

Critique

In her article "What Shall I Give My Children?": The Role of the Mentor in Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* and Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*," Wells focuses upon the woman's role as mentor in various works of modern African American women writers. In using Gwendolyn Brooks' poem as the cornerstone of her study, she establishes the sense of anguish and frustration faced by the mother who seeks to give to her children a sense of worth and self-esteem in a society which automatically disenfranchises them. She poses an important question--one that goes beyond the role of mother: "How does the power of mentoring and affiliation help women to overcome the institutional oppression leveled against them because of race, gender and class?" The works of Naylor and Marshall offer their individual answers for triumph in the face of "an autumn freezing everywhere."

As Wells notes, the women of Brewster Place support and empower one another, and, through mutual love and respect, enable one another to develop a sense of individual completeness. She cites important critical works which facilitate her movement beyond the novels of Naylor and Marshall into the culture they represent. Auerbach and Giddings note the black female's disenfranchisement in modern American society, and the need, as Morrison states, not only to establish themselves, but to invent themselves. It is this "mother of invention" which the women of Brewster Place bring to their dead-end ghetto, a blind alley symbolically represented by the brick wall which borders it. With nowhere else to go, they create for one another a haven of peace and community among a world which either ignores, brutalizes or betrays them.

In *Brewster Place*, as Wells establishes, the role and voice of the woman as mentor is integral to the central fabric and device of the novel. Each of the seven narrators tells her story and relates the history of sisterhood through the recollections of past mentors who have enabled these women to survive. It is Mattie Michael, the novel's "central consciousness," who best represents the ideal role of the black woman in her community: she is the novel's moral consciousness, a woman who has transcended the suffering heaped upon her and who responds to all who need her with a quiet outpouring of love, wisdom and support. Mattie has matured into a "calm, unifying force," one

who has, with every new tragedy, emerged reborn into an ever stronger self.

Wells ends her discussion of *Brewster Place* with what I agree is "the most affecting scene of the novel," the scene in which Mattie rocks the tortured Ceil "across history" and in so doing becomes the archetypal mother who, through her love and compassion, bestows upon her children "a way to exorcise the pain." The women of *Brewster Place*, as Wells so aptly notes, have, by striving for and maintaining their humanity, overcome the limitations about which Gwendolyn Brooks has written.

It is indeed the question of legacy with which Paule Marshall is concerned in *Praisesong for the Widow*. As Wells indicates, "conflicts between materialism and spiritualism are integral to the novel." If the black parents and children strive to "perfect" themselves by white society's standard of success, they become, like Jerome Johnson, traitors to themselves, cutting themselves off from both the past and the future, and squandering the present as well. They become, like Avey and her friends aboard the *Bianca Pride*, isolated faces in a mirror, hollow masks of their real selves. How, then, can they "reinvent" themselves, and affirm their selfhood, and also pass along to their children, those "sweetest lepers," a vision for the future?

Wells examines Avey's spiritual awakening through the four sections of the novel, "Runagate," "Sleeper's Wake," "Lavé Tête," and "The Beg Pardon." She aptly stresses the importance of the journey motif and the use of music in the novel. Black music functioned as an enlivening force in the Johnson's early marriage; the lack of this influence later in their lives is representative of the false and sterile values they have come to embrace, and of their alienation from one another.

When Avey rediscovers herself, she also rediscovers her music, which serves as a conduit to connect her with the community of spirits her great-aunt Cuney identified in her legend of the Ibos. Aunt Cuney tried to teach Avey the lessons of the Ibos' vision into the future, a future of further enslavement by whites and by their false values. From her tenth year, Avey had begun to reject this vision, and has become increasingly isolated within the white world and values. Her flight from the ship, a symbol of material luxury, and her rejection of her material possessions, reflected by the six suitcases of clothes she leaves behind at the hotel, prepare her for her encounter with the old man, Lebert Joseph, who, like the Ibos, can see that which is beyond seeing. As Wells notes, her excursion to Carriacou is a journey which enables her to rein

her nation. His daughter bathes and purifies her, and by her laying on of hands, heals her much as Mattie Michael has done for Ceil in *Brewster Place*.

In the final section of the novel, "The Beg Pardon," Avey is "cleansed, like a newborn, of the material world." As Wells notes, the novel has come full circle. The dance performed is the same as the Ring Shout performed so long ago in the South Carolina Tidewater. Avey has indeed experienced a full awakening. She understands her mission: to bring her grandchildren and Marion's students, the "sweetest lepers," back to the Landing in order to pass on to them the story of their heritage. She has learned that one's connection to the past helps to create the present and to ensure the future.

As Wells notes in her conclusion, "Both Naylor and Marshall treat the power that arises from marginalized groups who forge a community out of their common history. In each of the novels, the mentor binds people together in this common history." In an earlier section of her work, she focused upon another important theme for exploration, "the issue of gender relations and the black experience." Certainly, as she has established, the relationship between these women and their men--fathers, lovers, sons--who are so integral a part of their lives, is one which could be further explored. As Toni Morrison so aptly depicts in her novel *The Bluest Eye*, without healing relationships, and without guidance and mentoring, many are still, as Gwendolyn Brooks laments, lost in "an autumn freezing everywhere."

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