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Combating Invisibility: Older Women Stereotypes Revised

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Abstract

This essay discusses the difference between television and literary portrayals of middle-aged and older women in the last 30 years of the 20th century. TV writers rarely included older women in programming, and when they did, the older women were often characterized as useless, undesirable, and passive. The popular and critically acclaimed novels, *Song of Solomon* and *Paradise*, by Toni Morrison, and *The Weight of Water* and *The Pilot's Wife*, by Anita Shreve, revise the TV stereotypes, creating central, vital, and complex older female characters. These novels illuminate that a mother is to the family what a shaman is to his or her community. The methods are different, but their goals to preserve their tribe or family and their functions as healer and storyteller are the same. The authors' expansion of the older women stereotypes creates a new paradigm for measuring the value of older women.

If you were a superhero, what would your superpower be? Besides flying and X-ray vision, invisibility often captures popular choice. Imagine the mischief possible—with no fear of getting caught! On the other hand, negative complications could develop if no one could see you: people might inadvertently sit on you, kick you around, or ignore you completely. If no one knows you are there, you may not be appreciated as a person or acknowledged for the work that you do. A person without the ability to control invisibility may find it to be a hindrance rather than an asset.

Middle-aged and older women who lived during the last 30 years of the 20th century found themselves rendered thus invisible by society. Even feminists of the period largely ignored female seniors. Television writers frequently depicted this significant percent of the U.S. population as useless, undesirable, and passive—if they portrayed them at all (Davis, 1985). Television, as a major means of enculturation, will serve as the standard against which literary portrayals can be measured. Two female authors, Toni Morrison and Anita Shreve, themselves middle-aged during the last 30 years of the 20th century, highlight older women in their novels *The Pilot's Wife*, *The Weight of Water*, *Paradise*, and *Song of Solomon*, revising the stereotype of sidelined mother by giving their mature female characters shaman-like roles and functions, which revise the negative value judgments concerning older women.

One may ask, “Why these novels, why these authors?” We were interested in what middle-aged or older women, for our purposes defined as 50 years or older, had to say about themselves. But we did not want to read just anything. We wanted to read critically acclaimed literature and novels that have achieved a significant degree of popularity. So we developed criteria for selecting books for this study. They had to be written by a middle-aged or older female author, on Oprah's Book Club list, on *The New York Times*' bestseller list, and respected in academic circles. Two authors met the age requirement: Toni Morrison was 46 when she wrote *Song of Solomon* and 67 when she wrote *Paradise*; Anita Shreve was in her 50s when she wrote both *The Weight of Water* and *The Pilot's Wife*. Oprah's Book Club list stood out as a reasonable measure

of popularity. Winfrey's endorsement usually increases the sales of titles she selects (Day, 2003). The *New York Times*' long-standing list of best sellers is another measure of popularity that tells us many people are at least buying the selected novels. All selected novels have met the established criteria for popularity except for *The Weight of Water*, which instead of having gained notoriety from being included in Oprah's Book Club list has gained celebrity from being made into a movie directed by Kathryn Bigelow and starring Sean Penn, a film which won the Film and Literature Award at the Film by the Sea International Film Festival 2001. Morrison and Shreve both have won critical acclaim; their respected reputations are reflected in the collective awards they have received including PEN/L.L. Winship award, Nobel Prize for Literature, and the Pulitzer Prize. Each of the novels selected met the desired criteria.

In order to see if literature reflected or deviated from the average portrayals of popular media, it is important to look at what the standard portrayals were. Since television is the means of mass communication and is highly influential for enculturation within American society, we looked primarily at television statistics and research (Melamed, 1983). No matter when the television shows or novels were set, the fact that they were all created within the last three decades of the 20th century allows us to compare television and literary portrayals of older women.

Just as a census can be taken of a country's population, a census can also be taken of the population of the characters on TV in order to compare fact with fiction. Also keep in mind that some of the following research is decades old—on purpose. Since the novels chosen for the purpose of this study were written in a span of 30 years from 1977 to 1999, media research for those years is more applicable. A 1978 study done by Anselmo revealed that 6% of characters from 238 half-hour segments and commercials were elderly (Davis, 1985). Compared with actual census information, the elderly are noticeably underrepresented. Other studies show a similar trend of underrepresenting the elderly population (Davis, 1985). The older a person is, the less likely they are to see a reflection of themselves on television. Elissa Melamed has called the disproportion "symbolic annihilation" (1983, p.116). Discrimination of middle-aged to elderly people exists in TV shows and commercials, rendering older generations invisible.

Older people are not the only underrepresented group on television; women also suffer discrimination. Studies done in the mid 1980s show that for every one woman there are three men on television (Davis, 1985), even though women outnumber men in U.S. society, notably in the age categories above 65 years. In fact, the gap between the amount of men and the amount of women widens significantly as people age. The 1990 census showed that in the 80 to 84 years of age category, women outnumbered men 2-to-1 (U.S. Census Bureau, 1990). Astonishingly, however, research says that TV characters older than 65 were more than 90% men (Davis, 1985). In TV land, women are most likely to be in their 20s. After age 30 women start disappearing from television. Being a woman compounds the discrimination already heaped upon older people in electronic media.

The few older women characters on TV during that time period also tended to be peripheral (not a main character) and are characterized as past the most useful and important stages of life. They serve not as heroes and leaders; the women are primarily in comic relief and victim roles (Melamed, 1983). Of course, there are exceptions, such

as *The Golden Girls*. The repetitive portrayal of older women characters as peripheral and trivial reflects many television viewers' perceptions of older women. According to Davis, there are six common generalities in America concerning older people: 1.) they are rigid and inflexible; 2.) they decline in intelligence; 3.) they are less productive as workers; 4.) they are institutionalized and dependent; 5.) they are senile; and 6.) they are sexless (1985). These perceptions all have negative connotations which suggest the devaluation of older generations in American society.

In contrast, Toni Morrison in her novels *Paradise* and *Song of Solomon* and Anita Shreve in *The Weight of Water* and *The Pilot's Wife*, rather than creating older women characters who are peripheral, insignificant, and devalued, established older women characters that are visible, vital, and complex. The revisions they make instruct the reader on how to value older women's contributions to society in a new way. An examination of each author's style, an inspection of each individual novel, and an introduction to individual characters will illuminate their revisions.

There are numerous interesting and significant older women characters in several of Toni Morrison's novels, but we will highlight Consolata, age 60, and Lone DuPres, 86, from *Paradise*. In *Song of Solomon*, the character Pilate Dead, 68, illuminates the revision of older women's value within American society. The source of these women's visibility and vitality is worth considering.

In both of these novels, Morrison draws upon a convention of African-American folklore: the shaman. It is through the use of the shaman character that she is able to transcend cultural stereotypes and perceptions of older women. Shamans, because of their function and power, stand out as the most prominent member of the community. There are three important commonalities to know about when considering a shaman character.

Every shaman's main goal and purpose is to preserve the culture and heritage of his or her tribe. It is his or her responsibility to transfer the tribe's heritage from the past to the future. According to shamanistic tradition, dead ancestors are considered to be very much alive by the members of the community: "...death is not the end of existence, but merely another phase" (Vitebsky, 1997, p.1). The ability to communicate with dead tribal ancestors is the cornerstone of a shaman's power; his or her proficiency to speak to the dead is directly related to his or her power as a shaman (Vitebsky, 1997).

Shamans use their powers to heal as one of several methods to preserve their tribe. As medicine men they mitigate disease, ensure fertility, and heal the sick; if these responsibilities are successfully accomplished then the tribe prospers and continues. The ability to act as a healer to the tribal members preserves the tribe's future generations and the passing on of their heritage and culture.

A second method a shaman uses to preserve his or her tribe is the passing on of culture by relating the ancestor's wisdom, heritage, stories, and songs to younger generations. This oral tradition teaches children the values of the tribe. Shamans help young men and women transition from childhood into adulthood, helping them accept their responsibilities and roles in the tribe. This guarantees the perpetuation of the culture through the generations (Vitebsky, 1997).

In a tribal society where one might encounter a shaman figure, these clan leaders function in their tribes as the embodiment of the culture. As such, they are

uniquely qualified to speak about that society's past and present identity and to offer modes of healing in times of adversity. Their power and function give them a highly visible position in the tribe and makes them vital to the survival and health of the group (Vitebsky, 1997). When a shamanic character is encountered in one of these novels, it is a significant signal as to that character's importance.

One begins to see shaman characteristics in Lone DuPres from *Paradise*. Orphaned, unmarried, and childless, Lone has been a midwife in a rural town for 75 years with the amazing record of never losing a patient. Some of the townsfolk underestimate the intelligence of this toothless senior, who learns how to drive a car at age 79. She functions as a healer in *Paradise* by tending to pregnant women, their babies, and sick people, contributing to the overall well-being of the town. Lone helped countless women in Ruby through pregnancy and childbirth: "She taught them how to comb their breasts to set the milk flowing; what to do with the afterbirth...searched the county to get them the kind of dirt they wanted to eat...massaged their stomachs with sweet oil for hours" (Morrison, 1997, p. 271). Though not a doctor, Lone has knowledge of natural and spiritual remedies of healing. When Consolata experiences her first signs of menopause, the old midwife is there to administer herbal tea. More than these everyday remedies, she also possesses a special power—the power to raise the dead. This shaman character uses her healing power for the good of everyone in her community for more than eight decades and passes on her craft to others.

Another orphaned, unmarried, and childless character in Morrison's *Paradise*, Consolata, lives in an ex-convent near a rural community where she shelters destitute and abused women, to whom she functions as a mother. Taken by a nun from the streets at age 9, she sells vegetables and rents land to farmers to ensure that the convent-turned-safe-house stays open to whoever needs it. The healing process Consolata walks her daughters through enables them to live outside the convent after her death. Consolata's realm of influence is small, but the impact she makes on the people around her is vast. Her tribe of daughters engages in relationships with their own children, relatives, and friends as a living embodiment of the knowledge that Consolata taught them. In this way Consolata becomes a tribal preserver. Her mentor, Lone, taught her how to use spirituality to physically and emotionally heal others, and they then return to their families as whole individuals to help their children learn similar lessons.

Consolata also plays the part of a healer perfectly. Mentored by Lone, Consolata discovers and develops her supernatural abilities as a healer:

Consolata looked at the body and without hesitation removed her glasses and focused on the trickles of red discoloring his hair. She stepped in. Saw the stretch of road he had dreamed through, felt the flip of the truck, the headache, the chest pressure, the unwillingness to breathe...Inside the boy she saw a pinpoint of light receding. Pulling up energy that felt like fear, she stared at it until it widened. Then more, more, so air could come seeping, at first, then rushing rushing in...Scout opened his eyes, groaned and sat up. (Morrison, 1997, p. 245)

Just as a shaman identifies the source of a problem and then communicates with the ancestors for a solution, Consolata interacts with the dead boy's spirit in the spiritual realm, restoring his life. Lone uses this crucial moment to pass on knowledge to the next generation; and both older women have positively contributed to the larger community.

A strong shaman figure emerges in Morrison's *Song of Solomon* as well. Born without a navel, Pilate Dead is outcast from many superstitious communities. She, her daughter, and granddaughter end up living in a primitive home together in Detroit, Michigan, where they make wine for a living. Pilate uses her skills as a medicine woman to assist her sister-in-law Ruth in conceiving a son with her estranged husband. Ruth recalls, "Even before his birth he [her son] was a strong feeling—a feeling about the nasty greenish-gray powder Pilate had given her to be stirred into rainwater and put into food. But Macon came out of his sexual hypnosis in a rage and later when discovering her pregnant, tried to get her to abort" (Morrison, 1977, p. 131). Pilate created a potion that made Ruth's husband desire her after many celibate years and then stepped in to protect the unborn child from his father: "...don't take no more mess off Macon and don't ram another thing up in your womb" (Morrison, 1977, p. 132). Pilate's knowledge as a medicine woman produced a son for the Dead family, ensuring that the family name and heritage would be preserved in the community.

Pilate functions as a successful storytelling shaman. She tells Ruth's son, Milkman, stories about his grandfather's farm and his dad as a small child, introducing him to his family connections and pieces of his heritage. On his path to self-discovery, it is Aunt Pilate's song that becomes the clue to his family's past:

Sugarman done fly away

Sugarman done gone

Sugarman cut across the sky

Sugarman gone home (Morrison, 1977, p. 49)

Upon hearing children singing the song he heard Pilate sing when he was a child, Milkman connects the pieces of his family history. Pilate's song gives Milkman the information he needs to discover his heritage. Carmean comments on the importance of Pilate's stories in Milkman's life: "Pilate's stories form the nucleus of Milkman's integrating past...These stories inspire interest in other and provide a way for Milkman to discover where he might belong...Milkman can begin to think in terms of stories he might tell his own" (1993, p. 49). Milkman is introduced to his family heritage through the legend of his grandfather and then relays the legend to his relatives in Detroit, becoming a storyteller himself. Pilate achieves the passing on of culture with Milkman, preserving the family's heritage for another generation.

Morrison has found a way to develop her older women characters in a visible and vital way, helping readers to reassess their value within American society. Despite the fact that the characters still exhibit stereotypical characteristics about older women, such as physical unattractiveness and limitations, their shaman role gives them valuable means by which to impact their community. Morrison's inclusion of older women as a focal point revises the perceptions of the stereotypes, creating a new paradigm that can be used to measure the value of the older generations.

There are no shaman characters in the selected novels by Anita Shreve. Her older women characters descend from traditional American middle-class roles for women. Julia, a super grandma in *The Pilot's Wife*, is 78 years old. In *The Weight of Water*, Maren Hontvedt, age 52, is the central character. They both operate primarily in a domestic realm as housewives and/or mothers.

In the novels, a mother is to the family what a shaman is to the community. The methods are different, but the function is the same. They are both entrusted with

the preservation of their tribes. Holding a vital and visible position in their tribe, each is the embodiment of the heritage they represent. Children as well as tribe members find comfort and security in the capabilities of their respective leader. Acting as a healer is an important part of each of their roles; both women provide spiritual and physical healing and protection to those under their care. For example, if a child is sick, the mother will take him or her to a doctor or feed him or her chicken noodle soup; if a tribe member is ill, the shaman consults the ancestors and performs an appropriate rite. Both shamans and mothers pass on ancestral stories. Shamans obtain their information directly from the source, while mothers receive their information second hand. In shamanistic cultures the shaman is the mediator between the living dead and the physically living (Vitebsky, 1997), but a mother is the genetic link between grandparents and children. The main difference between the two character types is that the source of power for the shaman lies more in the spiritual realm, while the motivation and ability of a mother can vary. In both cases, the surrounding community benefits and thrives because of the elder's active participation.

When her grandson-in-law passes away, Julia functions as a healer for his surviving wife, Kathryn, and their daughter, Mattie. This New England antiques dealer is familiar with tragedy, having first lost her husband years earlier, and then later a son and daughter-in-law in a drowning accident. Julia continually feeds her granddaughter and great-granddaughter, making sure they have basic sustenance despite their grief. She serves them both tea with brandy and Valium so they can sleep, keeping up their physical strength. While they sleep she watches over them, making sure they are disturbed by nothing. Her own grief is put aside in order to be a strong caretaker for her family. Kathryn and her daughter Mattie recognize Julia's wisdom and follow her advice. Amid their grief, Kathryn and Mattie spend too much time together feeding off each other's sorrow. Julia recognizes this and addresses Kathryn:

'You don't normally spend time with her like that.'

'This isn't normally.'

'Well, maybe we could all use a bit of normally right now...'

She [Kathryn] sighed. It was always difficult to refute

Julia's wisdom, especially as Julia so often turned

out to be right. (Shreve, 1998, p. 190)

She sets them both on the path to emotional and physical wholeness during this trying time, helping to heal their emotional grief and preserve their mother-daughter relationship.

The similarities between a mother and a shaman are ingrained directly into the African language Yoruba (Washington, 2005). The word Àjé refers to a spiritual force that is believed to be innate in African women. The Àjé women are highly respected and feared within the Yoruba culture. It is believed that they are "astrally-inclined human beings" (Washington, 2005, p. 171) having special powers and connections to the earth and nature. These women are honored as personal and communal mothers. The linguistic link between supernaturally powered humans or shamanic figures and women serves as a link between the role of a mother and that of a shaman.

Daughter of a poor fisherman, Maren Hontvedt, from Shreve's *The Weight of Water*, is a highly complex character. This Norwegian immigrant to America grudgingly exchanges family, lifestyle, and home, for life on a small, rock island with

her husband, John. Here she leads a lonely life, made worse by her inability to conceive a child. Though she is neither a mother nor a shaman, she has a strong storytelling and healing function. It is Maren's storytelling ability that allows her to play a highly visible role in the novel. In *The Weight of Water* there are two stories being told side by side, one from the late 19th century and one from the late 20th century. On her death bed, Maren writes a confessional journal about significant events in her past: the murder of her sister, Karen, and sister-in-law, Anethe. Aging has brought her insight about herself, her family, and the limitations of humanity. Her reflections on her youth show a greater understanding and wisdom of her own life and the way human nature works. With this journal she is able to relate her legacy to Jean, passing on a positive heritage by relating her negative story. Jean goes on to make better choices than Maren did: extending forgiveness and getting out of an unhealthy situation. Maren's life, especially her reflection as an older woman, impacts a future generation.

The common element in each of these older women characters is their shaman function, which allows middle-aged or older women in these stories the opportunity to preserve their tribe through healing and storytelling. Like superheroes, these women are visible and vital both to the story and the other characters in the novel. This raises the reader's perception of the value of older women, in contrast to the perceptions presented on television.

The lack of older women characters and their limited portrayal on television created a gap between reality and TV land, resulting in a skewed perception of what it meant to be an older woman in American society during the last 30 years of the 20th century. By creating visible and important older female characters in these four books, Morrison and Shreve are themselves acting as shamans, showing the next generation how to better value women as they age and offering older women alternative role models to those previously on television. Morrison and Shreve did not allow the invisibility bestowed by television on their generation to dictate their ideas of older women; instead, they control the visibility of older women through the shaman function of their characters.

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The Invisible Woman: Eve's Self Image in *Paradise Lost*

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Abstract

This article is a feminist, deconstructive analysis of John Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Taking the perspective of the story's main female character—Eve—the article seeks to understand how gender affects interpretation and how Milton's interpretation of the old biblical story hints at some of the problems of gender roles and "institutionalized misogyny" that are so much a part of our Western tradition. Milton's Eve has been created from a man, subjected to his rule, and punished for her alleged inferiority. She has been placed in a world that is not her own, her intellectual powers limited, her ability to define herself and her world prevented. Hers is an existence defined by men, and this is a paper dedicated to understanding her perspective—the female perspective. Is she the foil that tradition says she is? Or is she the hero, the first great seeker of knowledge?

Let's talk about sex—about the gulf between the feminine and the masculine, about the ways the sexes work and the ways they help to shape perceptions. How is a man's world any different from a woman's? Focusing on thought and interpretation, an undeniable otherness comes to clarity, revealing one of life's first oppositions—the male and the female. This paper doesn't seek to examine the biological differences; instead, the purpose is to briefly examine socially constructed gender roles and the role they play in literary interpretation, specifically in classical literature. The examination is meant to pose crucial questions and stimulate discourse.

Firmly rooted in the Western tradition of literature is the biblical story of Adam and Eve. This widely recognizable story is a keystone work, part of the system of thought and belief, an episteme. The infamous bite in a utopian garden, taken by lips feminine, has been said to be the root of all of our woe; has been inextricably planted in our culture and in our ways of understanding sex and gender roles. It is a story of power and where it comes from and how it is to be distributed. That Western tradition has seen many attempts to flesh out this short section on the Old Testament book of Genesis is a fact; that none have achieved the notoriety and esteem of Milton's *Paradise Lost* is more fact. *Paradise Lost* is a fictional work of alleged fact: pagan and poetic and prophetic. In his epic rendition of the old tale, Milton further complicates sex and gender roles, filling in the gaps with reason and with the inescapable touches of patriarchy and misogyny that have shaped and are still shaping Western culture. The language, the imagery, the religious claims—all conjured in a male mind. But what about the female reader? How does she interpret a work like this? How does she determine the meaning? For the male reader, this is a story of affirmation, a story of authoritarian origins. Milton's elaboration of the story of Genesis brings attention to the topic of female subjugation and creates a view of women that has an unmistakably inherent male bias. For the female reader (and the careful male reader), this bias and the way it creates meaning challenge the traditional interpretation, forcing readers to consider some tough questions about the sexes.