see the difference in their marital expectations. Raised
in an affluent, yet cold household, Ruth Foster accepted Macon as a husband because it met with the approval of her father. For the first sixteen years of her life, Ruth's father had filled the voids of Ruth's life. Motherless and without friends, Ruth relied on her father for protection, support and companionship. Morrison hints at an incestuous relationship between father and daughter, but never confirms it. Certainly, Ruth did not need a husband, but she married because it was expected. Her investment in the marriage was a minor one, always seeing to her father's needs before her husband's.

Macon's desire for Ruth was purely financial. Marrying the only daughter of the "biggest negro in the city" (23) would catapult Macon into societal heaven. It mattered little to Macon that he and Ruth did not know each other. He had seen the way she kept her father's house, she was pleasing to the eye, and he had heard how doting she was on her father. Surely she would be even more so to a husband. After all, she was named after the clearest example of the perfect wife.

The Biblical story of Ruth culminates with the matrimonial admonition that a wife's duty is strictly toward her husband and his people, that she abandons all attachment to her former family upon forming this new alliance. In this scenario, the perfect wife occupies herself with duties of the household. Macon, having never known his mother and without a more realistic pattern to follow, assumes that Ruth will fulfill all her wifely duties, leaving him to take care of all the larger, more worldly activities outside the family. This was Macon's dream. With his dutiful wife
caring for the home, he would then succeed in building his real estate empire, thereby gaining control over the black community in which he lived.

Macon’s dream world quickly came crashing down when he realized that Ruth only seemed to be the perfect woman because she was with her father and not because she was an inherently good wife. Ruth’s attentiveness only focused on her father, and she had no desire to play the role of her biblical namesake who was loyal to her husband’s family. However, it was the extent of Ruth’s involvement with her father that finalized Macon’s position against his wife. Having, for years, paled in the shadow of the almighty Dr. Foster, Macon’s worst fears were confirmed when he found his wife in the bed of her dead father, naked, with his fingers in her mouth. It is this confirmation that separates Macon and Ruth physically and emotionally:

Years of distance provided Macon and Ruth with time to plan. They each had their own plan regarding Milkman and his role in the family. Macon saw in Milkman the perfect successor to his fortune. He started molding Milkman at an early age to become a carbon copy of himself, thereby fulfilling his early dream of ownership.

Macon advises his son to follow his model of possessing material things. “Let me tell you right now the one thing you’ll ever need to know: Own things. And let the things you own own other things. Then you’ll own yourself and other people too”(55).

Clearly, Macon’s only desire in the world was to be powerful. It was his opinion that his son would be able to help him achieve his goals of financial success and a heightened social standing. Macon’s anaconda was powered by these desires and used
outright force to attain them. Macon was strict with his son and ruled his house like a dictator, with little thought about the effect that it had on Milkman.

Milkman’s mother had different ideas for her son. Ruth saw a replacement husband, meaning someone to protect and take care of her. In Ruth’s mind, this was a source of power for her because she could use Milkman in her battle against Macon. Her anaconda was powered by the desire to recapture what she lost when her father died and Macon abandoned her. She needed a surrogate male to act as protector and nurturer. She believed that Milkman would provide that source of power, thereby gaining control over Macon as well. Ruth’s anaconda did not work through force, as Macon’s did. Her anaconda worked through masked weakness. By playing a weak, powerless woman, Ruth was able to coerce Milkman to play the powerful male role in her life.

Both Macon and Ruth had such strong agendas that it is not surprising that they become two separate anacondas, each pulling Milkman in a different way. Their goal, however, is the same: total control of Milkman.

Milkman is not the only child victim in Song of Solomon. Hagar, who at one point becomes an anaconda herself, does so due to her upbringing. However, in order to understand Hagar’s treatment of Milkman, we need to first discuss Pilate and Reba’s enmeshing relationship with Hagar. It is this relationship that primes Hagar for her treatment of Milkman.

Psychologist Michael S. Nystul presents a scientific description of family enmeshment. He explains that the enmeshed dysfunctional family “is unable to
provide nurturing and growth to its membership"(4). Dr. Nystul also describes the weak emotional boundaries that are found in families involved in enmeshment. He says that these families exhibit "excessive closeness between members, low levels of individual differentiation, poor sense of autonomy, are highly reactive to any perception of deviance, and have a great need to be loyal"(5). When we apply Nystul’s description of enmeshment to Pilate’s household, we can see strong examples of this theory.

The youngest in a household of women, Hagar was witness to, and was defined by, certain behaviors exhibited by both her mother and grandmother. The eternal “baby girl” even into her thirties, she was allowed to remain immature even into adulthood. This is a direct example of how an enmeshed family does not allow its members to grow. However, Hagar is not solely to blame for these exhibitions. It is the enabling behaviors of Reba and Pilate that allow Hagar to indulge in these inappropriate feelings. One must then ask the question: why would two seemingly strong and independent women allow these types of behaviors to flourish? Pilate’s upbringing provides one answer.

Having lost her mother at birth, Pilate never had a maternal influence. She was well loved by her father, Jake, and subsequently inherited most of his personality traits. Even as a young child she appeared to have a strong spiritual presence. She was almost ethereal. She grew up with a love of nature and a strong farming prowess; noble attributes, but ones that helped little with child rearing. Fortunately for Pilate,
her daughter Reba shared her beliefs. Material things held little importance within their home. In a house without plumbing, their prized possessions were an earring, a geography book and a bag of bones. However, with the birth of Hagar, their priorities shift.

Hagar, unlike Pilate and Reba, had a love for pretty things. She always wanted nice dresses and ribbons for her hair, and it became Pilate's sole purpose to get these things for her. "All they knew to do was love her... they brought her things to please her" (311). It was as though Pilate was overcompensating for her lack of maternal skills, but by heightening her own expectations to an impossibly high level, her relationship with Hagar becomes unrealistic. The reader begins to see the excessive closeness that we are warned about by Dr. Nystul. We also see the poor sense of autonomy within the family. During the funeral scene, after a dramatic lullaby sung to her dead granddaughter, Pilate approaches all of the mourners, telling them about her "baby girl" (322). Even though Reba was Hagar's birth mother, it was Pilate who assumed most of the roles of caregiver. We see this confusion during Hagar's last attempt to fix herself up in order to win back Milkman. During a hurried conversation with Reba and Pilate, Hagar reverses her mother and grandmother's names. "And get some hair oil, Reba... Oh, never mind. Just that, Mama? Have you seen my... Oh my God" (emphasis added 313). In this triad, it was Pilate who was the driving force behind the enmeshment in Hagar's life.

The consequence for this enmeshment in Hagar's life, of course, is a seriously inflated sense of self-importance on Hagar's part. Having been given everything she
had ever asked for gave Hagar a sense of security, but also the belief that she could control everything and everybody in her life. This enmeshment left her emotionally and spiritually stunted. Because of Pilate and Reba’s enmeshment, Hagar felt that she could ask for, and receive, the love of anyone she wished. This is the basis for the anaconda love scenario with Milkman. The goal of Hagar’s anaconda was to have the complete love and devotion of Milkman.

When Milkman and Hagar first met, they were twelve and seventeen respectively. At the beginning, Hagar encouraged her younger cousin’s attentions because it was amusing to her. Morrison writes: “She babied him, ignored him, teased him – did anything she felt like, and he was grateful just to see her do anything or be any way”(92). Hagar believed that she had power over Milkman, and it was this power that gave birth to the anaconda she would use against Milkman.

As the years passed, the anaconda grew. Hagar began to give herself completely to Milkman, both physically and emotionally. This was what fed the anaconda and allowed it to gain strength. The physical relationship between Milkman and Hagar provided an easy escape for Milkman. Hagar was a constant in his life; if he wanted to see her, he would. Other times he would disappear for weeks at a time, and when he would return without explanation, Hagar and the anaconda would welcome him with open arms. It is at this point in their relationship where the reader can see how Pilate’s enmeshment of Hagar backfires. For years, Hagar had received anything she had ever asked for. Now that she was involved with Milkman, she assumed that he too, would give her anything she asked for. Even Milkman’s friend...
Guitar can see the damage caused by the enmeshment, and it is his words that describe Hagar’s condition.

The pride, the conceit of these doormat women amazed him. They were always women who had been spoiled as children. Whose whims had been taken seriously by adults and who grew up to be the stingiest, greediest people on earth and out of their stinginess grew their stingy little love that ate everything in sight. They could not believe or accept the fact that they were unloved; they believed that the world itself was off balance when it appeared as though they were not loved (310).

Storhoff again writes an acceptable explanation of this situation:

Hagar’s spiritual emptiness is ironically balanced by her vast sense of entitlement: she believes that Milkman must love her simply because she loves him. Her feeling of entitlement is a result of Pilate and Reba’s enmeshment, their eagerness to give her everything. While they deplete themselves for her sake, she becomes the consummate consumer, receiving anything she asks for. (297)

Interestingly, it is Milkman’s failure to commit to Hagar and her subsequent desperation that gives the most power to the anaconda. As Hagar began to realize that she would never become anything more in Milkman’s life (and, in fact, was becoming less and less important to him), her desire for the unattainable only increased. The strength of her anaconda grew with every rejection from Milkman. By the time he sent her the fatal letter, she no longer had any control over the predator.
In a novel where the entire theory of anaconda love is created, one has to ask if the anacondas are successful. Do the anaconda love relationships destroy or swallow, the victim? Ultimately, no. However, it is a long and drawn-out battle for freedom for Milkman, the victim of three anacondas in this novel.

As we can see, the first half of the novel describes the creation of the anaconda love relationships and how the anacondas gain their power. The family background and interpersonal relationships of the Dead family (including Macon, Ruth, Pilate and Hagar) exhibit the dysfunctionality necessary for the anacondas' emergence. It is during this first section that the anacondas have the most power. They are, in fact, successful at swallowing Milkman. Macon and Ruth engulf Milkman within their twisted battle for control over each other, and Hagar envelopes Milkman in a seventeen year relationship that simultaneously saps Milkman's strength while providing power to Hagar. As Milkman leaves for his trip South at the end of the first section, he is completely overpowered by these fearsome predators.

However, we can understand this novel to be one in which Milkman learns to overcome the anacondas. This occurs in the second half of the novel, the quest section. Playing the role of the classic pawn, Milkman heads south on his father's orders in search of a forgotten treasure. His trip is fueled by his father's greed for money and power over his son. Milkman, at this point fully controlled by the anaconda, agrees to do the leg work for his father.

As his search progresses, he finds himself in the heartland of his father's people. What began as a search for gold quickly becomes a search for the truth behind
Milkman’s family history. Milkman becomes intrigued by the stories he is told by the people who knew his father, aunt Pilate, and grandparents. Until this time, Milkman held no interest in the background of his family. However, his interest is sparked by the mysterious identities of his grandparents and their importance in the community.

Lincoln’s Heaven, the family farm, was at the heart of the community. It was a prosperous farm and gathering place, and Milkman’s grandfather Jake was held in high regard by the people of the area. His land was so prosperous in fact that he was murdered by neighboring whites who wanted the land. It was at this point that Macon and Pilate were run off and began their very different lives:

The more Milkman heard of his family history, the prouder he became. He had not realized how much of his own identity was missing until he heard the background of his father. After deciphering the meaning of the children’s song sung in Shalimar, Milkman’s past becomes more clear and his desire to learn more about his family is apparent.

Milkman was getting confused, but he was as excited as a child confronted with boxes and boxes of presents under the skirt of a Christmas tree. Somewhere in the pile was a gift for him... He ran back to Solomon’s store and caught a glimpse of himself in the plate-glass window. He was grinning. His eyes were shining. He was as eager and happy as he had ever been in his life. (308)

It is with this understanding of how his family was created that Milkman can finally admit to himself who he is. By taking pride in himself as a person, Milkman
instantly kills the anacondas of his parents. Even his self-induced deformity disappears, and for the first time "he did not limp" (284). He is now able to stand alone without the controlling support of his mother and father. It is also at this time that he is able to take responsibility for his role in his relationship with Hagar. Even though Hagar created and controlled the anaconda, he helped fuel her emotional instability with his prolonged treatment of her.

Finally, with Milkman's new found sense of self-awareness comes a profound love for his Aunt Pilate. Having been poisoned by his father into believing that Pilate was somehow responsible for what was wrong in his world, Milkman finally learned the truth about this strange, almost god-like woman. Pilate was a presence in his life from birth and was, in fact, responsible for his conception, but due to Macon's misguided hatred of his sister, Milkman had little to do with her until her was nearly an adult. His quest south revealed that Pilate was not the dirty, untrustworthy sneak his father made her out to be, but rather a world-loving Earth mother who would give her life for her nephew. As she lay dying in Milkman's arms at the end of the novel, this point is driven home with her final words. "I wish I'd a knowed more people. I would of loved 'em all. If I'd a knowed more, I would a loved more" (340).

We know little about the fate of Milkman at the end of the novel. Having killed his anacondas and regained his own identity and strength, we see him leap out into the air towards his friend/enemy Guitar. This novel is partially based on the myth of the Flying Africans, who gained their freedom from oppression by literally flying off above the heads of their oppressors, and the conclusion of Song of Solomon.
exhibits this parallel. With the knowledge of who he was as a person came the ability
to kill his anacondas and leap without fear into the unknown. With the weight of the
anacondas off of his back, Milkman realized that "if you surrendered to the air, you
could ride it"(341).
Chapter 2: Horrific Love in Toni Morrison’s novel, *Beloved*

In 1992, Toni Morrison published what is arguably the most powerful and emotional novel of her career. Based on the true story of a runaway slave, *Beloved* chronicles the life of a woman who had everything against her except the love of her children. And in the end, even that love proved to be too much for her. *Beloved* marks the life of Sethe, and her ghost-daughter Beloved, and their torturous battle to overcome each other’s anaconda love.

According to Terry Otten, Morrison’s characters “seem capable at once of enormous criminality and unmitigated love and they demand both condemnation and admiration, both respect and fear” (Horrific 655). Love, particularly, is an ambivalent value in Morrison’s writing. For the most part, it is used to illustrate a corrupt culture, crippled by racism. It is the excuse given to unleash forces so brutal that they defy conventional definitions of cruelty and evil. Instead, acts commonly considered evil are transformed in her novels into extraordinary illustrations of love. This is how the anaconda love situations play out in *Beloved*.

The anaconda strikes in a very interesting way in this novel. It attacks in two instances and with two characters, Sethe and Beloved. However, they each play an anaconda and a victim. In the first case, Sethe becomes the anaconda, loving her daughter so desperately that she would rather kill her than see her returned to the hands of a slave owner. Beloved then reciprocates the extreme love when she returns eighteen years later to recapture the mother she lost. In this chapter, I will examine
each instance of anaconda love and then explain the way in which Sethe was freed from the anaconda.

_Beloved_ was Morrison's fifth novel, and it is somewhat different from her previous books in that it is set in post-Civil war years whereas the others focus on near-real time. Therefore, the historic experience of slavery in America is much closer to the surface, much closer to memory for the characters of _Beloved_.

_Beloved_ was specifically inspired by real, historic cases of infanticide:

Among infanticidal accounts involving African American children born to slaves, most occurred in order to prevent children born into captivity from suffering the inevitable pain of slavery's inhumanity. One such true story involved a runaway slave, Margaret Garner, who tried to kill her four children when she was about to be caught by slave trackers. Like Morrison's fictional character Sethe, Garner was found at her mother-in-law's house in Cincinnati. Various versions of this case are recorded and it was incorporated into _The Black Book_, the scrapbook of African American history Morrison helped put together in 1974. In her essay, "Narrative Possibilities at Play," Giulia Scarpa tracks the impact of the Garner story in Morrison's writing. She says, "Morrison says that she was not at all interested in recording Garner's life as lived, but rather she wanted to invent it. With _Beloved_, Morrison has certainly succeeded in reinventing the extreme act of love of a slave mother and transformed it into a powerful metaphor" (93).
Morrison's vision in this story, as in her other novels, grows not only from the African American tradition but also reflects her affinity with the moral dilemmas acted out in ancient Greek drama. Morrison majored in classical literature during her undergraduate college years and she acknowledges that there is an affinity in her writing with ancient tragedy. We see, for instance, a similarity between the story of Beloved and that of Medea, a story of infanticide written by Euripides in 431 B.C. While the motivation of each woman is different, they are linked by the act of killing their children under extreme emotional distress.

Having been abandoned by her husband, Medea succeeds in the vengeful killing of her children. Medea, a fairly wealthy woman, exhibits the lack of importance of her children with this act. Their value dropped with the exit of her husband, and suddenly, they were more valuable dead than alive. This convenient disposability of life highlights the difference between Medea’s wealthy privilege and Sethe’s slave existence. Sethe is willing to kill her children in order to save them from a horrific life of enslavement, while Medea kills her children in order to maintain her pride and destroy her husband’s spirit.

Sociobiologist C. George Boeree would describe Medea’s motivation in instinctual behavioral terms. After all, mate selection dictates that women choose men on the basis of their ability to protect and provide for their offspring. When that contract has been breached and trust is broken, women may be driven to destroy the only thing that would remain important to the male: his children.
Such motivation may seem particularly unenlightened to women today; it may seem nearly alien, in fact, to young mothers who are accustomed to being both nurturers and bread winners. However, it is also important to remember that the entire basis upon which Sethe killed her daughter is perhaps the most alien to today’s society.

While today’s reader is commonly aware of the horrors inflicted on slaves during the 1800’s, Morrison is able to paint a frighteningly vivid picture of the life Sethe lead at Sweet Home, the Kentucky plantation where she was born and raised as property. During her time compiling The Black Book, Morrison was able to get first hand accounts of the conditions of Southern slaves. Slaves experienced the loss of their heritage and family traditions, deplorable working conditions and excessive abuse. Morrison incorporated these elements into Beloved, but also added other wounds to Sethe’s psyche.

As a young child, Sethe witnessed the hanging death of her mother, an event that would leave its mark on Sethe’s maternal makeup. This was the first time that Sethe realized how disposable black human beings were to slave owners. As she grew, she was fortunate to be placed in the plantation’s home rather than working in the fields. This did not protect her, however, from the abuse and humiliating attacks of the plantation’s caretaker, Schoolteacher. It was at his hands that Sethe suffered the most emotionally and physically devastating event of her life. By following Schoolteacher’s instructions, his two young nephews held down the pregnant and nursing Sethe and stole her milk. It was this event that separated Sethe’s emotional
state and maternal protection from that of other slaves. To Sethe, the act of stealing her mother's milk was worse than if they had killed her. This triggered her extremist desire to protect her children from this monster of a slave owner. This caused the anaconda to come to life within her.

After suffering horrifying acts of degradation at the hands of a slave owner, Sethe finally frees herself by running toward the North. The journey is a difficult one. She is pregnant and, having sent her children on ahead, she attempts to make the trip alone. Miraculously, Sethe succeeds in her task, having given birth to her daughter Denver along the way. This impossible feat is a clear example of the lengths Sethe is willing to go for her children. Her passage into freedom provides strength for the anaconda.

Sethe’s crossing into freedom with her children transforms her relationship with them. Terry Otten claims that “having entered the free state, Sethe cannot allow her children to return to slavery [and] her love becomes more boundless and free”(Crime 57). This boundless love becomes fuel for the anaconda. For the exslave, this time spent in freedom provided more time for her to worry about her children’s safety, thereby giving more power to the anaconda. Every day that Sethe enjoys freedom with her children in Cincinnati is another day that the anaconda gains power. By the time the slave owner appears to recapture Sethe and her children, the anaconda has coiled itself around all of the children. If left alone a moment longer, the anaconda may have claimed the life of all of her children, and not just Beloved.
It is impossible to miss the depth of love that Sethe holds for Beloved. Morrison alerts the reader immediately to this fundamental and crucial reality. In the novel's second epigraph Morrison gives us the origin of her name, again a Biblical reference, Romans 9:25, "I will call them my people, which were not my people; and her beloved, which was not beloved." Scarpa examines the use of this passage: "This oxymoron conceals the traps of duplicity that Morrison cherishes and hints at the power of language to change things by defining them" (94). Morrison's play on words highlights not only her education in classical literature, but also her family's influence and knowledge of Biblical text.

After murdering Beloved, Sethe exchanges ten minutes of sex with a stone engraver so that he would write the word "Beloved" on her tombstone. This scenario is both repulsive and touching. While we may find Sethe's behavior morally reprehensible, her motivation is pure because children of slaves most often were abandoned in unmarked, soon forgotten graves, and so Sethe guarantees through sacrifice of her body a kind of immortality for Beloved, the sacrificial child, in this section of Morrison's narrative labyrinth.

At her daughter's funeral, Sethe remembers only two words spoken by the preacher: "Dearly Beloved." She remembers those because from her perspective, it is "All there was to say" (5). The simplicity of this statement is powerful and to the point. The anaconda love has succeeded. It crept up on Beloved during Sethe's journey North, coiled itself around her during their days of freedom, and swallowed the baby girl at the same moment the knife went across her neck. With its prey
swallowed, the anaconda rests, waiting to spring should the situation present itself. With the predator within her silent, Sethe has nothing left to do but continue with her life.

Sethe lives in her mother-in-law's house with her only remaining daughter, Denver. The murdered child's ghost haunts the house. The baby ghost succeeds in driving away not only Sethe's two sons, Howard and Buglar, but also any visitor from the surrounding community who attempts to befriend Sethe. Paul D, a fellow slave from Sweet Home, arrives, takes up residence and brings back to Sethe the memories she has been trying to forget, both those of anguish and those of hope. Their attempt to live together is abruptly interrupted by the arrival of a young woman who calls herself Beloved. It has been eighteen years since the Sethe's anaconda was laid to rest, and now we see it emerge to assist a new ally: Beloved.

The arrival of Beloved marks the beginning of the end for Sethe and Paul D. Any chance at having a normal, reciprocating relationship is sabotaged with Beloved's return. In short, she takes possession of the house, runs Paul D out of it, and the three women start a life of self-absorption and recrimination.

The relationship between Sethe and Beloved proves calamitous. Terry Otten refers to an "intimacy of destructive rage incited by feelings of love" (Crime 194). Beloved's anaconda is one that thrives on anger. Beloved not only wants to overpower Sethe, but control her completely, mind and body. The destructive rage that Sethe and Beloved exhibit obviously drove Sethe to infanticide and it compels Beloved to claim possession of Sethe's self. Sethe is convinced that Beloved is her
own baby girl, resurrected and brought back into her life. Finally, Sethe gets the chance to explain her motives to Beloved and the opportunity to hear her daughter say "I forgive you" even though Sethe never admits guilt.

In her "unspeakable things, unspoken" soliloquy, Sethe claims that though she does not "have to explain a thing," she will. "Why I did it. How if I hadn't killed her she would have died..." (200). The more Beloved demands of her, the more "Sethe pleads for forgiveness, counting, listing again and again her reasons: that Beloved was more important, meant more to her than her own life" (246), "that what she had done was right because it came from true love" (251).

Beloved’s return is a resurrection, literally. She emerges from the river. Morrison uses water as metaphor and most often, as a symbol of birth, throughout Beloved. Water symbolizes the torturous passage of a slave ship en route to America, a kind of backwards rebirth from freedom into bondage. Sethe’s daughter Denver was born on the river that Sethe was about to cross on her way to freedom. Her waters broke into the water thus extending the metaphor “crossing the river” to freedom.

In another Biblical metaphor, Morrison invests Denver, Beloved’s sister, with a near disciple’s devotion to her dead sister’s memory. Denver, from the beginning, had a special relationship with Beloved. Moments after Beloved was killed, her mother, still covered with Beloved’s blood nurses Denver. Denver, "swallowed her [Beloved’s] blood right along with [their] mother’s milk" (252). Morrison completes another Biblical analogy in this description of communion, drinking the blood of
salvation, and in exchange for Beloved's sacrifice, Denver keeps her sister's memory alive.

The ritual of baptism in many religions is the symbolic act of "washing away sins" and being "reborn." Certainly, Beloved's arrival is interpreted by her mother and sister as rebirth and resurrection. Beloved's watery resurrection is predicted by Denver, who sees and describes a vision: "I saw a white dress holding onto you... It looked just like you. Kneeling next to you while you were praying. Had its arm around your waist" (emphasis added 43-44). Beloved's anaconda is already beginning to coil itself around Sethe, even before the appearance of the young woman. Sethe is not alarmed by this dream. She and Denver speak openly and without concern about the details of the dress. Her demeanor implies that seeing visions are common. The supernatural and its role in African American tradition is usually woven into Morrison's narratives. Most importantly, Denver's vision is a clue about the intertwining relationship between Sethe and Beloved and predicts the nearly complete and destructive immersion of the two.

Beloved arrives, apparently risen from the nearby river. For hours after she emerges from the water, she hasn't the strength to hold her head up or walk. She simply lies down against a tree and sleeps. Her actions mirror those of newborns who, after the trauma and exertion of birth, sleep for several hours. Sethe, upon seeing the young woman, needs to excuse herself and run to the privy, where "the water she voided was endless" (63). This is, again, a symbol of birth and the release of a woman's amniotic fluid.
Almost instantly, the relationship between Sethe and Beloved begins to show the signs of destruction. Beloved begins immediately to push away the few people that Sethe has let into her life, including Paul D. Beloved's anaconda does not want witnesses to its task. Instead, Beloved plays the helpless victim, knowing that the mother within Sethe will respond, thereby letting her reciprocating relationship with Paul D fall by the wayside.

Beloved has exclusive insight into portions of Sethe's life. She is aware not only of certain events that occurred at Sweet Home, but also how those events affected Sethe's life. Still, Beloved begs for detailed accounts of these events. In fact, she seems insatiable concerning Sethe's history.

Sethe wants only to please Beloved with stories of the past, but "every mention of past life hurt. Everything in it was painful or lost" (72). Beloved nearly swallow's Sethe's "self" whole, possessing her in a way no other person is able to do. Beloved seems to have no independent self, and is barely able to contain herself at night when they are sleeping in separate rooms, let alone the numerous hours "nine or ten of them each day but one" (123) when Sethe is away at work.

Left alone after Paul D's desertion, the three women allow waves of their passionate feelings to emerge without interference. Scarpa explains,

In this section of the novel, the absence of spoken words connoted the profound intimacy among characters and their absolute capacity to communicate symbiotically, telepathically. It is a unique and magical moment... Sethe is rejuvenated. She feels free: "Think about all I ain't
got to remember no more... I don’t have to remember nothing. I don’t even have to explain”(183). (100)

It is this memory that plays such an important role in the relationship between Sethe and Beloved. While Sethe’s past remains painful to her, it is her “rememory”(265) that Beloved needs in order to complete her “self.” In the crucial fourth soliloquy, we see the convergence of the mother and daughters which gives a sense of completion.

Beloved
You are my sister
You are my daughter
You are my face; you are me
I have found you again; you have come back to me
You are my Beloved
You are mine
You are mine
You are mine (266)

Sethe receives emotional healing from her relationship with Beloved. By nurturing the grown child, Sethe feels psychologically repaired. She is warmed by Beloved’s affection. Sethe believes that the attention she receives from the girl is different from Denver’s affection. Morrison writes, “Sethe was flattered by Beloved’s open, quiet devotion. The same adoration from her daughter [Denver] would have annoyed her; made her chill at the thought of having raised a ridiculously
dependent child. But the company of this sweet, if peculiar, guest pleased her the way a zealot pleases his teacher” (71).

However, the anaconda love between Sethe and Beloved soon becomes consuming. Sethe quits her job and immerses herself into supplying Beloved’s wants and needs; the anaconda’s love begins to squeeze. Sethe begins to lose self, but so does Beloved. Her tooth falls out and “Beloved looked at the tooth and thought, This is it. Next would be her arm, her hand, a toe. She had two dreams: exploding and being swallowed” (emphasis added 133).

The relationship between Sethe and Beloved depicts the calamitous potentiality of boundless love. Terry Otten makes this point eloquently. “Freedom in Morrison’s novels is always perilous, and a mother’s freedom to love her child is exceedingly dangerous- it is potentially self-consumptive” (Horrific 654). It is Denver who first understands the capacity of love to murder, because it is she who first senses Beloved’s murderous intent in the Clearing when Beloved almost strangles Sethe. Denver comes to realize that Beloved has returned to exact restitution from Sethe. Ashruf H.A. Rushdy rightly sees Beloved and Denver as polar opposites: one the incarnation of Sethe’s guilt, the other the symbol of hope. He comments: “Beloved accuses while Denver embraces, Beloved is unforgiving while Denver is loving” (303).

Only Denver is able to extricate herself from this swirling eddy of destructive love. It is Denver who senses the anaconda’s presence and its intent on swallowing Sethe. Denver, ironically, has always possessed “freedom” unknown to any other
black characters in the novel. She is not only a daughter conceived as a result of parental love, she is the only black character in this story born in freedom. Without slavery’s shackles, Denver can ultimately deliver Sethe from the coils of the anaconda.

Denver becomes frightened for Sethe and pleads with the community of women who previously rejected Sethe to come help save her from the obsessive ghost of her dead baby. In this passage, Morrison exhibits her knowledge of African American oral traditions. As the women arrive at 124 Bluestone Road, they act as a single being sent there to evict the thing that is harming one of their own. “Ella hollered. Instantly the kneelers and the standers joined her. They stopped praying and took a step back to the beginning. In the beginning there were no words. In the beginning there was the sound, and they all knew what the sound sounded like” (318). The women of the chorus, the thirty neighborhood women who come to pray and sing for Sethe, though they may have been horrified by Sethe’s “rough choice,” fully understand it.

The chorus comes to deliver Sethe from the ghost. Morrison writes “the voices of the women searched for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words. Building voice upon voice until they found it, and when they did it was a wave of sound wide enough to sound deep water and knock the pods off chestnut trees. It broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash” (261). Once again Morrison has “baptized” one of her characters. This
time, it was Sethe who was washed clean, saved from the certain death of anaconda love.

In spite of its inexhaustible efforts, Beloved’s anaconda failed in its primary task of swallowing Sethe. The women of the community were able to save Sethe from total consumption. It did succeed, however, in its secondary goals. For the period of time when Beloved (the woman) was in 124 Bluestone Road, Sethe was able to nurture and care for the child in Beloved. This reason, coupled with the critical arrival of Paul D, was why the baby ghost materialized. She desperately missed the mother that cared for her for the first two years of her life. Beloved’s anaconda also proved to be helpful to Sethe. By repeatedly discussing Sethe’s past, Beloved forced Sethe to deal with the atrocities that occurred in her life. Sethe was then able to purge some of the guilty feelings she had surrounding the death of her daughter. Also, Denver’s intervention at the end of the novel provided a reason for the community members to enter into Sethe’s life. This wouldn’t have been possible without the existence of Beloved’s anaconda.

The life span of Sethe’s anaconda was somewhat different from that of Beloved’s. From the beginning, Sethe’s anaconda appeared to contain more power than that of Beloved’s. Perhaps it was the maturity of Sethe’s love that gave it greater strength. Sethe’s anaconda was created at the Sweet Home plantation, gained power during her trip north, and finally swallowed its prey in Cincinnati. It wasn’t killed, however, until Sethe was saved by the ladies of her community. It was at that point
that Sethe's life became hers again. She had accepted her past, shared her rememory, and nurtured her baby daughter, and with that she was able to regain her own strength as a person.
Chapter 3: **The Bluest Eye**: Feeding the Anaconda with innocence

*The Bluest Eye* is not a love story. It is a story of destruction, brutality, incest and lost innocence. Cholly Breedlove is the thematic catalyst in *The Bluest Eye*. He instigates destruction for himself and the members of his family, particularly his daughter Pecola and his wife Pauline. Cholly Breedlove is the most clearly defined predator in *The Bluest Eye*, but he is not the only one. This novel is the home to two anacondas; one is blatant, the other shrouded.

Although Morrison did not publish the phrase “anaconda love” until 1977, it is apparent in *The Bluest Eye* that she was discovering the power of extremist love and the destructive capabilities it carried with it. This novel follows the same characteristics of anaconda love that was exhibited in the first two chapters. However, in this novel we discover an altered anaconda, one that has the ability to feed upon its own host.

Extremist love works in two different ways in *The Bluest Eye*. In the first case, Cholly Breedlove is the aggressor, or anaconda. His “love,” unlike the anaconda love in the two previous novels, is born out of profound hatred. He hates all of his victims/lovers and in fact, distrusts the very concept of love. This anaconda enjoys the pain that is associated with the squeezing of life from its victim. It chooses a victim that is his own close relation and one that is physically and emotionally weak. The anaconda will only be satisfied when it is able to crush the hopes and dreams of its victim, depriving the victim of any chance of normalcy within herself and the community. Death occurs when the spirit of the victim is dead.
The second example of anaconda love reveals a surprising predator. This anaconda instills a vision of perfection, beauty, and love that entangles Pecola Breedlove in an unattainable dream. Pecola so longs for this unreachable wish that she becomes victimized like Hagar and Sethe. Each yearns so deeply for the object of their affection that they become delusional, unable to see reason or boundaries in their love. In this light, Pecola becomes her own anaconda, victimizing herself with this unreachable dream.

Pecola’s anaconda is a vehicle for escape from a life that is filled with cruelty and ugliness. This anaconda will succeed in its mission when it can deliver Pecola the one thing she truly wants, blue eyes. Obviously, this task is never accomplished, and Pecola is left with only the harm that the anaconda brings.

Morrison has acknowledged that in The Bluest Eye she was writing about “beauty, miracles, and self-imagery”(Horrific 653). She was writing about how people relate to one another and how they use or misuse love. This misunderstanding of the theory of love is the basis for the anaconda love scenario in this novel. The first subject is Cholly Breedlove. I will analyze his impact on his family and his role as father and the role he takes as anaconda. Secondly, I will discuss Pecola’s love affair with blue eyes and what that represents. I will explain how it leads ultimately to her loss of innocence and sanity. I will also examine Morrison’s adaptations of classical literature including stories from the Bible that pertain to incestuous relationships and their affiliation to The Bluest Eye. Finally, I will discuss
Morrison's theory of the crime of innocence and how that is depicted in *The Bluest Eye*.

In his essay "Horrific Love in Toni Morrison's Fiction," literary critic Terry Otten eloquently describes Morrison's driving force behind the story of Cholly Breedlove. He writes, "In the story of the ironically named Cholly Breedlove, [Morrison] characterizes a quest and capacity for love malformed and wrenched by the viciousness of a white-dominated culture that perverts its every expression"(Horrific 653). The malformed love that Otten refers to is the result of Cholly's first attempt at intercourse. His first attempt to share intimacy with a woman becomes a humiliating and degrading experience and this degradation diverts his love into hate. Cholly and his young companion, Darlene are interrupted during their first sexual encounter.

Darlene froze and cried out. He thought he had hurt her, but when he looked at her face, she was staring wildly at something over his shoulder. He jerked around. There stood two white men. One with a spirit lamp, the other with a flashlight. There was no mistake about their being white; he could smell it... 'Get on wid it, nigger,' said the flashlight one... 'Come on, coon. Faster. You ain't doing nothing for her'... Cholly, moving faster, looked at Darlene. He hated her... He wanted to strangle her, but instead he touched her with his foot. 'We got to get, girl. Come on!' (117-118)
Cholly’s encounter with the white men associated sex with hate and humiliation. From that point on he sees love, both physical and emotional, as something bitter and angry. A pivotal point in the novel that exemplifies this is his violent rape of his daughter that leaves her unconscious on the kitchen floor.

Can there be justification for Cholly’s temperament and inability to express tenderness? He himself was parentless, and therefore lacked a paternal role model. He is certainly not anyone’s idea of a perfect parent. He turns his attention to his children only when he wants them to do something or when he needs an outlet for his insults beyond those that he levels at his wife Pauline.

In 1996, President Clinton asked that a task force be formed to investigate and strengthen the role of fathers in American families. The resulting committee, The Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, has published extensive research surrounding the role fathers play in their families. The committee found that in some cases fathers may experience a duality in their role as parent. In their report, they stated that most fathers “help protect and provide for their children while teaching them how to negotiate the difficult experiences they will encounter as they make the transition to adulthood” (Marsiglio 19). This was a trait that Cholly could not exhibit for his children. Usually drunk and never attentive, Cholly cared little about his role as a father. Is the anaconda a nurturing animal? Does it raise its young and teach it to prepare for the outside world? No. Like Cholly Breedlove, the anaconda’s responsibility for its young stops after birth.
Cholly does, however, fall under the second category that Marsiglio and his team investigated. The committee notes that “There can be a darker side to fathers’ presence in their children’s lives. Fathers sometimes present a danger to their families and trigger their children’s self-destructive behavior. Father’s have the potential to bring about real harm when they are physically or mentally abusive” (Marsiglio 19). Cholly Breedlove was both, triggering both Pecola and her brother Sammy’s self-destructive behavior. While Pecola withdrew into a fantasy world where she was beautiful and well–loved, Sammy used his home life and his relationship with his father as a weapon against the world. It allowed him to be vicious to other people and “to run away from home no less than twenty-seven times” (38).

Cholly’s lack of parenting skills derive from his own upbringing. Abandoned on a garbage heap, he was unable to experience normal parenting. As described in the novel, “The aspect of married life that dumbfounded him and rendered him totally dysfunctional was the appearance of children. Having no idea of how to raise children, and having never watched any parent raise himself, he could not ever comprehend what such a relationship should be” (126). While parenting skills are primarily learned, it is also necessary to have some shred of embedded compassion for other human beings. Cholly lacks this ability.

In his article on dynamic conflict, Morris Eagle discusses a theory that has some bearing in the case against Cholly Breedlove and his inability to function
normally within his family. Eagle says that dynamic conflict does not lay blame in environmental failures or traumas. Under this premise, we cannot blame Cholly’s upbringing for his infractions against his family. The humiliation he suffered during intercourse at the hands of the white hunters should not be an excuse for his subsequent rape of his own daughter. Instead, when dealing with dynamic conflict, one must “think in terms of wishes and fantasies that are embedded in conflict and anxiety. Being compelled by certain unrealistic wishes and fantasies about which one is conflicted and anxious can also be understood as a developmental deficit” (Morris 1). By following this line of reasoning, we can see that Cholly’s rape of Pecola was in fact, a bizarre fantasy that Cholly acted out in order to resolve an inner conflict, and doing so was an embedded necessity, not an act of unique free will. The anaconda within Cholly needed a prey. It chose a victim that was weak both emotionally and physically.

During the minutes before the rape, Morrison reveals Cholly’s train of thought. She writes:

The sequence of his emotions was revulsion, guilt, pity, then love. His revulsion was a reaction to her young, helpless, hopeless presence. Her back hunched that way; her head to one side as though crouching from a permanent and unrelieved blow… She was a child – unburdened – why wasn’t she happy? The clear statement of her misery was an accusation. He wanted to break her neck – but tenderly.(127)
Moments later he would crawl across the floor, and begin his attack by caressing Pecola’s foot. The reader can almost picture Cholly as an animal, slowly stalking and then devouring his victim.

What brought Cholly Breedlove to the point of rape? His actions cannot be excused, but analyzing some of his thought processes will give an insight into his depravity.

Pecola unwittingly made one gesture while washing dishes that would bring Cholly to his breaking point. She innocently scratched the back of her calf with her foot. This simple gesture catapulted Cholly back in time to the moment when he met his wife Pauline, who also innocently scratched her leg with her foot. Interestingly, it was not simply the action that attracted Cholly to Pauline; it was the fact that Pauline had a deformity, a clubbed foot.

Pauline was ever aware of her deformity and treated it as an excuse to stay away from people. It provided her with a screen behind which she could hide. However, this physical difference did not repel Cholly; it attracted him. This is another example of how Morrison contradicts what is normally expected in society while creating her characters.

Sociobiologist George Boeree talks about this physical attraction in mate selection. Curiously, Cholly’s attraction to Pauline’s ailment negates most research on the subject of mate selection. Boeree says “We should find healthiness attractive and, conversely, illness unattractive. We should find ‘perfect’ features attractive, and deformities unattractive. We should find vitality, strength, vigor attractive”(2). It
would be easy to assume that Cholly chose Pauline as a wife in order to take care of
her. More plausible, however, is that he saw Pauline as weak and knew that he would
be able to control or be superior to her as a husband.

Cholly Breedlove is the ultimate despicable man. He goes against every ideal
that society constructs, perfect husband, provider, father, member of community and
church. None of these titles ever fit Cholly Breedlove. After succeeding in putting
his family out on the street, Morrison describes the man Cholly had become. “Cholly
Breedlove, then, a renting black, having put his family outdoors, had catapulted
himself beyond the reaches of human consideration. He had joined the animals; was
indeed, an old dog, a snake, a ratty nigger”(emphasis added 19).

In an interview, Toni Morrison said of her characters that “If you judge them
all by the best that they have done, they are wonderful. If you judge them by the
worst that they have done, they are terrible”(McKay 423). However, it is difficult to
find the good in Cholly Breedlove. Any remnant of goodness left him at a young age.
The white men who interrupted his first sexual encounter took with them his dignity
and most of his compassion for women. The father who denied his existence took
Cholly’s identity as a man and his self-worth. What was left was skepticism and a
mean heart. Therefore, Pecola Breedlove started out in the world with a large strike
against her, her father.

Children are a product of their environment. Pecola’s environment was a two-
room storefront filled with anger, hostility and hatred. The entire Breedlove family
was ugly. They were not simply physically ugly, but ugly from the inside out. The
narrator tells us that “You looked at them and wondered why they were so ugly; you looked closely and could not find the source. Then you realized that it came from conviction, their conviction. It was as though some mysterious all-knowing master had given each one a cloak of ugliness to wear, and they had each accepted it without question”(34). This perceived ugliness wore Pecola down. It hammered away at her until she was nothing but an ugly shell of a girl. She never spoke or looked people in the eye. She never questioned other people’s opinions. In her life, she had only made two friends. People continually took advantage of and were cruel to her.

It is little wonder, then, that Pecola’s anaconda emerged at such an early age. One of the ways in which it manifested itself would be through a friend’s Christmas present, a beautiful white baby doll with golden hair and blue eyes. This doll triggered the anaconda within Pecola. This symbol of the anaconda was physical perfection. It was, however, hated by its owner, Pecola’s friend Claudia. She explains her hatred: “Adults, older girls, shops, magazines, newspapers, window signs – all the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every girl treasured. ‘Here,’ they said, ‘this is beautiful, and if you are on this day ‘worthy’ you may have it’”(20). Claudia’s reaction to the doll would be to take it apart to see what made it so beautiful. Unfortunately for Pecola, she not only bought into the vision of beauty, she dreamed of emulating it. From this point forward, she would wish of nothing else than to have beautiful, baby-doll blue eyes. Pecola’s anaconda begins to squeeze its victim from within.
Pecola's psyche had been profoundly damaged by the society around her. No matter what her interior held, be it unquestionable loyalty, compassion, or tenderness, a racist society judged her by her skin. To the rest of the world, even her family, she was worthless because she held no physical attribute that society found worthy. The community had substituted beauty for virtue. In his book *The Crime of Innocence*, Terry Otten explains how in *The Bluest Eye*, "the black community has allowed itself to be corrupted by a simplistic notion that devalues human beings solely on condition of their seeming ugliness" (Crime12).

It is this complete feeling of worthlessness that primes Pecola for consumption by the anaconda. Pecola initially welcomes the anaconda into her life. It becomes a comforting thing, something to help distract her from the daily routine. Like Milkman, Pecola sees no harm in her relationship with the predator. However, Milkman, after several years of feeding the anaconda, realizes that it has become something destructive and attempts to stop it by halting his relationship with Hagar. Pecola, on the other hand, continues to support her anaconda, continually giving it power by believing in society's view of beauty. If, at any given moment, she had questioned what was truly beautiful (inner strength, compassion, spirituality), she would have killed the anaconda.

Morrison tells Pecola's story in a series of circles, always looping back in the search of an unquestionable truth. What was the true reason behind what happened to Pecola? That is the one question that is posed to the reader, but is never unequivocally answered by Morrison. In fact, *The Bluest Eye* is an example of how incoherent
history, and the lives of the people who make up that history, really are. It is a composition of scattered images that make up the lives of the characters. Morrison organizes this piece non-linearly, revealing the most shocking part of the story at the very beginning. Within the first three pages of the novel, we are told that Pecola has had her father’s baby.

At the beginning of The Bluest Eye, Claudia tells us that she cannot explain why the events happened the way they did. Nor does she give any hint of empathy toward Pecola by anyone in the community other than herself and her sister. In her article “Worthy Messengers,” Catherine Rainwater discusses the reaction by the community to the trauma inflicted on Pecola: “They merely used her life as we use a story; her failure was a means of assessing their own imagined success; her weakness, an index to their ‘fantasy of... strength’ ([The Bluest Eye]159)”(101). The members of the community use Pecola’s tragedy as a way of rationalizing away their own imperfections. No matter how bad a parent they may be, no matter how poor or ugly, they will always feel that they are better than the Breedlove family. Clearly, the Breedloves are the objects of racism from both the white and black world. It is largely an unspoken status, one that the African American community rarely acknowledges to the outside white world and one that Morrison must have observed growing up in a mid-west segregated community.

As with all of her novels, Morrison borrows a portion of the Bible to help illustrate the father/daughter incest The Bluest Eye. Leviticus Chapter 18, the book of laws, lists several commandments that warn against “lying with” or “uncovering
the nakedness of kinsmen." There are nearly thirty relationships that are discussed
(father's wife, daughter-in-law, mother's sister, etc.), but none that clearly mentions
fathers lying with daughters.

Interestingly, two of the more well-known Old Testament stories dealing with
father/daughter incest cast the women as the aggressor, as if to say that women were
responsible for the corruption of the male. This point is raised towards the end of The
Bluest Eye when Claudia and Frieda overhear portions of conversations between
neighbor ladies. The women speculate that Pecola was not simply the innocent
victim. The neighbor ladies discuss this.

'They ought to take her out of school.'

'Ought to. She carry some of the blame.'

'Oh, come on. She ain't but twelve or so.'

'Yeah, but you never know. How come she didn't fight him?'

'Maybe she did.'

'Yeah, well you never know' (147).

It is important to remember that Morrison's use of Biblical text is not used as
a mirror for her own novels, but simply an insight into the source of her themes
and/or ideas. While many of the details between chosen Biblical verse and her
novels are extremely different, some show interesting similarities. For example, the
story of the Breedlove family and that of Lot and his daughters in Genesis 19: 30-38
reveal some of those similarities. Lot fled Sodom and Gomorrah and took his
daughters to hide in a cave. Believing that they would have no other chance to be
with a man, the daughters decided that they should sleep with their father, thereby
“preserving offspring from [their] father”(Genesis 19: 32). They proceed to get their
father drunk on wine and then each take a turn sleeping with him. From these two
sexual unions, sons are born who are listed as the beginnings of two tribes of Israel.
The entire myth is presented without moral judgement but simply as the story that
explains a part of humankind’s perpetuation after God has destroyed the sinful
population of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Lot, like Cholly Breedlove, displaced his family from their home. Both men
were under the influence of alcohol during their incestuous episodes. Lot’s
daughters had a rational explanation for their seduction, however deviant it may be.
Pecola’s involvement in the rape was considerably more subtle. The earlier
mentioned conversation between the two neighbor ladies hints at this theory. Even
though Pecola was only twelve, some believe that she played a large part in the rape.
Morrison herself refers in interviews to “the sin of innocence.” Is it possible that
Pecola enticed the anaconda? Could the simple action of scratching her foot have
been done as some seductive act? No. What appears as enticement is actually
explained through the theory of the crime of innocence.

The crime of innocence has been a repeated theme in Morrison’s works, but
nowhere has it been so well defined as in The Bluest Eye. By following Pecola’s
traumatic transition from innocence to experience, the reader is subjected to the
dangerous combination of good and evil. In this novel, innocence has the ability to
incapacitate and evil has the power to free the self. Terry Otten explains; “Ostracized
from the American dream by virtue of her blackness and from a black community too much corrupted by the values of the white culture, {Pecola} can only succeed in her insanity, having borne the effects of a devastating fall. Her violent passage from innocence to experience ironically results in the perpetual innocence of insanity that alone can grant her the ‘blue eyes’ which will assure her acceptance” (Crime 9). It is through her rape that Pecola becomes “free”: free in her own mind to indulge herself with her blue eyes.

Pecola suffers the same fate as many of the other characters in the novel including her mother, the socialite wannabe Geraldine, and the three whores who live in her building; she becomes hardened by experience. Like all of the women, Pecola begins her trip towards experience in an unassuming way. After realizing that she is offensive to society’s views of beauty, Pecola begins her search for blue eyes.

Her search, which ultimately leads her to self-destruction and insanity, is aided by her father and Soaphead Church. The physical violation by her father is compounded by the spiritual violation by Soaphead Church, who convinces Pecola that only he can grant her blue eyes. It is this melding of good (Pecola) and evil (Cholly and Soaphead) that finalize the structure of lost innocence in the novel.

Toni Morrison has mentioned in numerous interviews that she writes to learn what she doesn’t already know. Her desire is to become intimately acquainted with people, groups, and individuals. With the theory of anaconda love, Morrison does become intimately aware of the process of love and insanity. She transfers this knowledge to her readers through her narration. She gives cause for the reader to
question her own knowledge of life's detailed subject matter. In this way, Morrison becomes not only a teacher of her novels, but a therapist as well; challenging the reader to dissect the thoughts and emotions of the characters and the readers themselves.

Her writing requires a great deal of response from all levels. In her article "Remembering the Mother Tongue," Susan Huddleston Edgerton explains that “the reader who engages with her texts, who is seduced by them, can’t help but respond to them as well. As readers, we must always write part of the story for ourselves. In that way Morrison provides a text that listens, and listening is love” (358).

This seduction has become a fine art form for Morrison. She excels in it. She is able to provoke intense emotions both in the characters and the readers. We find ourselves engrossed in the lives and scenarios of each novel. "Anaconda Love" has become just one tool in her wide repertoire of seductive devises.
Conclusion: The Impact of Anaconda Love

As simply a reader of Toni Morrison's novels, it is impossible to pinpoint the moment when she first thought of "anaconda love." As I argued in this thesis, she introduced the term in 1977, but the theory itself is apparent in her first novel which was published seven years earlier. Therefore, I feel it is safe to assume that this particular complexity of human emotion is one which Morrison has been intrigued for the majority of her career.

On further investigation, we can also see degrees of anaconda love in other novels by Morrison. The most obvious occurs in Jazz, the story of three people involved in a passionate love triangle. The complexity of this anaconda love situation is different from that of the three books I discussed. In Jazz, we find an initially happy couple, Joe and Violet, whose lives become chaotic when Joe falls in love with young Dorcas. His love for her is "one of those deepdown, spooky loves that made him so sad and happy that he shot her just to keep the feeling going"(3). His intense love for the young girl created the anaconda, and as its power grew, so did the anaconda that had been born within Violet. Her husband's infidelity caused Violet such extreme emotional distress that she quickly lost all grasp on reality and let her anaconda take over. At its climax, the anacondas in Jazz succeed in swallowing both victims and hosts.

In her most recent novel, Paradise, Morrison has developed a new anaconda. This anaconda works for an entire community, defining a loyalty among its residents that is the source of its strength. Due to the number of people that support this
anaconda, it proves to be both powerful and vulnerable. Its power comes for the residents' loyalty to each other and the safety of their all black community, but its vulnerability stems from the fear of change and the power that is manifested through the women of a nearby "convent." Due to the complexity of this anaconda, its success or failure is difficult to measure. It does, however, maintain the theory of extremist love that has been discussed in this thesis.

While anaconda love is not the only way to investigate *Song of Solomon*, *Beloved* and *The Bluest Eye*, this theory does illuminate the complexities of human emotion that Morrison seems to enjoy writing about. The elevation of emotion that anaconda love promotes provides Morrison with the freedom to explore the relationship between extreme emotions, particularly love and hate. We are thereby able to closely examine her characters through this process and are allowed the space to respond emotionally to them. By varying the mode of operation and goals of each of her anacondas, she instantly receives a greater field on which to work.

As I discussed in this thesis, each of the anacondas in these novels operated and were motivated in different ways. They did, however, attempt to achieve the same goal. They each wanted to completely control their victims. Many, like Sethe and Cholly Breedlove, were successful in their quest. These anacondas swallowed their victims, engulfing their souls and emotions and leaving them with nothing but the human shell. Other anacondas like Beloved, Macon Dead and Ruth Foster, forced their victims to reexamine their lives, thereby promoting escape from the predator through a resurrection of the spirit.
In all cases, the presence of the anaconda signaled a drastic change in the lives of the victims and the predators themselves. There was not a single character involved in an anaconda love scenario whose life was not changed forever. Morrison's novels are not known for their happy endings, but at the conclusion of her novels, the reader is left with a sense of peace. Having traveled the emotionally exhausting journey with her characters, we find that many times we are disturbed, angered and frustrated by the time we read the final act. This is possibly one of the goals of Toni Morrison: to inspire a dramatic emotion in her readers and provide a sense of closure that is attained only through experiencing the entire anaconda love process with her characters.
Works Cited


