

**CHAPTER TWO**  
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The aim of this chapter is to examine the ruptures in maternity in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) and *Sula* (1973) and in Jessie Redmon Fauset's *Comedy American Style* (1933). The last novel though written much earlier, is placed last in the discussion as it depicts maternal rupture not under pressure but due to personal obsession. Although this chapter draws upon the theories of motherhood put forward by Andrea O'Reilly in *Toni Morrison and Motherhood*, it tries to examine the responsibility of the mother in the death of her child as well as the social and historical reasons. This is especially seen in Morrison's *Sula* and Fauset's *Comedy American Style*. In *Beloved* no one can undermine the excruciating pain and suffering of a slave mother who, to prevent atrocities on her infant daughter, prefers to kill her. The chapter looks into the possible causes of fractures in traditional black maternal values due to slavery, racism and economic hardship which does not leave the mother much option but to be somewhat distant in her emotional bonding with her children. O'Reilly believes Morrison's goal to be to "render explicit the historical causes of mother line rupture and disruption and to portray the devastating consequence of such for African American people"(74). However, she generally discusses maternal ruptures consequent upon cultural fragmentation and displacement.

The chapter examines both violent and figurative in the selected texts. While Sethe kills her daughter to 'save' her from the extreme trauma of abusive slavery, Eva's decision to kill her drug addict son is in line with her personality of taking decisive action where necessary. To take care of her small children she is believed to have stuck her leg under a train and with the insurance money maintained a guest house to provide not only for them but in time, for other needy people as well. Olivia, on the other hand, has no reason to behave as she does: her obsession with passing as white makes her a completely unnatural mother, ruining the lives of the people around her.

The hypotheses taken up in this chapter are:

that motherhood ruptures amongst African Americans is the result of personal as well as social causes;

that maternal ruptures have their manifestation in psychological as well as physical forms;

that in most cases these mothers are under tremendous pressure; that in some cases the rupture is the result of some phobia or obsession on the part of the mother.

This chapter also deals with this particular issue of ruptured maternity resulting from social and psychological factors. Black mothers, who have to accept the values of the dominant white culture through assimilation or under some kind of duress, contribute to the dilution of their own community values regarding motherhood. Migration to the North is another contributing factor as the South is believed to foster the genuine African American cultural values. Slavery, led to fractures of the 'motherline' by denying blacks their humanity and causing permanent dislocations, even ruptures within the black families. This chapter examines Sethe in *Beloved* and Eva Peace in *Sula* as well as Olivia Cary in *Comedy American Style* as examples of maternal ruptures along with the havoc created by them for those around them.

The chapter examines how Sethe's actions affect her relationships with everybody, especially her daughter Denver. Again Eva's tough maternal act results in relationship ruptures not only between herself and her children but also between her and her granddaughter Sula. While Sethe and Eva are directly responsible for the deaths of their children, it is Olivia's cruelty that drives her young son to suicide. Olivia's obsession with whiteness makes her so unnatural that she cannot even accept her dark skinned younger son as her own offspring, making him play the role of a young butler in front of her white friends. Olivia also interferes in the lives of her two older white skinned children, breaking up their courtships with darker partners and completely ruining her daughter's life. That part of the story will be examined in the fifth chapter dealing with the dilemma of mulatto or mixed race mothers.

This chapter argues motherhood cannot be seen outside the adverse social circumstances that surround African American women. Given the pressures, both social and domestic, under which an African American woman has to operate, African American motherhood turns out to be quite different from the expected norm in dominant White cultures. In presenting the pressures of black and white culture on the African American mothers, these writers present them as complicated human beings who make difficult choices as far as their children are concerned.

Female slaves who were often compelled to kill their babies fathered by white men, were deprived of the experiences of motherhood beyond giving birth. In *Beloved*, Morrison presents the brutal conditions of slavery through the figures of Baby Suggs and Sethe's mother. Sethe's mother is killed; Baby Suggs has lost all her eight children and Sethe is living with her guilt after killing her two year old daughter. Sethe's decision of killing her daughter can be linked to her mother's killing of unwanted children issuing out of rape, as well as her own horrible experiences of slavery.

Sethe's mother, a 'rebellious' slave, was hanged and her defaced body displayed to the public as narrated by Nan, another slave. Nan tells Sethe of the trauma faced by herself and Sethe's mother. They were repeatedly raped by the crew, and then later by other whites. Sethe's mother got rid of those babies but kept Sethe because she was fathered by a black man. Nan reports: "The one from the crew she threw away on the island. The others from more whites she also threw away. Without names she threw them. You she gave the name of the black man" (*Beloved* 88). Thus infanticide was not unheard of to Sethe. Just as her mother had asserted her choice over motherhood despite the unwanted pregnancies, Sethe asserts her right in one gruesome act. She had convinced herself that she was protecting her infant daughter from future tortures of slavery.

As a slave in "Sweet Home," Sethe undergoes inhuman torture and physical suffering. Not only is she raped, abused and humiliated by Schoolteacher and his nephews, she is also whipped with raw cowhide. The master was intent on proving that the blacks were less than human and so deserved to be treated like animals. The master's nephews also suckle her breasts and this affects her psyche more than all the violation and abuse to her person. When Sethe recalls her trauma in the presence of Paul D, the stolen milk bears down on her mind as she says: "those boys came in there and took my milk..."(19). More than the inhuman beating, she hates the taking of her milk, meant for the young child she was still nursing.

The condition of slavery also ensured that the slave mother beyond giving birth to the child, had little control over its future. The children were the property of the slave owner to be sold off like cattle, irrespective of maternal suffering or the child's trauma. In Morrison's *A Mercy*, a slave mother, minha mae is not unhappy to see her eight year old daughter Florens being given to another person in lieu of monetary payment. Florens was offered to Jacob Vaark as part of compensation of the debt which minha mae's master D'

Ortega owed to him. Jacob initially refused to take slaves as compensation but D'Ortega's insistence and the look of appeal on Florens' mother's face made him agree to the deal. She takes that decision to save her daughter from the imminent sexual advances of her master. But Florens who knows nothing of this, looks upon her mother's willingness to part with her as an act of betrayal.

Returning to *Beloved* we see that Sethe is initially disturbed by the ghost of her little daughter long after her death, and suggests to her mother-in-law, Baby Suggs, that they should shift elsewhere. To which the latter replies: "What'd be the point"? She continues:

"Not a house in the country ain't packed to its rafters with some dead Negro's grief. We lucky this ghost is a baby. My husband's spirit was to come back in here? or yours? Don't talk to me. You lucky. You got three left. Three pulling at your skirts and just one raising hell from the other side. Be thankful, why don't you? I had eight. Every one of them gone away from me. Four taken, four chased, and all, I expect, worrying somebody's house into evil." (5)

Baby Suggs is more pragmatic about things: her loves and her losses. She had forced herself to overcome her grief and carry on with life to the extent that some of her children are fading memories or not even that. Sethe remembers her suffering during her years as a slave and peripheral things rather than her children's faces find space in her memory:

It shamed her--remembering the wonderful soughing trees rather than the boys. Try as she might to make it otherwise, the sycamores beat out the children every time and she could not forgive her memory for that. (9)

It is as if the memory had been conditioned to forget the painful personal details like lost children dead or sold out.

From Baby Suggs' experience Sethe knew that men and women were moved around like checkers. Anybody Baby Suggs knew, let alone loved, who hadn't run off or been hanged, got rented out, loaned out, bought up, brought back, stored up, mortgaged, won, stolen or seized. So Baby's eight children had six fathers. What she called the nastiness of life was the shock she received upon learning that nobody stopped playing checkers just because the pieces included her children. (23)

Baby Suggs whose freedom was bought by her youngest son Halle, later Sethe's husband, recalls how one after another, her children were taken from her. She tells herself that her son Halle was the one she had for the longest time as if to make up for having to lose her daughters: "her two girls, neither of whom had their adult teeth, were sold and gone and she had not been able to wave goodbye"(23). This is an instance of involuntary maternal rupture forced by the slave trade practiced by the whites.

As Baby Suggs ponders over some apprehension of darkness, she wonders what else was there:

What was left to hurt her now? News of Halle's death? No. She had been prepared for that better than she had for his life. The last of her children, whom she barely glanced at when he was born because it wasn't worth the trouble to try to learn features you would never see change into adulthood anyway. Seven times she had done that: held a little foot; examined the fat fingertips with her own—fingers she never saw become the male or female hands a mother would recognize anywhere. She didn't know to this day what their permanent teeth looked like; or how they held their heads when they walked. (139)

Even as she thinks back to the dark moments in her life when she had been told of her children being sold or dead, it helps the reader to get a fuller picture of the relationship ruptures that the slaves and their children are subjected to. Nobody asked Baby Suggs whether her minor sons or daughters were ready to be traded off. The trauma suffered by the mother or children is not recognized at all. That is why she says that trying to mark her children's features so as to remember them was useless. She no longer knew if any of them were alive. She had heard of the deaths of some.

Apart from filling in the picture concerning her ruptured maternity through no fault of hers, Baby Suggs' premonition proves to be true as she sees the slave master and sheriff coming towards the house and on going to the backside notes what her daughter-in-law Sethe had done to prevent such a future for her children. Schoolteacher who had walked round the house notes that an old man and a woman standing apart staring:

Both, however, were staring at the same place--a shed. Then all four started toward the shed. Inside, two boys bled in the sawdust and dirt at

the feet of a nigger woman holding a blood-soaked child to her chest with one hand and an infant by the heels in the other. She did not look at them; she simply swung the baby toward the wall planks, missed and tried to connect a second time, when out of nowhere... the old nigger boy...ran through the door behind them and snatched the baby from the arch of its mother's swing. (149)

Morrison narrates this gruesome act through the white man—Schoolteacher, known for his brutality—but he is as shocked as anybody else. On the sheriff's advice they leave. In fact, "The sheriff wanted to back out too. To stand in the sunlight outside of that place...Not because he was afraid. Not at all. He was just cold" (151). The outsider's perspective draws attention to the enormity of what Sethe had done.

Further, it takes Stamp Paid and Baby Suggs to bring Sethe to her senses partially before her arrest by the sheriff. When addressed by Stamp Paid—"Sethe. You take my armload and gimme yours."—she "turned to him, and glancing at the baby he was holding, made a low sound in her throat as though she'd made a mistake" (151). She continues to hold on to the dead child till Baby Suggs after attending to the injured boys, turns towards her:

She took the crying baby from Stamp Paid and carried it on her shoulder for a full two minutes, then stood in front of its mother. "It's time to nurse your youngest," she said. Sethe reached up for the baby without letting the dead one go. Baby Suggs shook her head. "One at a time," she said and traded the living for the dead, which she carried into the keeping room. (152)

But on returning she is shocked to see Sethe offering a blood covered nipple to her baby and shouts at her to wash herself first. Sethe does not comply and they struggle to take possession of the baby. Finally as Baby Suggs slips on the puddle of blood and falls down, the baby, Denver, "took her mother's milk right along with the blood of her sister" (152). When the Sheriff returns with a cart Sethe walks out with the living baby in silence.

Years later Sethe tries to explain her actions to Paul D as he questions her:

It didn't work, did it? Did it work?" he asked. "It worked," she said. "How? Your boys gone you don't know where. One girl dead, the other won't leavethe yard. How did it work?" "They ain't at Sweet Home. Schoolteacher ain't got em."

"Maybe there's worse." "It ain't my job to know what's worse. It's my job to know what is and to keep them away from what I know is terrible. I did that." (164-65)

Paul D realizes what Sethe was trying to tell him—that she chose death over slavery for her child and would do it again if she thought it would remove her from the inhuman brutality of the slave owners. She tries to assuage her guilt by being extra kind and accommodating towards the adult Beloved who she thinks is the reincarnation of her dead daughter. This has the effect of Denver feeling somewhat alienated. She notices that what was once a threesome consisting of her mother, herself and Beloved had been replaced by a twosome forged by some secret knowledge.

Denver reflects: "I love my mother but I know she killed one of her own daughters, and tender as she is with me, I'm scared of her because of it. She missed killing my brothers and they knew it. They told me" (205). She also confesses that she has lived with fear amidst nightmares of her mother cutting off her head, and her ways of countering that fear through loving her mother.

Denver is still worried about the turn of events, about the nature of circumstances that could drive a mother to kill her child and feel vindicated by it:

All the time, I'm afraid the thing that happened that made it all right for my mother to kill my sister could happen again. I don't know what it is, I don't know who it is, but maybe there is something else terrible enough to make her do it again. I need to know what that thing might be, but I don't want to. Whatever it is, it comes from outside this house, outside the yard, and it can come right on in the yard if it wants to. (205)

Her subconscious tells her that there must have been extenuating circumstances, dark moments in history for a mother to kill her child and justify it. In fact, Denver despite feeling disturbed by the developments reacts with the resilience of youth and tries to take care of her mother and Beloved. She takes on the responsibility for "Washing, cooking, forcing, cajoling her mother to eat a little now and then, and providing sweet things for Beloved as often as she could to calm her down" (250). Denver even reconstructs her mother's past for Beloved to make her understand the trauma and difficulties of being a slave and a mother.



To return to Sethe's growing love for the girl she believes is her daughter returned to her, she thinks that the daughter she had killed had forgiven her or at least accepted why her mother did what she did. On one occasion she goes out to collect firewood on a cold morning while the girls are sleeping:

She even looked straight at the shed, smiling, smiling at the things she would not have to remember now. Thinking, "She ain't even mad with me. Not a bit." (181-2)

So convinced is Sethe that she tells herself: "if her daughter could come back home from the timeless place—certainly her sons could, and would, come back from wherever they had gone to"(182). It is hard to tell whether Sethe is being delusional or it is a mere wish fulfillment on her part as she comforts herself: "Think about all I ain't got to remember no more. Do like Baby said: Think on it then lay it down--for good" (182). The decision Sethe had made the moment she saw Schoolteacher's hat—to kill all her children—continues to trouble her as she has to live through public censure, her mother-in-law's grief and her own combination of guilt, remorse and triumph (at putting off Schoolmaster). This, till she convinces herself that the little ghost, which had been creating havoc in their home and been thrown out by Paul D, has returned in the shape of the grown-up Beloved.

Before she can lay her ghosts literally, however, Sethe continues with the belief that her dead daughter had come back to enable her to ask for forgiveness and as far as possible, atone for her deed:

Beloved, she my daughter. She mine. See. She come back to me of her own free will and I don't have to explain a thing. I didn't have time to explain before because it had to be done quick. Quick. She had to be safe and I put her where she would be. But my love was tough and she back now. I knew she would be. (200)

This is how she tries to expiate her guilt—by explaining to the one person who needed to be told. Since death separated them and it was not possible for Sethe to lie with her in the grave as she wanted to, she thinks she has been given a chance by God to make her daughter understand her killing.

Not only is Sethe glad to communicate with the older Beloved and give her all the love she could not offer her infant child at that time, she also rationalizes in her mind that the girl calling herself Beloved is none other than the banished ghost returning in more tangible and therefore more credible form. She says:

Paul D ran her off so she had no choice but to come back to me in the flesh. I bet you Baby Suggs, on the other side, helped. I won't never let her go. I'll explain to her, even though I don't have to. Why I did it. How if I hadn't killed her she would have died and that is something I could not bear to happen to her. When I explain it she'll understand, because she understands everything already. (200)

Sethe feels that her kindly mother-in-law had put in a word on her behalf to God and she would not waste the opportunity given to her. She justifies the killing as necessary or even preferable to the cruelty and degradation a slave has to experience. Further, it appears that she has reached a stage where she can overcome the trauma she has been living with. She is ready to put a closure to that particular chapter of her life and this girl she takes for Beloved come to life appears to be a manifestation of her complicated thoughts and troubled conscience.

In the meantime Denver is troubled by the fact that Beloved was becoming more and more demanding and Sethe more and more appeasing. Nothing, however, could satisfy Beloved and Denver starts fearing for her the former: she feels that one day Sethe might again resort to violence and harm her. She tries her best to protect Beloved. But the turn of events convinces her that it is not Beloved who needs her care and protection but Sethe who was becoming thin and tired. Moreover, Beloved's demands had exhausted all their resources. Sethe had lost her job through too many late attendances, and instead of looking for work elsewhere she was content to stay at home and do things for Beloved. Finally they were running out of food and Sethe was starving to gratify Beloved needs, when Denver decides to seek help from the community outside.

Denver goes looking for work so that she can buy food but is told that nobody would pay her for work they would do themselves. When she confesses that her mother is sick and not earning anything, the community rallies around them and provides them with food almost daily. They leave it unobtrusively on a tree stump in the yard, helping Denver all they can:

Her father's daughter after all, Denver decided to do the necessary. Decided to stop relying on kindness to leave something on the stump. She would hire herself out somewhere, and although she was afraid to leave Sethe and Beloved alone all day not knowing what calamity either one of them would create, she came to realize that her presence in that house had no influence on what either woman did. She kept them alive and they ignored her. (252)

She looks farther afield for work, even going to meet the Bodwins. By reaching out to others Denver learns of the people outside as well as about herself.

In Sethe we see a mother who tries to atone for her guilt: all the things she would have done for her daughter during her years of growing up and then some. Long after the killing of her daughter to protect her from the unbelievable suffering as a slave, she continues to be haunted by the horrors of her past brought on by traumatic memory. She tells Denver:

Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory. You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it's not. Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place—the picture of it —stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world. (35-6)

She cannot stay away from her memories. What she says looks like an explanation of her state of mind and her conscience. The crime was cold but the guilt endured. Much later Sethe reflects: “ I couldn't lay down with you then. No matter how much I wanted to. I couldn't lay down nowhere in peace, back then. Now I can. I can sleep like the drowned, have mercy. She come back to me, my daughter, and she is mine.” This is how Sethe tries to tackle her troubled memories around her once ruptured maternity.

If Sethe was forced to take such a drastic decision to save her infant from abuse under slavery, Eva Peace's decision (in *Sula*), to kill her son to save him from ignominy in the twentieth century appears to be even more bizarre. Morrison presents Eva as a woman who was abandoned by her husband, leaving her with three small children. After the departure of her husband Boyboy, Eva leaves her children with her neighbours ostensibly for a few hours but actually returns eighteen months later. By that time she appears to

have some money but has lost one of her legs. It is presumed that she has collected some insurance money after her accident on the railway line, even leading to speculation that she had stuck her leg in front of the train to get some compensation. Whatever the truth behind that story, Eva starts a guest house for people and runs it, taking in a few orphaned children called the Deweys later on. What stands out is that Eva and violence, whether voluntary or involuntary, are no strangers to each other.

Eva's main concern is providing for her young children after her dissolute husband abandons them after five years of a strained marriage, with him chasing women where possible and living without responsibility. She realizes that

The children needed her; she needed money, and needed to get on with her life. But the demands of feeding her three children were so acute she had to postpone her anger...until she had both the time and the energy for it. She was confused and desperately hungry ( 32)

For the time being she has to concentrate on caring for the children. Fending for herself Eva learns to toughen up and face the world. Her responsibilities make her adopt a tough, even hard stance with people as she knows that she cannot afford to be soft and sentimental.

When the novel opens Eva is grandmother to Sula and she is described in the following manner:

The creator and sovereign of this enormous house...was Eva Peace who sat in a wagon on the third floor directing the lives of her children, friends, strays, and a constant stream of boarders. Fewer than nine people in the town remembered when Eva had two legs, and her oldest child, Hannah, was not one of them. Unless Eva herself introduced the subject, no one ever spoke of her disability; they pretended to ignore it, unless, in some mood of fancy, she began some fearful story about it—generally to entertain children. (45-6)

Eva does not try to draw sympathy for her lost limb; instead she shows a rare kind of resilience as she wheels herself around the house in a contraption—"a kind of wheelchair: a rocking-chair top fitted into a large child's wagon"—fixed for her by one of her men friends (46-7). Such was the strength of her presence that although the makeshift chair was low, one had the impression of looking up at her.

Some of Eva's resilience is seen in her meeting with her husband a couple of years after he had left her. He appears to have made some money and is accompanied by a city-bred girlfriend who waits for him outside. As the girlfriend laughs with BoyBoy, "a high-pitched big-city laugh," it triggers off the feelings that Eva had suppressed all through her marriage and more so after her husband's desertion:

"It hit her like a sledge hammer, and it was then that she knew what to feel. A liquid trail of hate flooded her chest" (53). Knowing that she would hate him long and well filled her with pleasant anticipation, like when you know you are going to fall in love with someone and you wait for the happy signs. Hating BoyBoy, she could get on with it, and have the safety, the thrill, the consistency of that hatred as long as she wanted or needed it to define and strengthen her or protect her from routine vulnerabilities. (53)

Anger and hatred towards her husband would sustain her against all that life throws at her. Instead of hurt or a sense of injustice for the burden she has to bear, it would be the 'consistency...of hatred' that would sustain her, even strengthen her through her everyday life. As she tells her daughter Hannah, "she only hated one, Hannah's father BoyBoy, and it was hating him that kept her alive and happy"(53). It is necessary to take note of what keeps Eva Peace going, what gives her the courage to do what she does, when decisive action has to be taken.

Despite this hatred for BoyBoy, Eva and her daughter and later granddaughter loved all men:

It was manlove that Eva bequeathed to her daughters....The Peace women simply loved maleness, for its own sake. Eva, old as she was, and with one leg, had a regular flock of gentleman callers, and although she did not participate in the act of love, there was a good deal of teasing and pecking and laughter....They wanted to see the joy in her face as they settled down to play checkers, knowing that even when she beat them, as she almost always did, somehow, in her presence, it was they who had won something. (59)

Eva is kind towards men in general and though she argued with them over their interpretation of things and events, the end result is "that they felt their convictions solidified by her disagreement" (59). This shows that Eva, despite the struggle she has

gone through to bring up her children, is not bitter or withdrawn as far as other people are concerned. Her caring for the needy children or young couples and suffering individuals holds her up as a kind and considerate person. This information about Eva's daily life and background is necessary to show that she is not an unkind or crazy or desperate woman allowing for maternal ruptures regularly. What she does to her son Plum is an act of surgical removal without her son's reputation being affected.

We learn that Eva had cared her son from the time he was a baby, favouring him over the others:

Eva's last child, Plum, to whom she hoped to bequeath everything, floated in a constant swaddle of love and affection, until 1917 when he went to war. He returned to the States in 1919 but did not get back to Medallion until 1920.... They waited in vain for his telling but not long for the knowing. His habits were much like Tar Baby's but there were no bottles, and Plum was sometimes cheerful and animated. Hannah watched and Eva waited. Then he began to steal from them... and sleep for days in his room with the record player going. He got even thinner.... It was Hannah who found the bent spoon black from steady cooking. (63-4)

Unfortunately his experience of the war and a sense of betrayal by the authorities on his return home leave him as a washout, with a drug addiction. Instead of talking and sharing his experiences, his trauma, Plum preferred to escape through drugs. This weakness is totally opposed to Eva's diehard philosophy and they watch him sink lower and lower.

Finally when Eva realizes that her son is intent on escaping and not facing life head on, she decides to act:

So late one night in 1921, Eva got up from her bed and put on her clothes. Hoisting herself up on her crutches, she was amazed to find that she could still manage them, although the pain in her armpits was severe.... she arrived at Plum's door and pushed it open with the tip of one crutch. He was lying in bed barely visible in the light coming from a single bulb. Eva swung over to the bed and propped her crutches at its foot. She sat down and gathered Plum into her arms. He woke, but only slightly. (64-5)

This shows that what she does in not in anger or frustration. She has to struggle to reach his room down several flights of stairs and what she observes does not impress her much. Plum wakes up slightly:

“Hey, man. Hey. You holdin’ me, Mamma?” His voice was drowsy and amused. He chuckled as though he had heard some private joke. Eva held him closer and began to rock. Back and forth she rocked him, her eyes wandering around his room....Rocking, rocking, listening to Plum’s occasional chuckles, Eva let her memory spin, loop and fall.... Eva lifted her tongue to the edge of her lip to stop the tears from running into her mouth. Rocking, rocking. Later she laid him down and looked at him a long time. (65-6)

When Plum sleepily assures her that he is all right and that she should go back to bed she agrees but goes to the kitchen for kerosene and paper.

The sleeping Plum stirs to a feeling of “some kind of wet light traveling over his legs with a deeply attractive smell” as Eva douses him with kerosene:

She rolled a bit of newspaper into a tight stick about six inches long, lit it and threw it onto the bed where the kerosene-soaked Plum lay in snug delight. Quickly, as the whoosh of flames engulfed him, she shut the door and made her slow and painful journey back to the top of the house. (67)

Even as the rest of the house erupted, Eva made her way to her bedroom. When Hannah rushed up to tell her that Plum was burning and the door could not be opened, Eva’s Stony response: “Is? My baby? Burning?” was enough to convince Hannah what had happened. She closes Eva’s door and rushes downstairs “toward the voices calling for water” (67). Without her mother saying anything beyond that initial response, Hannah realizes the steely determination that drove her mother. Plum burns to death despite the efforts of others to save him, and with him the story of his addiction.

Much later, one day Hannah decides to question Eva about her feelings:

““Mamma, did you ever love us?’She sang the words like a small child saying a piece at Easter”(90). Eva responds by asking her to speak straight and Hannah repeats asking her whether she had loved them as little children. Eva continues “No. I don’t reckon I did. Not the way you thinkin’.”

“Oh, well. I was just wonderin’.” Hannah appeared to be through with the subject.

“An evil wonderin’ if I ever heard one.” Eva was not through.

“I didn’t mean nothing by it, Mamma.

“What you mean you didn’t mean nothing by it? How you gone not mean something by it?”(91)

Eva asks: “You settin’ here with your healthy-ass self and ax me did I love you? Them big old eyes in your head would a been two holes full of maggots if I hadn’t.” Since Hannah does not remember seeing her mother with two legs, she has not stopped to think of Eva’s great sacrifice. It appears that she carries on the conversation she had with her friends, with quizzing her own mother about her feelings for her children. Eva’s answer is matter of fact: had she not done her best to feed them and look after them, they would have perished.

When Hannah wishes to know if she ever played with her children, Eva loses her patience:

“Play? Wasn’t nobody playin’ in 1895. Just ’cause you got it good now you think it was always this good? 1895 was a killer, girl. Things was bad. Niggers was dying like flies... I’m talkin’ ’bout 18 and 95 when I set in that house five days with you and Pearl and Plum and three beets, you snake-eyed ungrateful hussy. What would I look like leapin’ ’round that little old room playin’ with youngins with three beets to my name?” (92)

Hannah wants to know if she ever had a relaxing moment with her children without worrying:

“But Mamma, they had to be some time when you wasn’t thinkin’ ’bout...”

“No time. They wasn’t no time. Not none. Soon as I got one day done here come a night. With you all coughin’ and me watchin’ so TB wouldn’t take you off and if you was sleepin’ quiet I thought, O Lord, they dead and put my hand over your mouth to feel if the breath was comin’ what you talkin’ ’bout did I love you girl I stayed alive for you can’t you get that through your thick head or what is that between your ears, heifer?”(93)



Eva explains how her time was spent looking after them on her own, worrying about all their health issues and how they were the reason for her being. She is incensed that her daughter should doubt her feelings when she had done all she could to nurture and protect them.

Hannah comes up with the question that had been bothering her: “But what about Plum? What’d you kill Plum for, Mamma?” As she waits and watches her mother, Eva becomes pensive and recalls the difficult birth she had with Plum and then with keeping him alive:

when he came back from that war he wanted to git back in. After all that carryin’ on, just gettin’ him out and keepin’ him alive, he wanted to crawl back in my womb and well...I ain’t got the room no more even if he could do it. There wasn’t space for him in my womb. And he was crawlin’ back.... I had room enough in my heart, but not in my womb, not no more. I birthed him once. I couldn’t do it again. (95-6)

Eva explains further why she could not allow Plum to proceed on that regressive course till his self-respect or public esteem was completely eroded:

He was growed, a big old thing. Godhavemercy, I couldn’t birth him twice.... It’d be true and I would have done it, would have let him if I’d’ve had the room but a big man can’t be a baby all wrapped up inside his mamma no more; he suffocate. I done everything I could to make him leave me and go on and live and be a man but he wouldn’t and I had to keep him out so I just thought of a way he could die like a man not all scrunched up inside my womb, but like a man.” (96)

From Eva’s account Plum appeared to have become soft in the head and was no longer behaving like a grown up man. Not only was he a drug addict but somewhere along the way he had lost maturity. Even addicts and drunkard’s have their moments of sanity or dryness but Eva saw none of that in her son. She sees no future for him or only a gloomy one full of humiliation and suffering. It was to save him from such a useless life that she kills him. In Eva’s world of black and white there are no half measures. She cannot think of sending Plum for treatment or that he might have recovered. As far as she is concerned he was totally ruined and she did her bit to save him from infamy.

Soon after that talk with Hannah, Eva looks out of the window and sees Hannah trying to light the yard fire before she goes around her room searching for the missing comb.

Sometime later Eva looks out and sees Hannah burning and realizes that she has to save her by covering her daughter's body with her own:

She lifted her heavy frame up on her good leg, and with fists and arms smashed the windowpane. Using her stump as a support on the window sill, her good leg as a lever, she threw herself out of the window. Cut and bleeding she clawed the air trying to aim her body toward the flaming, dancing figure. She missed and came crashing down some twelve feet from Hannah's smoke. Stunned but still conscious, Eva dragged herself toward her firstborn, but Hannah, her senses lost, went flying out of the yard gesturing and bobbing like a sprung jack-in-the-box.  
(101)

Although the neighbours, the Suggs tried to save Hannah, she was badly burnt and died on the way to the hospital. Looking for Eva they found her on her stomach amongst the bushes near the side of the house calling Hannah's name. She was cut and bruised and as she lay forgotten on the hospital floor—as they attended to more serious case—she would have bled to death but for an orderly noticing the blood and calling a nurse to her. This act of Eva's—jumping from the third floor window to get to her burning daughter—shows that she cared for her daughter and tried to save her without a second thought for herself. If Eva is a killing mother who does away with her son, she is also someone who on one leg leaps out of a three storey house to try and save her burning daughter. Even more important is the fact that Eva had nothing with her and was trying to jump as near as possible to her burning daughter so that she could cover her body with her own.

This particular accident draws attention to the grim determination which drove Eva Peace. She could kill her own where necessary and she could risk her own life to save another child of hers. If in the case of Plum we see maternal rupture in Eva, believing that she was saving him from further disgrace, her attempt to save her daughter, though a failure attests to the resilient and loving side in her. As she saw it Plum's race was over while Hannah's life was necessary and helpful to all of them. As she had told Hannah, she loved them all but life demanded that choices be made, difficult decisions acted upon. If Sethe's killing of her infant daughter was wholly the outcome of slavery which leaves an individual with no element of humanity, Eva's responsibility was her's alone. She thought her son had reached the point of no return, and she was facilitating his departure in the way she considered best.

If Sethe and Eva have reasons to believe that they had killed their children for altruistic purposes, or if their maternal ruptures can be explained in terms of extreme or extenuating circumstances, the actions of Olivia Blanchard Cary (*Comedy American Style*) who pushes her son to commit suicide, cannot be explained on any terms but the individual. As mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, Olivia is fair skinned but born to coloured parents. Her mother, though fair like her, is not interested in being white. Olivia's father, Lee Blanchard, was dark but from a good family and had married her mother who was working as a maid at that time. Olivia hates the fact that she carries coloured blood and blames her parents for putting her in that predicament. Her father's death when she was a child forces her mother to sell up and shift to another town to look for work. Here Olivia decides to pass as white because both she and her mother are fair and her dark her leads people in her new school to mistake her as an Italian. Gradually, her mother is promoted in her job at the mill to a supervisor and she decides to shift to Boston where she would have settled had her husband who was training to be a doctor lived.

Given the ultimatum of striking out on her own or moving with her mother when she was seventeen, Olivia decides to join her mother in Boston. In an argument with her mother as they discussed leaving for Boston Olivia tells her:

“All of them black or brown,” she raged, “and all of them looked down on! If you think I want my children to feel toward their father as I felt toward—”

She stopped then, realizing that she had gone too far. Janet finished the sentence for her. “As you felt toward your father! Toward Lee Blanchard, the best and finest man that ever lived!” How horrible this was, she thought, to almost hate one's own child. (*Comedy* 15)

In Boston Mrs. Blanchard takes evening courses at the University and gradually makes herself educated. Further with the help of one of her University teachers she moves into a house where she can take in lodgers. Soon she manages to achieve solvency and pay off her loans as she opens her house to coloured students. It is here that Olivia meets her future husband. In the meantime her mother meets a fair skinned widower who had taken rooms in her house and marries him. Her mother gives birth to twins who are fair and Olivia is convinced that her fears of coloured blood showing up are unwarranted.

In fact it is the fair twins, her young half brother and sister, which puts her fears to rest as she decides it safe to marry a fair skinned medical student of coloured origin: “She could be certain of their color. Her twin sister and brother, only two years older than her own children, had proven that” (32). Olivia’s marriage to Christopher Cary produces a daughter and a son—Teresa and Chris Junior—both fair. She reflects:

It was worth every one, she felt, of her labor pains not to hold in her arms little Teresa, her first-born,—but to gaze on that tiny, unremarkable face and note the white skin.... Every time she appeared in public with the little girl she was presenting the incontestable proof of her white womanhood. . . .And when Christopher, the second child was born, she was not the least fraction worried over the closely curling tendency of his slightly reddish hair.... And meanwhile his skin was actually fairer than that of his little sister, his features finer and better chiseled. He had, she felt, a look of “race,” by which she meant of course the only race which God, or Nature, for hidden, inscrutable purposes, meant should rule. (32)

While all these things should have satisfied Olivia, her husband’s insistence on freely meeting with coloured/ dark people and treating them in his clinic displeases her. She tries to interfere with her children’s choice of playmates, even shutting the door to darker children and leaving her own feeling awkward and unhappy as they tried to cover their mother’s irrational behavior. Olivia had clearly decided that she had become white, was a member of the white race and anyone else stopping her social climbing ambitions was to be brushed aside—be it members of her own family.

When Olivia became pregnant for the third time she made plans for herself:

This child should be her very own. She would make her husband believe that she needed a change, she would take the child away and live with him apart for two, three, perhaps for five years. In appearance, in rearing, in beliefs he should be completely, unrelievedly a member of the dominant race. She was a much wiser woman than she had been six years ago. The prospect made her gay and charming, almost girlish; far younger too than her twenty-eight years, younger indeed it seemed to her husband than she had ever been in those remote, so precious years of training.(33-34)

Olivia is so taken up with her sense of superiority that she thinks nothing of deserting her husband and young children. Moreover, not having an income of her own, she expects her hardworking husband to maintain two households to fulfill her ambitions. She does not even consider her role as a wife and mother. She expects others, including her husband to support her silly ideas at the cost of the children's welfare and the stability of his home life.

However, as fate would have it, Olivia was sick during and after the birth of her third child a son and did not see him till he was almost a month old. Olivia sat up, arms outstretched to receive him. Her baby! Her eyes stretched wide to behold every fraction of his tiny person. But the expectant smile faded as completely as though an unseen hand had wiped it off. She turned to her husband sharply:

“That's not my baby!”

But it was her baby. It was a boy, handsomer and more attractive than the other children. He was named Oliver. . . . They had been calling him that for a month, her delighted children assured her . . . his hair was black and soft and curly . . . and he had the exact bronze gold complexion of Lee Blanchard! She had reckoned without her own father! (34)

Her instant rejection of her dark son remains constant for the rest of his days. Being remarkably well endowed, it continues to puzzle him as he tries his best to win his mother's approval.

The rest of the family—her husband and two older children—on the other hand are delighted with young Oliver. While his mother contrives not to be seen with him, But the two older children and his father would proudly conduct him anywhere. And wherever he went he attracted attention...infinitely more so than his brother and sister had ever earned...He possessed not only a winning smile and a genuine sweetness of attitude and conduct but he was unquestionably of remarkable mental endowment. . . . But even from babyhood little Oliver sensed in himself one lack which early automatically destroyed any root of undue self-esteem. He knew he did not have his mother's love. . . . Worse than that through some strange childish, unflinching perception he was sure of her active but hidden dislike for him. (35)

This is what a stupid and heartless mother can do—reject her son because his presence prevents her from passing completely as a family. Despite his charm and intelligence, his talent for music, Olivia takes no interest in him and snubs him if he seeks her attention. Moreover, Olivia directs her anger over her dark skinned son at her late father but more immediately her husband for being “so decidedly a Negrophile,” that it had an effect on her unborn child (35).

Meanwhile as Olivia continued with her anger and her hatred for coloured people, Oliver lived under a shadow:

It saddened his childish days....As soon as he became old enough to be free from under her surveillance Olivia saw to it that he spent most of his time with her own mother in Boston or with her husband’s mother in South Philadelphia. In both of these homes he met with the intense affection and generous esteem which his finely keyed little nature so craved. Gradually he became able to adjust himself to the inexplicable phenomenon of a mother who...did not love at all, her youngest son. (35-36)

Despite this realization Oliver continued to love his mother “to steel his brave and loyal heart against this defection and to crush down his pain” (36). Being a naturally good natured child he looked for and found relief in music for which he had talent. He was good at studies and once when he came home to inform his mother that he had secured the highest marks in Algebra he was reminded by her that he should knock before entering her room and that she did not wish to be disturbed. There was no word of appreciation let alone of maternal pride in her bright son’s achievement. She was just not interested in her dark son. (145)

Oliver, not knowing that the problem lay with his dark complexion, continues to try and win his mother’s approval. His older siblings aware of their mother’s obsession with whiteness worry over his heartbreak. Teresa shares her uneasiness over her mother’s conduct with her brother Christopher:

“I’m glad for Oliver, that is, if she’ll really be nice to him.... But she won’t be, Chris, she just can’t bear any dark people . . . she simply doesn’t see them. And I think she’s mad at Oliver for being as brown as he is and daring to be her son! And he’s so crazy about her! (44)

In the face of Olivia's determination, her two older children feel that they are caught in some place they do not want to be. As Teresa tells Chris:

I know what she's hoping. She thinks either you or I, or both of us, will marry white; and then she'll come and live with us."

Christopher's eyes showed his astonishment. "You know I never thought of that! She'll never live with me. I'll show her. . . . And I won't marry any of her white girls either."

"That's just what I said. But she'll keep after me. . . . Chris, do you know," she said solemnly, "I can just feel that I'm going to be awfully unhappy. I can feel it closing in on me."(44)

When Christopher asks her what was troubling her Teresa replies "Life," she said seriously. "I feel like a fly in a spider's web. I know I'm going to be caught and I know I'm going to hang there. I won't have a lot of pain. I'll just live on stupid and dull and unable to stir. Hating everything" (44). Not only does she ignore her youngest child, she also makes her older children apprehensive and fearful for the future. This aspect of social and racial complications in mixed race families as seen in this novel will be addressed in the fifth chapter dealing with interraciality.

To return to Olivia's refusal to acknowledge Oliver as her son in public we see instances where she persuades him to masquerade as a butler/houseboy when she has her white women friends visiting and he happens to be at home. She convinces him that it is a joke between them to impress the visitors about their social status and he willingly obliges. It is only when he tells his sister Teresa about his helping out his mother that she gets to know of Olivia's baseness:

"Anyway I know how to please her now. We play a sort of game together and she's always nice to me afterwards."

"A game?" Teresa's face showed her surprise . . .

"Yes, you know she likes to entertain those ladies that belong on her committees; she has them here for tea, lots of times. And I play at being the butler and serve the tea for her. . . . I have never spilled a drop or broken anything yet."

Her voice was aghast. "You play at being the butler!"

"Yes, I put on a white suit and slick my hair back . . . they think I'm

Japanese or Mexican.”

“And she tells them afterwards what a smart little son she has?”

“Oh, no! She doesn’t tell them anything. You see most of the other ladies have butlers and foreign servants. And Mother felt so bad because Dad couldn’t afford to let her have one. . . . So she said if she just had somebody who could make believe for her. . . . She said of course I couldn’t . . . I was such a baby!”

“So now she doesn’t think you’re such a baby any more?”

“No, I don’t guess she does. . . .(77)

What Oliver who is around twelve at the time does not realize, and what Teresa does, is that their mother will not acknowledge him as her son at any cost. Her social pretensions are so important to her that her abdication of maternal love and responsibility regarding Oliver do not matter at all. More than that, she is not above humiliating him by reducing him to the level of a servant. But so eager to please his mother is the young boy that nothing is too much for him.

Teresa’s reaction however is different:

She went to her room and gazed and gazed at a picture of Olivia on her dressing table. Presently she picked it up and laid it carefully, face downward, in a drawer. In her heart was a prayer: “God, God don’t let me hate her! I mustn’t hate my mother, God!”(78)

It may be recalled that Olivia’s mother has a similar feeling when Olivia was a teenager. Her racism, her determination to be white and not acknowledge her darker skinned father or son is shocking to her equally fair mother and daughter who have no interest in being white.

Again, when it comes to talk of sending Oliver to college like his older siblings, this is what Olivia ‘with a cool stare’ has to say to her daughter:

“Why should he? You know as well as I..that Oliver hasn’t your and Christopher’s chances....Why would your father need to waste money on him? These Philadelphia schools are quite good enough. Goodness! That was all you and Chris ever said when we began to talk of sending you two off to school.” (80)



It would be a waste of money to send her bright son to a prestigious college. Olivia becomes conscious of her husband's income when it concerns her youngest son but she has no scruples about spending his hard earned money on her fancy trips. In fact she expects him to provide the funds to enable her "to push forward to newer heights of affluence and privilege"(150). As far as she is concerned, because of his dark skin colour, her son stands no chance in life and should expect none.

Meanwhile Oliver continued to enjoy himself among both set of grandparents who cherished him. His paternal grandfather had even made Oliver his sole heir instead of their son. Oliver too, realized that "It was hard to go from the warmth and pride, the brightness and breadth of these two households to the frigid sterility of the house on Thirty-eighth Street in Philadelphia" (142). He felt the difference in his mother's attitude to him:

It was, her coldness, her indifference intrigued and stimulated him. Baffled by the chilly riddle of her attitude he had to come back to his real home from time to time to find out what it was all about. (142)

Being a sensitive and intelligent child Oliver knows that something is not right, but he does not think that the problem lay in his mother's approach to things. His father and elder siblings had given him their love and attention. most of the time he was happy...completely so if he were with his father, or Christopher or Teresa. It was only in the presence of his mother that he became suddenly discomfited, like an awkward boy who does not know what to do with ungainly hands or feet...(142)

Oliver realizes that there was nothing wrong with his physical composition: "He was beautifully constructed, he knew it himself, for ever since his babyhood he had heard sung constantly the saga of his grace, his fine looks and his accomplishments" (142). Without conceit he knew this to be true. In fact he would not have bothered with these things if his mother's conduct had not made him self conscious and introspective. He decides that there "must be some hidden, some inner defect" in him which will come out later (142).

Olivia on the other hand did not want to be reminded of the black blood in her veins of which her son was a telling reminder.

Olivia never acknowledged her inadequacy as a mother....On the contrary she believed that Fate had perpetrated on her a very Cruel Hoax of which Oliver was the perpetual reminder. When he was away from her she was actually able to forget he was hers. But his presence in the house fretted and humiliated her. (149-50)

By her own admission, Olivia has no maternal feelings towards her younger son. Instead she felt 'frightened and degraded' by the evidence of the black blood that she had passed on to her son. "To her Oliver meant shame. He meant more than that; he meant the expression of her failure to be truly white" (150). She appears to be caught up in a world of denial and self delusion where her talented and charming son is a threat and a stumbling block. At the same time Olivia is unscrupulous enough to covet Oliver's money left to him by his paternal grandparents with his father as executor. She wanted that to spend on her social gatherings. Her husband angrily reminds her of her aversion towards her son.

Olivia continues to call upon Oliver's services as butler for her frequent social gatherings at home. Oliver who thought nothing of lending his services to his mother, keeps it a secret from his father on her request. His older brother Christopher one day intercepts him on the staircase with a heavy trayload of things:

He couldn't believe his senses.

"Oliver! Well, for Pete's sake, what's all this?"

"Mother's giving a tea and I was helping her." Christopher's eye, traveling over his brother's form, darkened stormily. "In those clothes? just what are you supposed to be doing anyhow? Here give me that tray!" Oliver yielded, suddenly feeling himself very tired. "It isn't anything really, Chris. She wanted a Filipino butler and Dad said he couldn't afford it. So she told me about it . . ."

"And asked you to be the butler!" (154-5)

Christopher loads a tray in the kitchen and carries it up to his mother who asks him if something was wrong:

"No," he said scornfully. "I just thought the tray was too heavy for that little Filipino; so I brought it up." (155). His mother introduces him proudly to the roomful of ladies but once they depart he corners her in her bedroom: "Mother," he said, "how could you do this—to Oliver of all people!"

He repeated the title. “*Mother!* You ought to be called anything but that!”

Clearly she was frightened. “You won’t say anything about this to your father, will you, Christopher? After all he was willing. . . . Christopher, promise me, you won’t tell your father?”

He said briefly, irrelevantly: “You’ve made me despise you! I never expect to know a sadder day than this!” (155)

Olivia’s actions, especially her ill treatment of her younger son, make her elder children hate her. While she would gladly have snapped ties with him, she still wants to remain in the good books of her fair skinned children and retain some control over them so that in future she could use them for her social climbing.

Meanwhile Oliver, who is sixteen years old, hopes that his sister, who had married a Frenchman in France, would send for him and fulfill the promise that she had made when he was small. His mother who had accompanied Teresa was still touring France. His father whose health had suffered somewhat, takes a vacation away from home and leaves the two boys at home. As Oliver prepares to take his father’s suits to the cleaners, he empties the contents of the coat pockets into his father’s drawer and discovers a letter with the line “if it just weren’t for Oliver” in it. After resisting the temptation to read it, he decides that since it concerns him, he should know. “It was a letter full of dissatisfactions, of demands for money, of little regrets, of unfulfilled fancies. Then suddenly his mother began praising the beautiful country of the Riviera”:

*“It is too heavenly here for words, Christopher. I wish you could see it too. The little towns are like jewels, each one lovelier than the other.... I’d be willing to live there all the rest of my life....If you and Chris would come and settle down over here we could all be as white as we look . . . if it just weren’t for Oliver. I know you don’t like me to talk about this . . . but really, Chris, Oliver and his unfortunate color has certainly been a mill-stone around our necks all our lives...”* (160)

With a shock Oliver realizes that he might have been a burden, an embarrassment to his family, that despite their kindness to him—which he was sure was genuine in his father, brother and sister—they might have also pitied him.

The effect on Oliver is devastating: “He was sixteen years old, but no man of sixty-six ever felt so aged, so finished as he. “If it just weren’t for Oliver.” . . . Why, of course he had always been in her way, in their way” (160). He is convinced that he has to leave his family. In a last attempt he writes to his sister hoping she would help him out but her reply which arrives a week later convinces him that his colour was a problem for all of them:

*Darling, I’m so sorry I can’t do what you want. It is a little early to be talking in this way . . . so soon . . . and I don’t want you to tell Father. . . . But I’m afraid my marriage is going to be different from what I had expected. Perhaps no marriage is what one thinks it is going to be. But you can’t understand that yet. . . .*

*“The funny thing is, Oliver, that even before I received your letter I had begun to cast about for ways and means of bringing you over here . . . we could have enjoyed life here so much together. But the one thing that I never meant to come between you and me prevents it. . . .*

*“I have been so foolish. I might have foreseen it. Oliver, my husband doesn’t know I’m colored. Perhaps I might have got around that. But just the other day he talked to me very bitterly about people of mixed blood, especially Americans. So, darling, you see with your tell-tale color . . .” (160)*

Oliver does not bother to read the rest of the letter. He feels terribly let down by his sister whom he had trusted and loved the most. He notices that both his sister and mother talk about his colour being a problem.

With cold hands he laid the two letters together on the bureau. Then he looked in the mirror.... With one chill finger he touched his beautiful, golden skin. No, certainly it wasn’t ugly.... Yet it had kept him from the enjoyment of that most ordinary and universal possession, a mother’s tenderness. . . . It had separated him from his sister. (164)

With a smile he takes out the pistol which he had used for target practice and shoots himself. His brother found him on the ground, the smile still on his face. While Teresa’s letter is the final trigger, it is clear that it is his mother’s antipathy for him and coloured people with darker complexions that drives Oliver to take the final step. Interestingly, his father and siblings are devastated but his mother continues with her unholy crusade to ensure that her two remaining children do not marry anybody with darker skin. This is

taken up in the fifth chapter where Olivia's interference in the lives of her fair skinned children is addressed.

It is seen that Olivia's obsession with race and so called racial superiority is the deciding factor in the periodical ruptures in her maternity. Loving, caring and nurturing play no part in her brittle life which, depended on a round of parties with white people for sustenance. Even her love for her two older children can be reduced to her love of control over their lives and later as gateways to what she hopes to be a better life. Nowhere in the novel is there any sign of remorse or genuine love for anybody in Olivia. Her parents notice it in her as a small child when she evinces no affection for her parents when they greet her. Her one attachment if it could be called so is to whiteness. This fascination for whiteness is not uncommon in non white communities but nowhere so obsessive that parents have to reject their children or a mother should disavow her bond with her own son. White Olivia does not indulge in physical violence like Sethe and Eva, the ruptured maternity that she presents, can be taken as more horrid and inhuman than the gruesome ruptures presented by the other two women.

In *Beloved* and *Sula* mother love finds violence the only solution: killing a child to radically address a problem. Sethe's act shows how slavery pushes its victims to lose their sanity or sense of being, temporarily or permanently. Eva's ruptured maternity on the other hand is influenced by the post world war scenario. In its aftermath it was difficult for ordinary but normal people to pick up the pieces of their life. Given the strained circumstances, Eva sees no way to avert her son's death wish through drugs. So she ensures that her beloved son can have his death wish through the 'accident' that she arranges. Sethe and Eva, take the decision to kill their children because they feel driven to the edge of despair. They are convinced that they are saving their children from worse things. While this shows a rupture of the bonds of motherhood, it also points to extenuating circumstances. Unlike them Olivia's case is without any defence: pushing a son to his death by her aversion to his colour simply because he stands in the way of her ambitions. Despite the background of racism in America at that time, and the rejection of people with mixed blood, Olivia's attempts escape her racial heritage and her ruptured maternity unleashes untold tragedies for her husband and children.

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