Toni Morrison's Depiction of Beauty Standards in Relation to Class, Politics of Respectability, and Consumerism in Song of Solomon

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Toni Morrison’s Depiction of Beauty Standards in Relation to Class, Politics of Respectability, and Consumerism in *Song of Solomon*

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the University of New Orleans in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in English American Literature

by

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Abstract

In *Song of Solomon*, published during a transitional moment in the history of U.S. feminism, Toni Morrison portrays the destructive forces of hegemonic female beauty standards, materialism, and consumerism in a Midwestern African-American community from the 1930s to the 1960s. She reveals a hierarchy in which men define standards of beauty and respectability that enforce white bourgeois ideals. Focusing on five female characters, this thesis examines this hierarchy; the agents who maintain it; and the ways in which it affects female characters who accept and/or reject it. While one of the characters, Hagar, perishes in her attempt to live up to normative beauty standards, her cousin Corinthians is liberated when she leaves her oppressive father and moves in with a working class male partner. Morrison thus creates a viable alternative to strict adherence to materialist values, while representing the destructive force of oppressive beauty norms and standards of respectability.

*Song of Solomon*, female characters, feminism, beauty standards, respectability, consumerism
Introduction

“I want to know my hair again, the way I knew it before I knew Sambo and Dick, Buckwheat and Jane, Prissy and Miz Scarlett. Before I knew that my hair could be wrong – the wrong color, the wrong texture, the wrong amount of curl or straight” (365). Paulette Caldwell's introduction to her article about workplace discrimination against African Americans echoes the thoughts of African-American women who have felt that their hair, skin, faces, and bodies are “wrong.” In her third novel, Song of Solomon, Toni Morrison portrays several African-American women who all, in some way, negotiate oppressive standards of beauty and respectability that tell them that certain types of behavior, clothes, and hairstyles are “wrong.” To a greater extent than anyone else, the character of Hagar is the tragic victim of her belief that her hair is “wrong” and “bad.” Hagar’s distinct sense that her former lover, Milkman, does not like “hair like mine,” but prefers “silky hair the color of a penny” (315), represents the emotions of African-American women whose beauty has been devalued from the era of slavery until today. Morrison's novel, published in 1977, marks the end of the era of second wave feminism, “womanism,” Black Power movements, and the “Black is Beautiful” social movement. According to Tracey Owens Patton, the Black Power movement “eroded as assimilation became more dominant in the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s” (358). In 1991, Naomi Wolf called for “no less than a feminist third wave” (274). The year after, Rebecca Walker, a black feminist, wrote that she was not “a postfeminism feminist” but a “Third Wave” (41). Thus, Morrison's novel was published during a transitional moment within the history of U.S. feminism, as intersectional approaches to race and gender were being advocated and articulated. Negotiation of dominant beauty standards remained important for both white third wave feminists and women of color. While many second wave feminists viewed adherence to dominant beauty standards as negative by default, third
wave feminists assert that healthy forms of adherence to beauty standards exist, especially when these forms involve a playful, self-affirming attitude toward femininity.

*Song of Solomon* centers on the bourgeois Dead family and Macon “Milkman” Dead's coming of age. Milkman's immediate family consists of his father, Macon, his mother, Ruth, and his two older sisters, Magdalene (or “Lena”) and First Corinthians. At the outskirts of town, Macon's sister, Pilate, lives in a small house with her daughter, Reba, and her granddaughter Hagar (who will become Milkman's lover). While Macon is a successful but ruthless landlord, Pilate and her family make a living through wine-making and winning prizes in contests. While Milkman is the novel's main protagonist, “the novel is (…) supported by a brilliant cast of female protagonists” (Ahmad 59). These protagonists include Ruth, Lena and Corinthians, Pilate, and Hagar. Ruth is the daughter of Dr. Foster, the first black doctor in town, and she knew the manners of the bourgeoisie before she married Macon. On the surface, she is the incarnation of the light-skinned bourgeois black woman. She is always clean and well-dressed and behaves quietly and respectfully in public. Her daughters look and behave much as their mother does, until the end of the novel, when Corinthians begins dating Henry Porter, a working class man and her father's tenant. Pilate appears as the antithesis of Ruth and her daughters. She dresses “shabbily” in public and ignores bourgeois standards of respectability, both in terms of her appearance and her lifestyle. Both she and her daughter Reba are unmarried mothers. While Pilate and Reba are content with their lives outside of bourgeois normativity, Hagar is stuck in limbo; she is ashamed of her family and class background, but is unable to transcend them. Hagar's unsuccessful attempt to become the light-skinned, well-dressed, straight-haired woman that she thinks Milkman desires eventually leads to her death.
In spite of their differences, all of Morrison's women have lived or live difficult lives. Positive relationships with their female relatives could have provided relief. Solidarity was, after all, important for both the feminist movement and the African-American civil rights movement in the 1960s and 1970s. However, Macon's spite prevents solidarity and friendship between these women. Notwithstanding Macon's hatred for her, Pilate never harbors a grudge against him or his family. When Ruth asks Pilate to protect her unborn son against Macon's violence, Pilate is there for her. Although the contact between the two ceases shortly after Milkman's birth, Ruth remains grateful to Pilate and she ensures that Hagar gets a decent funeral. While Pilate is sympathetic to Ruth, Hagar and Ruth do not have a good relationship. When Ruth confronts Hagar about her attempt on Milkman's life after Milkman's rejection of Hagar, Hagar feels jealous of Ruth's maternal bond to Milkman. Ruth also fears Hagar's “wilderness” (138) in a way she never fears Pilate. As far as the reader knows, Lena and Corinthians do not encounter their aunt or cousin after Pilate leaves the Dead house for the last time. While Pilate and Ruth begin to develop a friendship (brutally ended by Macon) at the beginning of the novel, Lena, Corinthians, and Hagar remain isolated from each other. This isolation, caused by the patriarchal figure Macon, is destructive to all of the women, especially Ruth, Lena, and Hagar.

Focusing on this group of female characters and their relationships to each other and to men in the novel, my thesis considers the representation of female beauty standards in *Song of Solomon*. It examines the ways in which hegemonic, racialized beauty standards are enforced; how they affect female characters who accept and/or reject them; and how they influence male characters who consciously and subconsciously enforce and reinforce them. Morrison’s representation of the destructive forces of racialized beauty norms reveals not only a racial hierarchy in which dark skin and kinky hair are disfavored, but also a patriarchal one in which
men assume the power to define norms of beauty and femininity. The novel also depicts a class hierarchy in which only bourgeois women can live up to beauty standards, even though fulfillment of these standards does not equal spiritual fulfillment and happiness. On the contrary, the bourgeois women – Ruth, Lena, and Corinthians – are unhappy, discontented, and, in some respects, immature. Furthermore, Morrison's critical depiction of materialism and consumerism reveals the crucial role the product manufacturers and advertisers in a consumer society play as creators and enforcers of dominant beauty standards.

The primary focus of the thesis is the five women closest to Milkman: Pilate, Ruth, Hagar, and Lena and Corinthians. Soophia Ahmad writes that these women “contribute significantly, but in varying measures, to Milkman's development” (59). While Ahmad is right in that these women play crucial roles in Milkman's development, the focal point of this thesis is their positions in a heteropatriarchy¹ that is enforced and upheld by promotion of racialized, bourgeois beauty standards and materialist values. Their positions and the ways in which they negotiate the standards of beauty and respectability determine their level of mental and spiritual fulfillment. Jane Bakerman names the female characters' development “maturation stories” (541). Furthermore, she argues that the characters search for “love, for valid sexual encounters, and, above all, for a sense that they are worthy” (541). The women’s sense of self-worth, unrelated to material possessions and developed in a healthy (as opposed to self-destructive) way, is the key to their fulfillment.

Pilate embodies the most obvious rejection of both conventional feminine beauty standards and materialist values. She has short hair and wears both women's and men's clothes.

¹In my use of the term “heteropatriarchy,” I am drawing from Roderick Ferguson’s queer of color critique outlined in Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2004). He identifies heteropatriarchy as intrinsic to Enlightenment claims which “entail an investment in heterosexual patriarchy as the appropriate standard for social relations and the signature of hegemonic whiteness” (18).
Macon worries that his sister's appearance damages his reputation among the white businessmen (20). Pilate embraces an alternative approach to beauty. Instead of adopting heteropatriarchal beauty standards, she develops her own aesthetic. Pilate's signature earring, her short hair, and her outfits are not expressions of apathy or ignorance of appearance, but expressions of a sense of style that intentionally ignores the bourgeois female style. Pilate's earring with a brass box containing the piece of paper on which her father wrote her name when she was born is a crucial part of her aesthetic and her life. The self-made earring, symbolizing her birth, heritage, and ownership of self, radically differs from an expensive earring serving as a status symbol. Pilate not only rejects traditional definitions of beauty, but also of bourgeois respectability. Her family is not a nuclear one, and she sees no value in conventional signifiers of respectability and wealth, such as a big house and a car. She is detached, both literally and metaphorically, from the town and the community to which her brother belongs, yet she is the novel's most fulfilled character.

As opposed to Pilate, Ruth seems to embrace the black bourgeois fashion and lifestyle. She is always “well-groomed” and wears corsets and proper dresses. Her family possesses bourgeois status symbols: a large house and a beautiful car. However, Morrison quickly reveals the emptiness of these symbols: the house “was more prison than palace” (10) and the townspeople call the car “Macon Dead's hearse” (33). Ruth herself is unable to play the role that she has been assigned; she fails at cooking and housekeeping. Her marriage is loveless. In spite of, or rather because of, her abundance of material wealth and her position in the town, she is deeply unhappy.

Hagar is trapped between the values of her grandmother and mother and bourgeois values. When Pilate asks her whether she ever had to go hungry, Hagar answers that “some of [her] days were hungry ones” (48). The silence after Reba's statement that Hagar could always
have gotten everything she asked for indicates, as Pilate says, that Hagar “don't mean food” (49). More than likely, her lack of meaningful relationships with other people constituted part of Hagar's hunger. Hagar has been lonely and isolated. Pilate and Reba love her, but their love cannot replace the missing ties to other people. Hagar's relationship with Milkman is her primary social connection to the outside world. When he rejects her, Hagar assumes that it is because of her dark skin and curly hair. Hoping that Milkman will return to her, she goes on a shopping spree to transform herself into a woman who will be desirable for Milkman. She utterly fails, and her disappointment is lethal.

Lena and Corinthians have been crippled by their controlling father and their inattentive mother. In spite of their parents' attempts to find husbands for them, Lena and Corinthians remain unmarried and live at home into their forties. Like Ruth, they are incarnations of light-skinned bourgeois black women. They remain static and lifeless, like “big baby dolls” (10), until later in the novel. Lena's most radical act is reprimanding Milkman for having pissed on and laughed at his mother and sisters his whole life (214, 215). Corinthians, however, takes an even greater leap; she begins seeing Porter. In spite of Macon's efforts to ruin their relationship, she finally lets her hair out, never collecting it in a ball again (202), and frees herself from her father's tyranny to move in with Porter.

In addition to an analysis of the women who negotiate beauty standards, a brief consideration of how Macon and Milkman, enforcers of beauty standards, are affected by the heteropatriarchy is also crucial. Macon is clearly the strongest and most vicious enforcer. He oppresses Ruth, Lena, and Corinthians through dictating how they act and dress. His oppression is successful in that his women, on the surface, look perfect by black bourgeois standards. For Macon, money and status are markers of progress. His attempt to instill the same patriarchal
values in Milkman, are, however, only initially successful. After Milkman's awakening, he rejects his father's values. Even though Macon is mostly successful in maintaining a regime of beauty and appearance standards, he is one of the most unhappy and dysfunctional characters. At the end of the novel, the family structure has disintegrated. Corinthians has moved in with Porter; Macon is humiliated when Ruth forces him to pay for Hagar's funeral; and Milkman has rejected bourgeois values. It is hard to tell whether this change will affect Macon negatively or provide him with an opportunity for spiritual growth.

Since Milkman is the main protagonist, scholars have devoted much attention to his coming of age. Of the five women discussed in this thesis, Pilate has received the most critical attention because she relates to several of the novel's major themes, such as migration, myths, ancestral roots, and anti-materialism. Hagar and Ruth have received less attention; Milkman's two sisters even less. Scholars have established the importance of the female characters in Milkman's coming of age. However, a discussion focused on the female characters and their development and/or decline, independent of their functions in relation to Milkman, fills gaps that have not yet been covered by current criticism.

Ahmad provides a valuable analysis of all the important female characters in the novel – Pilate, Ruth, Hagar, Corinthians, and Lena. She studies the women's development of race-consciousness and its manifestations in their “attitudes toward life” (59). Ahmad acknowledges the importance of two of the crucial topics of this thesis: material wealth and hegemonic beauty standards. Nevertheless, these merit more in-depth study. Furthermore, her analysis of Hagar's shopping spree and makeover and their relation to consumer capitalist culture does not go quite far enough. Unlike Ahmad, who provides a broad analysis of all of the main female characters, Susan Willis focuses specifically on Hagar and her shopping spree. Willis provides valuable
viewpoints concerning the destructive effects of white beauty standards and excessive consumerism on black people. However, since *Song of Solomon* is not her main topic, she does not place Hagar in the greater context of the other female characters in the novel as will be done in the analysis to follow. Like Ahmad and Willis, Edward Guerrero discusses the destructive effects of hegemonic beauty standards on Hagar. Like Willis, Guerrero also recognizes the connection between beauty standards and consumer culture. However, like Willis's text, Guerrero's lacks a discussion of Hagar in relation to the other female characters. Malin LaVon Walther also discusses Hagar's downfall. Like Guerrero, Walther briefly examines Hagar's frantic shopping spree and mentions the erotic images present in the cosmetics department. She also emphasizes Morrison's “redefinition of female beauty that insists upon racial identity as its cornerstone” (782). As in Guerrero's article, an analysis of the effect of white beauty standards and consumerism on Milkman's mother and two sisters is absent. Because the community of women constitutes such a crucial part of Morrison's novel, both in relation to Milkman and on its own terms, a comprehensive critical examination of the women is justified.

While scholars have addressed the subjects outlined above separately, an extensive discussion of all of these issues is imperative. Morrison's critique of consumer society and bourgeois values is well-known. Yet this critique is inseparable from her observations on the detrimental effects of white beauty standards imposed on black women. The women who adhere to materialist and bourgeois values to the greatest extent – Ruth, Lena, and Corinthians – also adhere to and are influenced by white beauty standards to the greatest extent. Pilate and Reba embody anti-materialist and non-conformist values and seem to be the least affected by the beauty standards. Pilate represents the clearest alternative to bourgeois values. She has given up “all interest in table manners or hygiene,” but has “acquired a deep concern for and about human
relationships” (149). Pilate also embodies an alternative to bourgeois aesthetics. When Milkman sees her for the first time, he is fascinated by her looks. She has “berry-black lips” and one earring (38). Her dress comes to “just below her calf (...) and he [can] see her unlaced men's shoes and the silvery-brown skin of her ankles” (38). In comparison with the doll-like looks of Ruth, Corinthians, and Lena, Pilate appears very “natural.” Hagar, however, is unable to embrace Pilate's and Reba's values and aesthetics. Instead, she attempts to transform herself into the woman that she thinks Milkman, with his bourgeois background, will love. Consequently, she pays the highest price for trying to live up to standards up to which very few women, if any, can live. The thesis devotes a considerable amount of attention to Hagar's shopping spree and makeover, partly because I have yet to read a substantial analysis of this moment. While Hagar's preparations, the shopping itself, and the aftermath take up only five pages of the novel, it is one of its most poignant passages and the most pivotal moment in Hagar's life.

Chapter 1: Beauty Standards, Rituals, and Beauty Advertisements in African-American Communities

More than any other passage in the novel, Hagar's shopping spree and makeover embody Morrison's critique of a racialized beauty industry. Since Morrison's critique of consumer society and the beauty industry is such a crucial part of the novel, an examination of the history of the role of beauty products and beauty advertisements in African-American communities is necessary. Patton traces the history of African-American women's hairstyles back to slavery. Slaves whose hair was straight and skin color was light were less likely to perform backbreaking work in the fields than slaves with darker skin and kinky hair (353). She writes that “historically and into modern times African American beauty has been disparaged” (350). Consequently,
African-American women have employed various methods, such as skin bleaching and hair straightening, to emulate white standards of beauty. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, prominent black leaders, such as W.E.B. Du Bois, Booker T. Washington, and Marcus Garvey, spoke against these practices. Even though these men were quite influential, “most Black women felt straightened hairstyles were not about emulating Whites but having modern hairstyles” (353). Thus, African-American women's participation in the beauty industry, whether through hair straightening or working as hairdresser, was not necessarily an expression of self-hatred and a desire to “become white,” but rather an attempt to adapt to the harsh reality that African Americans, particularly women, were discriminated against and devalued, and that emulating white beauty could give them opportunities to earn money and be economically independent. Furthermore, trying out different hairstyles could for some women be a form of playing with appearance.

In her book-length study, Hair Raising: Beauty, Culture, and African American Women, Noliwe Rooks investigates the development of beauty advertisements targeted at African-American women from the mid-nineteenth century to the present day. The early advertisements for hair-care products specifically designed to straighten hair were all made by white-owned companies (13). She writes that the products advertised “could only promise a caricature of white standards of beauty” and thus “the pictures that accompanied the ads were caricatures of a standard of beauty that was difficult, if not impossible, for African American women to meet” (13). Some of the advertisements also conveyed that “black and feminine” was a contradiction in terms. In one advertisement, the before-picture shows a figure that “is neither male nor female

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2 Patton points out that, ironically, Du Bois and Washington were “light-skinned Black males with wavy hair” (353). Du Bois and Washington already possessed some privileges that darker-skinned African-American women lacked, both because of their gender and because of their racial features. After all, both Washington and Du Bois were able to go to college during a time in which higher education was a male-dominated arena.
but a faceless blob” (29). Rooks writes that “the presence of blackness precludes gender identification as well as the possibility of femininity for African American women” (29). These racist and sexist characteristics remained present throughout late nineteenth- and early twentieth century-advertisements. No products that would enhance black beauty on its own terms were advertised (with the exception of wigs) (26). The advertisements focused on products that would make black women look whiter and thus more “beautiful.”

The rhetoric of the advertisements for beauty products targeting African-American women began to change at the turn of the century. Now companies owned by African Americans began to sell beauty products. Rooks writes that “numerous companies owned and operated by African American women began to advertise in the same newspapers sometime between 1906 and 1919” (Hair Raising 42). The “advertisements challenged dominant ideologies and constructions of African American women” (42). The advertisers “contested the popular construction of African American women as 'other' and addressed them in ways that indicated kinship and acceptance” (42). Madam C.J. Walker is probably the most famous African-American beauty product company owner from this time period. According to Rooks, Walker never mentioned straight hair in any of the advertisements she created. She simply assumed that African-American women wanted to straighten their hair and “focused on the results of such practices in terms of economic security” (52). African-American leaders such as Washington were critical of Walker because they believed she promoted vain ideals and encouraged African-American women to alter their natural hair. Yet Walker did contribute to the welfare of African-American women. During a time in which “middle-class African American men urged that women be trained for jobs that could be performed in the home” (18), she trained and hired African-American women to become saleswomen or owners of their own Walker beauty parlors.
For African-American women, straightening one's hair has always implied more than just the physicality of the process and a desire to approximate whiteness. bell hooks remembers how excited she was to have her hair straightened in her mother's kitchen. She writes:

> There is a deeper intimacy in the kitchen on Saturdays when hair is pressed, when fish is fried, when sodas are passed around, when soul music drifts over the talk. (...) It is a time when we work as women to meet each other’s needs, to make each other feel good inside, a time of laughter and outrageous talk. (112)

hooks describes women who probably worked hard but found time and space to relax. The kitchen was a social space, similar to the porch or the barbershop. Hair straightening was not related to approximation of whiteness. hooks asserts that “it is not a sign of our longing to be white,” but “a sign of our desire to be women” (112). Later, hooks argues against hair straightening, stating that “every aspect of our [black women's] self-representation [should] be a fierce resistance” (116). Even though hooks later condemns hair straightening (and asserts that she never straightens her hair anymore), she still treasures the memories of having her hair straightened in her mother's kitchen. Before she was aware of the relation between hair straightening and white beauty standards, it was a positive experience for her.

The beauty parlor or hairdresser was also an important social space for African-American women. Rooks remembers that she, “sitting in a room full of African American women and hearing them talk about sex, white people, men, and money, (...) got clues on how to be and how not to act” (*Hair Raising* 5). hooks also emphasizes the importance of the beauty parlor beyond “fixing of hair.” She argues that it was “a space of consciousness raising, a space where black women shared life stories – hardships, trials, gossip; a place where one could be comforted and one's spirit renewed” (112). hooks recognizes that “these positive empowering implications of
the ritual of hair pressing (…) exist alongside all that is negative” (112). Furthermore, as Rooks points out in *Hair Raising*, many black women who would have been unemployed or in domestic service were able to work in beauty parlors and thus gain economic self-sufficiency. Judging by these accounts, hair straightening and the surrounding rituals go beyond expressions of self-hatred, self-mutilation, lack of racial pride, and a loss of identity, as later leaders such as Malcolm X implied that they were (Haley 56-57).

**Chapter 2: Performance of Class and Respectability in Relation to Race, Gender, and Geography**

The positive dimensions of hair straightening rituals are completely absent from Morrison's novel. She does not depict the inside of a beauty parlor. Instead, Milkman observes the beauty parlor from the outside: “Beauty shops always had curtains or shades up. (…) The women didn't want anybody on the street to be able to see them getting their hair done. They were ashamed” (62). Obviously, Milkman's point of view is limited. Because he is a man, he does not have access to the female domain of the beauty shop. Yet Morrison could have provided a more complex portrayal of the beauty shop at some point in the novel. She does not. Thus, the beauty parlor as a space of “consciousness-raising” (hooks 112) is absent; instead, it is a space of shame and hiding. The glaring absence of positive experiences of beauty rituals indicates that these experiences have been unavailable to the female characters.

Very little is revealed about the hair and hair rituals of Ruth, Corinthians, and Lena. Corinthians has “long, lightweight hair, the color of wet sand” (33). Since Corinthians and Lena are both light-skinned and look like each other, one assumes that Lena has similar hair. Morrison also reveals that Corinthians has been wearing her hair in “a ball at her nape” (202), possibly
because of her work or because of her parents' orders to do so. It is hard to imagine Ruth “doing” her own or her daughters' hair in the same way that hooks's mother did her daughters' hair.

Macon leaves no room for any type of pleasure in their household, and Ruth does not have a close relationship with her daughters. It also seems unlikely that any of them would go to the type of beauty parlor to which Rooks went, simply because the women have been drilled not to mingle with common folk. Corinthians's choice to let her hair out and leave it like that after her night with Porter indicates, however, that she has been forced to adopt a certain hairstyle or hairstyles, and that “doing her hair,” no matter how and where it was done, has been oppressive, not pleasurable.

When Macon goes to Pilate's house, he observes a disorganized version of the kitchen rituals that hooks describes: “Reba was cutting her toenails with a kitchen knife or a switchblade (…). (...) Hagar was braiding her hair, while Pilate (…) was stirring something in a pot” (29). The scene conveys a sense of simple pleasure and peace. Unfortunately, braiding her hair while her mother cuts her toenails and her grandmother is cooking is not sufficient for the adult Hagar. As Milkman’s friend Guitar, who also knows Pilate and Hagar, reflects, Hagar was “not strong enough, like Pilate, nor simple enough, like Reba, to make up her life as they had” (307).

Moreover, Hagar has no one outside of the family with whom she can share her frustrations and her shame. She has no understanding neighbor lady with whom she can chat. To make the situation worse, Hagar is also excluded from other beauty rituals that possibly could have been positive experiences, such as going to the beauty parlor. When she goes there, the hairdressers are unfriendly, and the hairdresser, Marcelline, only accepts to do her hair because she is afraid of her (312). After Hagar has left, she says: “No appointment. No nothing. Come in here all late and wrong and want something fancy” (313). This incident illustrates that even if one has the
money required to get one's hair done, one has to behave in a certain way and have a certain character. Even though Hagar has physical access to the beauty parlor, she does not have access to the possible comfort that it could have provided for her because she doesn't belong to the “right class” of customers and doesn't understand the unwritten social rules of the space.

The female characters’ class statuses do not only affect their hair rituals; they also dictate the ways in which the women alter their appearances. Their class statuses shape the beauty standards they are expected to adopt; the ways and the extent to which these standards influence them; and who the enforcers of the standards are. The Dead family is a model of the black bourgeoisie in the urban North that developed during and after the Great Migration. In his 1957 work, *Black Bourgeoisie*, E. Franklin Frazier described the history and characteristics of the black middle- and upper middle class. He argued that “the black bourgeoisie has rejected the folk culture of the Negro masses” (112). That seems to be the case with Macon's relationship to folk culture and the “Negro masses.” Macon's rejection of black folk culture manifests itself in his obsessive desire for material wealth; his sense of superiority over common folk; his hatred of Pilate's values and behavior; and his disassociation from his past. Unlike Dr. Foster, who was, according to Macon, a colorist who would have disowned Milkman because of his skin color, Macon does not ground his negative judgment of people directly in their skin color; however, he enforces bourgeois standards that ultimately undergird white supremacist ideals of beauty and propriety. He condemns people who have not achieved success in the same way that he has, such as working class people. He disassociates himself from and forces his family to disassociate themselves from people who do not live according to his standards of respectability. Macon has followed a model of racial progress that was endorsed by many black leaders: the model of economic self-sufficiency and property ownership. As Milkman discovers when he talks with the
men who knew who his grandfather was, owning property was very important for African Americans after emancipation. Milkman's grandfather was highly respected because he acquired property and “pulled himself up by the bootstraps” after he became a free man (235). Morrison, nevertheless, also tells a story in which economic self-sufficiency does not constitute progress if one disassociates oneself from the past and one's ancestral roots, and if one does so through the exploitation of others.

Macon's standards of respectability affect Ruth to a great extent. However, Ruth was oppressed by these standards already as a child because she grew up in an upper middle-class home. She says to Milkman: “I lived in a great big house that pressed me into a small package. I had no friends, only schoolmates who wanted to touch my dresses and my white silk stockings” (124). Dr. Foster was concerned with his daughter's appearances and material belongings, but her status, while envied by others, also alienated her from the rest of the other girls in her school and neighborhood. When other girls came to see her, it was not to spend time with her, but to admire her beautiful things. Her collection of dresses and white silk stockings also indicates that Dr. Foster treated Ruth somewhat like a precious doll. White silk stockings might be an aesthetically pleasing signifier of high class status, but they are not very practical for a little girl who wants to go out and play. Thus, her lack of connection with the outside world and her loneliness further pressed Ruth into a “small package” (124).

In many respects, Ruth remains the same throughout her adult life. After her marriage and the death of her father, Macon keeps pressing her into “a small package.” Macon “[keeps] each member of his family awkward with fear. His hatred of his wife glitter[s] and spark[s] in every word he [speaks] to her” (10). As a result of both her loneliness and her feelings of isolation, caused by her father and later Macon, Ruth is unhappy and unfulfilled. She has a dysfunctional
relationship with both her son and her daughters; she treats them like dolls or toys just like her father treated her like a doll. She is “given to deviousness and ultra-fine manners” and seems “to know a lot and understand very little” (75). Judging by this description, Ruth is somewhat intelligent, but has been unable to develop the ability to think deeply and develop an understanding of human relations. Ruth's concern with “ultra-fine manners” is reflected in her appearances. Her first scene establishes her, on the surface, as a lady-like and bourgeois woman. She wears “a neat gray coat with the traditional [emphasis mine] pregnant-woman bow at her navel, a black cloche, and a pair of four-button ladies' galoshes” (5). Ruth clearly keeps up with fashion and knows what is considered to be respectable. She does not wear flashy colors. Essentially, she presents a perfect and polished surface to the world. Nevertheless, the reader shortly learns that this surface is only a façade under which dysfunction, abuse, and unhappiness rule.

Like Ruth, Lena and Corinthians are also oppressed by Macon, his volatile temperament, and his rigid standards of respectability:

Solid, rumbling, likely to erupt without prior notice, Macon kept each member of his family awkward with fear. (...) The disappointment he felt in his daughters sifted down on them like ash, dulling their buttery complexions and choking the lilt out of what should have been girlish voices...The way he mangled their grace, wit, and self-esteem was the single excitement of their days. (10-11)

In addition to terrorizing them with his anger, Macon also treats Lena and Corinthians like dolls. During her angry eruption, Lena tells Milkman about a time before he was born when Macon drove the two girls to the ice-house in his Hudson. The girls were dressed up and watched the “sweating black men” (216) as they were sucking ice out of handkerchiefs. Lena says:
There were other children there. Barefoot, naked to the waist, dirty. But we stood apart, near the car, in white stockings, ribbons, and gloves. And when he talked to the men, he kept glancing at us, us and the car. (...) You see, he took us there so they could see us, envy us, envy him. Then one of the little boys came over to us and put his hand on Corinthians' hair. (...) Before we knew it, he was running toward us. He knocked the ice out of [Corinthians's] hand into the dirt and shoved us both into the car. First he displayed us, then he splayed us. All our lives were like that (...). (216)

According to Lena's description, Macon wanted to display his daughter like fashionable ornaments to prove his superiority and kindle others' envy. Of course, a father's pride in his daughters and his desire to “show them off” is not necessarily dysfunctional. What makes this incident disturbing is Macon's belief that his daughters should not be in contact with other children. They might as well have carried signs saying “Do not touch!” When he shoves them into the car, he humiliates them in front of the other children as if he believes that they are in danger of contamination. Macon's obsession with class status and respectability ruin Lena and Corinthians's opportunities for communication and play with other children. He deprives them of agency and keeps doing so as the girls grow up. Therefore, both Lena and Corinthians remain unhappy “dolls” through most of their adult lives.

Pilate represents one of the clearest antitheses to bourgeois standards of beauty and respectability. Morrison's introduction of Pilate is similar to that of Ruth’s. She describes her by her appearance and clothes: “The singer [Pilate], standing at the back of the crowd, was as poorly dressed as the doctor's daughter [Ruth] was well-dressed. (...) The singing woman wore a knitted navy cap pulled far down over her forehead. She had wrapped herself up in an old quilt instead
of a winter coat” (5-6). Morrison establishes Pilate as a contrast to Ruth. Pilate disregards the standard fashion of the day, since the bourgeoisie certainly did not associate navy caps and quilts with clothes. Pilate wears her hair short and she dresses both in dresses and traditional men's clothes. Significantly, Morrison does not describe her as filthy or disgusting in any way. When he sees her for the first time, Milkman realizes that the rumors about Pilate are untrue: “Nor was she dirty; unkempt, yes, but not dirty. (…) Of course she was anything but pretty, yet he knew he could have watched her all day” (38). Milkman's fascination for Pilate is probably partly grounded in his class status; since he is used to seeing “polished” women like his mother and his sisters, Pilate appears as a radical alternative. One gets the sense that Pilate is natural, as opposed to “artificial.” When Macon watches Pilate, Reba, and Hagar, he relishes “the effortless [emphasis mine] beauty” of the scene (29). Pilate not only defies the dominant standards of what it is to dress and behave like a woman; she also defies gender in some ways. Milkman thinks that Pilate is “all angles, (…), knees, mostly, and elbows” (36). She is not curvaceous, the body shape that is most often associated with women. That – and the fact that she often dresses in men's clothes, make her androgynous. She is unmarried, she has traveled, and she operates her own wine-making “business.” Pilate has apparently adopted both male and female characteristics that she wants to have in her life, unconcerned that many people think that only the female characteristics and opportunities should be available to her.

Unlike Pilate, who seems unaffected by bourgeois beauty standards, Ruth, Lena, and Corinthians are oppressed by them. However, Hagar becomes the most tragic victim. Unlike her aunt and cousins, Hagar receives very little guidance on how to dress. More than likely, Pilate and Reba have given her free rein with the money they could afford to give her. Already as a young girl, she likes pretty clothes, and “astonished as Pilate and Reba [are] by her wishes, they
[enjoy] trying to fulfill them” (151). Through her participation in consumer culture and her relationship to Milkman, Hagar learns beauty standards and standards of respectability. Being able to live up to these standards to a certain extent does not guarantee happiness or success; Ruth, Lena, and Corinthians are living proof of that fact. Yet they do enjoy class privileges to which Hagar has no access. Hagar lives in a limbo; she is not satisfied with living like her grandmother and mother live, but she cannot transform herself into a bourgeois woman by buying new clothes and cosmetics. Willis writes that “Hagar is the sublime manifestation of the contradiction between the ideology of consumer society that would have everyone believe we all trade equally in commodities, and the reality of all marginalized people for whom translation into the dominant white model is impossible” (179). This is essentially what Hagar discovers when she sees herself in the mirror after she has dressed up and put on makeup. In spite of the fact that she had money to buy clothes and cosmetics, these commodities exhibit an exclusivity that goes far beyond their price. Unlike some bourgeois women, Hagar has neither the necessary tools (literally and metaphorically) nor the knowledge to emulate the images that she sees in the beauty advertisements. No one tells Hagar, however, that she aspires to an ideal that is both unattainable and highly destructive.

Morrison's criticism of bourgeois values and obsessive ownership are conjoined. Macon's wish to display a respectable and correct image of himself and his family is largely due to the fact that he is a businessman. He makes a living by buying houses and renting them out to poor, working class African Americans. The success of his business depends on his reputation. Macon is unconcerned about his tenants' opinion of him, though. As long as they fear him enough to pay the rent every month, Macon is contented. However, his reputation is important to the white businessmen from whom he buys property. Macon is aware that he lacks privileges that white
businessmen have: “He knew as a Negro he wasn't going to get a big slice of the pie. (…) There was quite a bit of pie filling oozing around the edge of the crust in 1945. Filling that could be his. (…) And years later when the war was over and that pie filling had spilled over into his very lap, [it] had stickied his hands and weighed his stomach down into a sagging paunch” (63). Since he understands that his position is vulnerable, maintaining a respectable reputation becomes even more important. This passage also reveals, however, that his wealth has damaged his character and his body; he has “sticky hands” and a “sagging paunch” (63).

Furthermore, Macon has developed an unhealthy relationship to ownership. He says to Milkman: “Own things. And let the things you own own other things. Then you'll own yourself and other people too” (55). Macon's desire to own people is disturbingly ironic considering that Macon's father was a slave. Macon also tells Milkman that money is “the only real freedom there is” (163). Part of Macon's motivation for keeping his women down and forcing them to be ornaments in the image of the respectable Dead family lies in these two statements. If Macon does not successfully maintain the family's façade, he risks losing what he owns and thus losing ownership of himself. Overall, Morrison depicts this model of freedom and racial progress as corrupting. Through Milkman, nevertheless, she offers an explanation of why Macon values this type of freedom. After Milkman learns that Macon's father was a proud property owner and farmer, he understands his father better: “As the son of Macon Dead the first, he paid homage to his own father's life and death by loving what that father had loved: property (…) That he distorted life, bent it, for the sake of gain, was a measure of his loss at his father's death” (300). The relationship to his father explains, at least partly, why Macon associates ownership with freedom; he learned it from his father who in turn learned it from white capitalist society both during slavery and after emancipation.
The performance of class and the importance of maintaining a respectable image must be read in relation to the setting of the novel: a city in the Midwest. Standards of respectability and beauty did, of course, exist in the South and in rural areas, too, but the performance took a certain form in the city. Victoria Wolcott writes: “Because public displays were crucial to the enactment of respectability, the city was often the theater in which the drama of respectability was most elaborately performed. (...) In urban neighborhoods, potent symbols such as clothing, mode of transportation, or the state of a front yard or stoop signaled the level of respectability to others” (5-6). The public display Wolcott describes is indeed what Macon engages in. His wife and daughters have to dress in certain ways, and he displays his car to the people in the neighborhood every Sunday. The enactment of respectability that Wolcott describes was an important part of a certain model of racial progress. In 1920, Katherine Williams wrote: “Many members of the race lack respect for conventionalities, decorum, and even common decency in public places. (...) Our women should be taught to wear becoming clothes (...). Both men and women could be taught the importance of keeping neat and clean. (...) The race as a whole could be taught to be quiet and polite in public places” (qtd. in Rooks, *Ladies’ Pages* 72). Williams relates racial progress directly to adherence to standards of respectability. By respecting conventions and traditions and avoiding any type of “negative attention” in public, black people could better their positions. It is exactly this model of progress that Macon Dead has adopted, and he forces his family to adhere to this model, too. One could view adherence to this model of respectability as an indication that black people had thoroughly internalized and adopted white standards of middle class behavior. However, it is important to keep in mind that for many black people, being quiet and polite in public was a matter of life and death. For many black women, employment, for example in domestic service, depended on respectable behavior. For black men,
“deviating” behavior in public could be viewed as a threat by white people and the men could risk becoming victims of severe violence.

Fashion became an important part of the performance of respectability, explaining why the Dead women are always so well-dressed in public. Rooks writes that in the twentieth century, “fashion, adornment, and public display were most significant as markers of a northern, urban, modern understanding of who African American women were” (*Ladies' Pages* 64). Furthermore, Rooks asserts that “the bogeyman, as opposed to fashion choices that reinforced cultural associations about African American women and sex, is most consistently the uncivilized character of newly arrived southern migrants who occupy the buses, street corners, and other public spaces of urban America” (64). In Morrison's novel, Pilate, Reba, and Hagar are representatives of this “bogeyman.” The three women have been living a nomadic life until Pilate decided to settle down close to her brother. Pilate is a citizen of the world who has synthesized her own set of values inspired by all the places in which she has lived, and she does not alter them simply because she has settled down. Many members of the upper middle class would consider Pilate and her family uncivilized because of their house, their wine-making business, and the ways they dress. Even though Ruth seeks help from Pilate when Macon tries to kill the unborn Milkman, she is somewhat afraid her. Corinthisans and Lena do not have any form of contact with their aunt or cousin. Macon sees Pilate as vulgar and dishonorable and tries to prevent Milkman from seeing her, as if she could contaminate or damage his son.

Hazel Carby labels the feelings that members of the Northern black bourgeoisie harbored against migrants from Southern and/or rural areas as fear. She writes that the “movement of black women between rural and urban areas and between southern and northern cities generated a series of moral panics” (739) in the black bourgeois classes. It is this moral panic Macon feels
when he criticizes Pilate for her appearances:

“Why can't you dress like a woman?” He was standing by the stove. “What's that
sailor's cap doing on your head? Don't you have stockings? What are you trying to
make me look like in this town?” He trembled with the thought of the white men
in the bank – the men who helped him buy and mortgage houses – discovering
that this raggedy bootlegger was his sister. That the propertied Negro who
handled his business so well and who lived in a big house on Not Doctor Street
had a sister who had a daughter but no husband, and that daughter had a daughter
but no husband. A collection of lunatics who made wine and sang in the streets
“like common street women! Just like common street women!” (20)

Pilate's appearances make Macon tremble with fear. His reputation as a businessman is at stake,
and being a businessman equals freedom for Macon. Interestingly, Macon views himself as an
apt judge of Pilate's femininity. Peg Zeglin Brand writes that men, “as long-time observers of
beauty, (...) have often regarded themselves as highly qualified, cultured men of taste: men for
whom beauty matters” (2). Macon positions himself as a qualified judge of what it constitutes to
(not) dress like a woman. For him, beauty matters because Pilate's “ugly” appearance puts his
reputation at risk. As previously discussed, Macon is already in a marginalized position as a
black businessman. Unlike white businessmen, Macon does not get a real piece of the pie (63).
Furthermore, Macon's reputation is based on his disassociating from black working class people.
He believes that they (and Pilate) exhibit characteristics that have been labeled as “essentially
black” by white supremacists for centuries – filthiness and immorality.
Chapter 3: Morrison's Critique of Materialism and Consumer Culture

While the depiction of Macon's tyranny is a harsh critique of bourgeois values and oppressive standards of respectability, Hagar's shopping spree and subsequent downfall constitute the novel's most powerful attack on materialism and consumer culture. Pilate's and Reba's failed attempts to please Hagar by giving her objects and Hagar's futile attempt to pave her way to Milkman's heart through beauty products illustrate how paradoxically powerful and powerless material objects are. They are powerful in their ability to daze Hagar. Moreover, Hagar's utter devastation when her faith in the objects' ability to magically solve all of her problems is shattered demonstrates the objects' power. Yet the objects are powerless because they do not fulfill their own promise – to positively contribute to Hagar's emotional well-being and sense of self-worth. Morrison also criticizes consumer culture's role in creating and enforcing the idea that women can transform themselves into objects worthy of men's love through the acquisition of beauty products and clothes. Furthermore, Hagar's demise illustrates the potentially destructive effects of marginalized African-American women's attempts to live up to beauty standards established and sanctioned by privileged African Americans and white society.

As previously mentioned, Hagar desires material objects already as a girl, and her mother and grandmother do their best to fulfill her wishes (150). What makes Hagar's desire for material objects problematic is that she is unlike Pilate and Reba. Pilate and Reba can own objects without letting the objects own them. Hagar, on the other hand, has, like Macon, an unhealthy relationship to acquisition and ownership of things. She believes that the objects in themselves will make her happy. Each Christmas, she gives Milkman a list of things she wants for Christmas: “a navy-blue satin bathrobe (...); a snood with a velvet bow; a rhinestone bracelet with earrings to match; patent leather pumps; White Shoulder cologne” (92). For Hagar, the
beautiful objects alleviate her shame of her family and home, her lack of meaningful relationships with people her own age, and her loneliness to a certain extent. However, her extreme sorrow after Milkman's rejection of her and her ensuing quest to kill him reveal that her material belongings are worthless in her quest for happiness and emotional well-being.

The relationship between Milkman and Hagar is not one of mutual respect and compassion. Milkman regards Hagar as his “private honey pot” and “the third beer” (91). Milkman is too immature and selfish to realize that Hagar loves him and needs him far more than he loves and needs her. Thus, his brutal call for her to “drive that knife right smack in your cunt” (130) devastates Hagar. Pilate and Reba try to comfort Hagar by bringing her things: “All they knew to do was love her and since she would not speak, they brought things to please her” (308). Clearly, the things are not just an easy way out for Pilate and Reba; they truly love Hagar. They know that she likes things, so they bring her “lipstick and chocolate milk, a pink nylon sweater and a fuchsia bed jacket” (308). First, Hagar does not care about these objects. When Pilate gives Hagar a compact with a mirror, however, she finally gets out of bed to “fix herself.” After scanning her closet, she declares that she needs “everything” (310). Hagar's declaration is followed by Morrison's words “and everything is what she got” (310). This statement is deliberately ironic; while Hagar materially gets everything, she mentally and spiritually gets nothing. When Hagar announces that she wants to go shopping, her mother does not hesitate to sell her $2,000 diamond ring for $200 (310). This dubious transaction illustrates that in spite of their possession of valuable objects, Pilate, Reba, and Hagar belong to a marginalized group that will not get “value for their money” in a capitalist society because they are either unable and/or unwilling to “play the game.” Genuinely wanting to help her daughter, Reba willingly gives up an object that a true materialist would have been hesitant to sacrifice. In all their goodness,
generosity, and love, Pilate and Reba fail to realize that Hagar always needed more than their unconditional love and that objects never could and never can fill the void in her life. By giving in to Hagar’s wishes, they unintentionally and unknowingly push her deeper into depression and sorrow. Guitar gives Hagar a ride home shortly before her shopping spree. During the ride, he asks himself what Pilate had done to Hagar and whether anybody had told Hagar the things she ought to know (307). It is hard to determine the extent to which Pilate and Reba are to blame for Hagar’s downfall. Clearly, they always wanted the best for her, but did not always understand what the best was. Regardless, the person who carries the most blame in the novel is Milkman.

The beauty products that Hagar acquires to transform herself into Milkman’s dream woman are clearly useless. However, they also exert a tremendous amount of power. That is, the beauty industry and its producers exercise power through their products. The forcefulness of the beauty industry and the store is obvious when Hagar enters the cosmetics department. The department “enfold[s] her in perfume, and she [reads] hungrily the labels and the promise” (311). The perfume is a potion that hypnotizes Hagar, and the only way to break the spell is to buy products. The word “hungrily” indicates that Hagar feels that she needs the perfumes as much as she needs food. She has fallen victim to the beauty industry’s message: “you need our products.” While walking around in the store, Hagar is like a “smiling sleepwalker” (311). She’s only half-conscious. Undoubtedly, Morrison condemns the beauty industry’s methods of enhancing their sales. Clothes and beauty products are probably the last things Hagar needs. However, the store is designed to convince Hagar that makeup is the thing she needs. By depriving her of her consciousness, the store’s owners and the product makers seduce her into buying their products. The products promise Hagar beauty and attractiveness. However, the only ones who benefit from Hagar’s purchases are the producers and the business owners of the beauty industry.
Even though the producer is usually the powerful and the consumer is the powerless in the fashion and beauty industry, the producers and advertisers create the illusion that one can gain sexual and social power through dressing up in their clothes and putting on their makeup. Undoubtedly, men and women can wield power by dressing up in certain ways. Whether one resists the notion or not, clothes and appearances are part of our public identity. Kathleen Higgins writes: “(...) one feels a sense of invulnerability in being well-dressed. (...) We also consider beauty an assertion of power. Beauty is the irresistible weapon, the spiritual equivalent of the nuclear bomb. Beauty compels, and the beautiful being is, we imagine, all-powerful” (88). Higgins acknowledges the power of beauty, but she is also aware that the equation of beauty with all-powerfullness is an illusion. Clothes can only be used to wield certain types of power in certain contexts. To assume that members of marginalized groups can gain real power by dressing up like members of the dominant culture and putting on the same makeup as they do is at best naive and at worst dangerous. This assumption undermines the importance of the unequal societal power structures whose roots are much older and deeper than mass production of clothes and cosmetics.

Even though Hagar's shopping spree (or any woman's shopping spree) appears as a form of self-gratification, it is clear that Hagar does not do this for her own sake, but for Milkman's sake. She wants to be happy, but the problem is that she feels that she cannot be happy without Milkman. Ahmad writes that Hagar's shopping spree “demonstrates the extent to which the white culture propagates the values of success based on materialism and a certain fixed concept of beauty” and that “the underlying assumption is that a woman is worthy only if she is desirable to men – and they will find her attractive only if she lures them by the power of her clothes, make-up and perfume” (64). Women are only worthy if they are attractive, and they can only be
attractive if they buy beauty products. Thus, their acquisition of beauty products determines their value as human beings. Obviously, all women in Western consumer culture are vulnerable to this logic. Patton points out that “many Euro American women cannot measure up to the White normative standard of beauty” (356). Yet African-American women are even more victimized by normative beauty standards and the beauty industry because of their history of sexual slavery and a consistent devaluation of black female beauty and black femininity. As Patton emphasizes, African-American women are up against “an entire race of people and a system of thought” (362). While white women face sexism, African-American women face both sexism and racism. Furthermore, both black and white women might face class-based oppression. Thus, racism, sexism, and classism often, if not always, intersect in some manner.

Given that one of the messages to women from the beauty industry is “Use our products and be attractive to men,” sexual imagery in beauty advertisements is no surprise. Michael Jacobsen and Laurie Mazur argue that “many ads tread close to the pornographic border” (83). Jacobsen and Mazur describe a general tendency in all advertising, but the beauty industry is no exception. Nowhere is this connection between beauty products and sex more apparent than in the cosmetics department. Hagar sees “peachy powders and milky lotions (...) grouped in front of poster after cardboard poster of gorgeous grinning faces” (311). She sees “faces in ecstasy” (311) and “faces somber with achieved seduction” (311). She sees “lipsticks in soft white hands [darting] out of their sheaths like the shiny red penises of puppies” (311) [all italics mine]. The language is sexually charged. The grinning faces in ecstasy evoke people who are having or have just had an orgasm. The faces of achieved seduction advertise that “you can also seduce a man if you wear my makeup and perfume.” While it might be an idiomatic expression to refer to puppy or dog penises as “lipsticks,” Morrison's red puppy penis lipsticks are grotesque miniature
versions of the human penises that women will be able to satisfy if they abide by the beauty standards enforced by the fashion and cosmetics industry. Wolf traces explicit sexual imagery in beauty advertisements back to pornography and the 1980s: “the conventions of high-class pornographic photography, such as Playboy’s, began to be used generally to sell products to women. (...) Seeing a face anticipating orgasm, even if it is staged, is a powerful sell: In the absence of other sexual images, many women came to believe that they must have that face, that body, to achieve ecstasy” (135). Both Hagar’s experience in the cosmetics department in the 1960s and the publication of Morrison’s novel precede the development Wolf describes.

However, judging by the sexual advertisements in the store, the connection between beauty products and sex was in development well before the 1980s. While the 1960s was the dawn of the “Black is Beautiful” movement, Malcolm X’s condemnation of hair straightening, and promotion of African-American hairstyles such as the afro, this context seems to be largely absent from Hagar’s life. Instead, Hagar lives in a world in which black women do go to the hairdresser to get their hair “fixed” and in which women can go to a department store to “upgrade” themselves from top to toe without leaving the store. In this store, in which both the employees and customers are women, at least in the 1960s, sexist patriarchal signifiers are present to remind women why and for whom they ultimately put on makeup and perfume.

The existence of a consumer culture depends on its members’ belief in the necessity of products. Moreover, shopping is often advertised as a pastime. Whether or not one actually needs the objects, the activity of picking out, trying on, selecting, and choosing is promoted as a pleasurable process. Higgins writes that “the ‘makeover’ game” of transforming our appearances “with cosmetics and clothing (...) need not be considering psychologically pernicious” (96). However, she also recognizes that “it is rare for a woman in our society to approach clothes and
cosmetics in a completely light-hearted manner” (96). Hagar's attempted transformation is anything but light-hearted. When Hagar is trying on a skirt that is too small for her, she struggles with the placket not closing. She “suck[s] in her stomach and pull[s] the fabric as far as possible, but the teeth of the zipper [will] not join. A light sheen [breaks] out on her forehead as she huff[s] and puff[s]. (…) The nail of her forefinger split[s] and the balls of her thumbs [ache] as she struggle[s] with the placket. Dampness [becomes] sweat and her breath [comes] in gasps” (310-311). For Hagar, trying on clothes is a very unpleasant experience. It is a physical exertion, and it causes pain and even a minor injury on her finger. Her exertion illustrates that buying an outfit is very serious for her. It has none of the entertainment qualities of “the makeover game” (Higgins 96).

Unfortunately, Hagar's attempted “extreme makeover” turns out to cause much more harm than a split forefinger nail and thumb aches. According to Ahmad, Hagar has been “conditioned by exposure to the majority culture (…) to think of a successful woman as one who is beautiful [and] dresses up in chic clothes” (64). Hagar is already struggling with feelings of deficiency before she goes out to shop. When she sees herself in the mirror, she says to Pilate: “Look at how I look. I look awful. No wonder he didn't want me. I look terrible” (308). Her shopping is an attempt to “fix herself” and reestablish not only her looks, but also her sense of self-worth. When she is struggling to put on the skirt, she is “convinced that her whole life depend[s] on whether or not those aluminum teeth would meet” (310-311). Her inability to pull up the zipper does not signify that she picked the wrong size or that she has gained some weight while lying in bed, but that she is simply not good enough. Higgins writes that our belief in flawlessness and glamour, “false paradigms of beauty” (87), sends the problematic psychological message “that unless you are physically flawless, you are deficient as a human being” (96). Since
Hagar has been exposed to the normative beauty standards of the dominant culture and, in her eyes, fails to live up to them, it is no wonder she is upset when her skirt does not fit. Hagar has made Milkman her life; the only way she thinks she can keep him is to abide by normative beauty standards; pulling up the zipper is a form of abiding by the beauty standards. Since Hagar is unable to question the relations between Milkman, her life, and the zipper, pulling it up becomes a matter of life and death.

After realizing that she cannot transform herself into the woman she thinks Milkman desires, Hagar goes to bed and simply wastes away: “The fever dried her eyes up as well as her mouth. She lay in her little Goldilocks’-choice bed, her eyes sand dry and as quiet as glass” (314-315). Morrison does not describe the moment of Hagar’s death, but her last words to the reader are: “Penny-colored hair (...) lemon-colored skin (...) gray-blue eyes (...) thin nose” (315-316). One could read Hagar’s death as the result of a broken heart. Certainly, numerous female literary characters have wasted away because of a broken heart before Hagar. However, Hagar mourns her loss of Milkman through a description of characteristics of normative beauty that she does not exhibit. Thus, one has to read her death as not only caused by her loss of Milkman, but also by a heteropatriarchal society that enforces beauty standards that excludes dark-skinned African-American women and references black femininity as non-normative and/or a contradiction in terms.

Aside from her depiction of Hagar’s self-destructive shopping spree and makeover, Morrison’s description of the miserable and dysfunctional Dead family clearly represents a critique of materialism and consumer culture. Macon remembers that he and Ruth used to have a sex life, but he mostly remembers her beautiful underwear and their childish foreplay. They do not share any real intimacy. Had Corinthians married a man of her own class and of Macon’s
caliber, one can imagine that she would have developed a similar relationship to him as Ruth has with Macon. However, Corinthians chooses a different path with Porter. Corinthians’s first sexual intercourse with Porter (and her first ever) is the antithesis to the sex that Macon remembers:

They were quiet for a minute, then [Porter] turned over and parted her legs with his. Corinthians looked down at him. “Is this for me?” she asked. “Yes,” he said. “Yes, this is for you.” “Porter.” “This is. . .for you. Instead of roses. And silk underwear and bottles of perfume.” “Porter.” “Instead of chocolate creams in a heart-shaped box. Instead of a big house and a great big car. Instead of long trips. . .” “Porter.” “. . .in a clean white boat.” “No.” “Instead of picnics. . .” “No.” “. . .and fishing. . .” “No.” “. . .and being old together on a porch.” “No.” “This is for you, girl. Oh, yes. This is for you.” (200)

Porter offers his body, his love, and sexual intimacy in place of material objects. Corinthians’s relationship with Porter represents a radical change from her childhood and adolescence. Her parents gave her material objects, but no love or intimacy. This scene is crucial for two reasons. The first is that the characters reject materialism and bourgeois values not by emphasizing their negative aspects, but by emphasizing the positive aspects of the alternative. Of course, Pilate represents an alternative to materialism, but Porter serves as a more mainstream alternative. The Dead family and Pilate’s family are extremes at each end of the scale, but with Porter, Morrison shows that there are valuable, middle ground alternatives. One does not have to choose between a palace and a hut, between being a businessman and a wine-maker. The second reason why the passage is crucial is that it illustrates that class status is not necessarily static. By the end of the novel, Corinthians chooses to move in with Porter. One could hardly imagine a greater quantum leap for a woman who has lived in a dollhouse and been controlled by a tyrannical puppeteer
father her whole life. While Corinthians loses her place in her father's big house in a bourgeois neighborhood, her class status, and the opportunity to buy beautiful objects, she gains a sense of self-worth and independence, and, most importantly something that she has neither given or received earlier: real love.

Conclusion

Since Morrison’s novel was published in the transitional period between second wave and third wave feminism, tenets of the former movement are present in the novel to a greater extent than tenets from the latter. Along with scholars and writers, such as Alice Walker and hooks, Morrison is an important figure in second wave black feminism, or “womanism,” as Walker named it in *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose* (1983). If one reads Morrison’s novel in the context of second wave feminism, Hagar’s demise is a symbol of the destructive effects of shopping for fashionable clothes and beauty products. Her missed appointment at the beauty parlor to “get her hair done” underscores the destructive nature of hair straightening for African-American women. hooks argues that the history of hair-straightening and the ideological implications overrule individual preferences. These preferences, “whether rooted in self-hate or not (…)[,] cannot negate the reality that our collective obsession with hair straightening reflects the psychology of oppression and the impact of racist colonization” (115). Furthermore, she asserts that even if the individual feels that her hair straightening is a “playful gesture,” it carries other implications beyond her control (115). Thus, while hair straightening might not always be as destructive to the individual as Hagar’s shopping spree and makeover were for her, African-American women should, according to hooks, avoid it because it will more than likely be destructive to a larger collective group.
However, does that mean that shopping and hair straightening are inherently destructive activities and that clothes and cosmetics are inherently oppressive? Wolf asserts that it's not what women do, but the motivation behind their behavior that is critical. She writes that “the problem with cosmetics exists only when women feel invisible or inadequate without them” (273). Thus, Hagar's shopping spree is not self-destructive because it is a shopping spree, but because it is an act of desperation. Her motivation is not to please herself, but to please Milkman. Furthermore, her self-worth depends on the success of the shopping. For Hagar, shopping is far from playful. However, through a third wave feminist lens, one can at least imagine black women, and even Hagar, having a healthy relationship to clothes, hair, and makeup within the boundaries of consumer culture. Yet Morrison leaves no doubt that Hagar’s failed transformation, carried out through a shopping spree and an attempted “extreme makeover,” essentially triggers her death. Ultimately, most third wave feminists would likely agree that Hagar’s style of shopping is destructive. As Wolf acknowledges, cosmetics can be problematic “when women feel invisible or inadequate without them” (273).

Since Hagar’s relationship to consumer objects, cosmetics, and clothes is clearly so unhealthy and self-destructive, one examines the novel for alternative forms of femininity and womanhood. The bourgeois lady Ruth is clearly not an ideal of womanhood that Morrison wishes to promote. Pilate, being one of the novel’s most fulfilled female characters, does represent an alternative, but possibly one that few twenty-first century women would like to adopt completely. She has traveled widely and worked to make a living for herself and her family, and she does not depend on a man to support her in any way. She is Milkman’s most important teacher and guide in his coming of age. Pilate is also a helper; she helps Ruth to conceive Milkman and she helps protect the unborn child against his father. Morrison
undoubtedly portrays several of Pilate’s characteristics and personality traits in a very positive light. But inevitably, one asks oneself the question: Are women of the twenty-first century, white or of color, either Hagars or Pilates? More than likely, the answer is no. The question then becomes: Does Morrison present an alternative model of femininity and womanhood that a woman of today can recognize and relate to?

Corinthians emerges as the most viable alternative to Hagar, Pilate, and Ruth. By the end of the novel, Corinthians has rebelled against bourgeois conventions to a greater extent than any other female character, excluding Pilate. One could even read Corinthians’s rebellion as stronger and more radical than Pilate’s because, unlike Pilate, Corinthians was indoctrinated into bourgeois culture from birth. Ahmad describes Corinthians as “the most successful of the Dead women (excluding Pilate)” (71). She writes that Corinthians “finally realizes that self-worth is more important than material worth (…),” and that she “learns, in essence, to listen to her heart, and to appreciate herself for what she is, rather than what she has” (71-72). Bakerman, on the other hand, has a more pessimistic view of Corinthians’s development. She argues that to Corinthians, life has no worth without Porter, and that she has no identity save the reflection of herself in Porter’s eyes (563). Furthermore, Bakeman argues that “the reader is left to wonder how long Porter will value a life found valueless in the eyes of its owner” (563). Bakeman’s argument that Corinthians believes that her life is valueless is unreasonable. On the contrary, Corinthians feels “a self-esteem that was quite new” (Morrison 201) after her first sexual intercourse with Porter. Furthermore, during their sexual intercourse, Porter is more concerned with pleasing Corinthians than making Corinthians please him. Probably, Corinthians feels self-esteem, not because she realized that she had the ability to sleep with a man, but because she realized that Porter believes that she deserves pleasure. Her father's treatment has taught her that
she does not deserve or should not feel pleasure. Her relationship with Porter might lead her to
the realization that taking pleasure in life, as Pilate does, is not wrong or immoral.

Since Morrison only reveals that Corinthians moves in with Porter before the novel ends,
the reader is left with unanswered questions about her future. Who will she be? How will she
develop? How will she differ from her mother and Lena? Most likely, she will neither become
Pilate nor return to the woman she was before meeting Porter. In that way, she represents a
middle ground between Pilate and Ruth. She is neither the wine-making woman in the house
without electricity nor the beautiful, rich lady trapped in a luxurious house. In conclusion,
Corinthians could then be the first brick of a bridge between the novel’s publication context of
second wave feminism and the more current movement of third wave feminism. Judging by the
end of the novel, Corinthians's fate radically differs from that of Hagar. While Hagar is destroyed
by her love for Milkman, Corinthians's love for and relationship to Porter is her first opportunity
in life to be fulfilled.


hooks, bell. “Straightening Our Hair.” Harris and Johnson 111-116.


Vita

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