

Article

# Mortifying Earthly Desires in Toni Morrison's *Home*

Tosha K. Sampson-Choma

Department of English, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506, USA; tchoma@ksu.edu

Received: 25 July 2019; Accepted: 26 September 2019; Published: 29 September 2019



**Abstract:** As is true of all of Toni Morrison's texts, *Home* does not shy away from difficult topics, particularly those related to sexuality. In this instance, her novel reveals the contestation between the societal narrative of Black male sexual depravity and the struggle to assert an authentic, strong, good, identity that privileges mutually balanced relationships. While characters falter and make mistakes, Morrison's text is about redemption and reconciliation to the ideals of a self-created theology steeped in a rich African and African American cultural heritage and tradition. This essay argues that Morrison uses a biblical theme to create a culturally relevant theology that shifts the narrative away from Black male depravity to a place of deliberate, conscientious, mutually beneficial relationships.

**Keywords:** Toni Morrison; spirituality; sexuality; *Home*; Christianity; Black masculinity; gender

---

"For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish." Galatians 5:17 The Bible (NKJV)

"Until we can see the cross and the lynching tree together, until we can identify Christ with a 'recrucified' black body hanging from a lynching tree, there can be no genuine understanding of Christian identity in America, and no deliverance from the brutal legacy of slavery and white supremacy." (Cone 2011, *The Lynching Tree*)

In much of Toni Morrison's literature sexual depravity is a key component, ranging from acts of violence and betrayal within the immediate family structure, such as an eleven-year-old being impregnated by her father, to a self-proclaimed spiritual figure preying upon the bodies of young children. Characters cheat on their spouses and choose family friends as lovers, adults have relationships with teenagers, pedophiles molest and murder children, and community members pass judgment, watch apathetically, or at other times pick up the pieces. What is Morrison suggesting when predominantly Black or African American communities feature extensive sexual deviance often targeted at children? She has declared, her work must create "discomfort and unease" as well as "bear witness and identify that which is useful . . . not by avoiding problems and contradictions but by examining them; it should not even attempt to solve social problems, but it should certainly try to clarify them" (Morrison 1984, pp. 387, 389). By her own testimony, Morrison's work provides opportunity to engage with social problems, even as she depicts painful atrocities.

As Morrison brings problems and contradictions to light in all of her work, she heavily utilizes Christian symbols and references. Her inclusion of Christian concepts, cultural practices and traditions does not function to point the way to a religious path but to reveal the significant, integral, albeit complex role Christianity plays within the history and culture of African Americans.

In *Toni Morrison and the Bible: Contested Intertextualities*, editor Shirley A. Stave compiles essays supporting her perspective that "Morrison has clearly maintained an ongoing dialogue with religion, understanding its vital role in African American consciousness, but approaching it warily: alternately suspicious, respectful, and antagonistic," a viewpoint to which I partly subscribe (Stave 2006, p. 7). Throughout her oeuvre, Morrison utilizes biblical names of characters, refers to African American

Christian cultural traditions, and engages with theological concepts through the actions of her characters and the contexts in which they are created. Avoiding didactic approaches to religion, Morrison reveals the intersections of several traditions and paradigms, highlighting the efficacy of such strategies as well as shortcomings or unreliability. Her approach suggests there is no guaranteed formula to navigate life, though for her characters, successful outcomes typically result from culturally relevant solutions. According to Stave, Morrison's "ongoing dialogue with Christianity [is] indicative of her misgivings with that religion, specifically insofar as the African-American community is concerned" (Stave 2013, p. 126). I, however, depart from Stave's interpretation in that I believe Morrison is more favorably aligned with Christianity, though she simultaneously recognizes the oppressive ways in which the religion has been utilized. As Ágnes Surányi indicates in "The Bible As Intertext In Toni Morrison's Novels," Morrison "attempts to appropriate and resist the Bible through allegory, the use of reversal, literalization, signifying, or covert citation," which means "intertextuality in Morrison's work, then, is extremely complex, since it is double-edged" (Surányi 2006, pp. 116–17). Surányi uses Henry Louis Gates' term "signifyin(g)" or what she calls "dual intertextuality" to capture the many ways in which Morrison utilizes the Bible and other texts as a two-way reference, ultimately arguing that Morrison's view of Christianity parallels St. Paul's paradigm. This essay supports Surányi's discussion of signifyin and biblical intertextuality, yet, the argument herein shifts from identifying Morrison's views within the scope of a particular biblical writer and instead focuses on the cultural and religious union of Morrison's views. In a chapter titled, "The 'Female Revealer' in *Beloved*, *Jazz*, and *Paradise*: Syncretic Spirituality in Toni Morrison's Trilogy," Sharon Jessee focuses on the trilogy and the ways in which Morrison's multifaceted theological views converge, incorporating "slave religion and African American Christian traditions—'hush harbor' spirituality, African American identifications with both Old and New Testament narratives, contestations between African American Protestant churches, 'the Black Church' and black and womanist theologies" as well as invoking "heretical Gnostic texts from the second and third centuries" (Jessee 2006, p. 130). The focus of Jessee's chapter is the significance and function of Morrison's iconoclastic view of African American spirituality, and despite the well argued position of the essay, there is room for discussing Morrison's subsequent work within the context of spiritual discourses.

My essay, in particular, builds upon a spiritual foundation; however, it takes as its focus the subject of Black sexuality within Morrison's *Home*. The 2012 novel provides a prime opportunity to discuss the intersection of the sacred and the secular, as through a Christian paradigm Morrison challenges notions of black sexuality, bringing together disparate values and ideas to create "discomfort and unease" while examining and clarifying unspoken social problems. *Home* is a narrative of familial redemption and reconciliation of cultural roots, which uses a biblical theme to shift the narrative away from—society's projection of—black male depravity to a place of deliberate, conscientious, mutually beneficial relationships. Benjamin Burr points out "each of Morrison's texts doesn't just suggest new ways for reading the influence of the Bible [on] literature, her texts suggests new ways for applying theory to literature" (Burr 2006, p. 159). In keeping with Burr's perspective, my critical analysis suggests new ways of discussing *Home*, yet it is most closely paralleled to the argument of Patricia Hunt's unpublished dissertation. In "The Texture of Transformation: Theology, History, and Politics in the Novels of Toni Morrison," Hunt argues that Morrison's works are based in an African American Christian liberation framework. Hunt clarifies for those unfamiliar with this perspective that "The Christianity of Black Americans is an Africanized form that is foundational of African American culture" (Hunt 1994, p. iv). She distinguishes this framework from the general, secular perception of "competing Eurocentric discourses" to carve out a space for the validity and efficacy of an African American Christian framework steeped in African and African American cultural traditions (Hunt 1994, p. iv). Expanding the discourse on Morrison and sexuality through the lens of spirituality, I share Hunt's interpretation of African American Christianity and use that perspective to discuss the novel *Home*. Morrison's integration of Christian imagery and symbolism in her life's work combined with the novel *Home*'s preoccupation with the protagonist's inner struggles, which are only reconciled after particular

actions that align with a Christian paradigm take place, validate the subject of this essay and affirm its relevance to the discourse on Morrison and spirituality in which it is situated.

Given her proclivity towards subjects of unresolved sexual deviance, Morrison's approach in *Home* reflects a departure from her typical depiction of such horrors, as she shifts the narrative away from Black male depravity. Instead, the text centers a twenty-four-year-old Korean War veteran by the name of Frank Money. Having grown up in Lotus, Georgia, a place he despises, Money quickly enlists in the army at eighteen. In Korea he has a number of traumatic experiences, including an instance when a local child grabs his genitals, causes him to become aroused and he consequently shoots her. Carrying the weight of his guilt resulting from outliving his friends, and being aroused by and then murdering a child, he refuses to return home to his beloved younger sister. Instead, he resides in the state of Washington where he struggles with Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome (PTSD), giving into alcohol-induced revelries and violence. When he meets and moves in with his newfound love, Lily, the visions of war and ghostly images fade to the background and he finds the strength to be more emotionally and mentally stable than ever before. Gradually, the relationship fizzles and stagnates before being brought to a halt by a postcard Frank receives. The message, though brief, iterates that his sister Ycidra (Cee) is in trouble and will soon die if he does not come quickly. Going first to an African Methodist Episcopal (AME) church for refuge, then onto various safe houses suggested by Green's Travelers' Guide, Frank begins a southern-bound journey to emancipate and save the person he loves most—succeeding only with the help of community women who aid in healing Cee. At the novel's conclusion, the brother and sister are left standing at the foot of a cross, supporting one another in a loving familial bond, an image that unites Christianity and the struggle towards liberation.

Besides Christian imagery, sexuality and gender are integral components of *Home*. The narrative begins and ends with a concept of manhood reflected in the notion of standing upright, a reference to both the physical and spiritual body. Frank Money's first words declare, "They rose up like men. We saw them. Like men they stood" (Morrison 2012, p. 3). Referring to fighting horses that display the greatness of men, Frank initiates his narrative with a vivid memory. At roughly ten and six years old, he and Cee are covertly lying in a field watching horses, only to be interrupted by men who arrive with a wheelbarrow carrying a corpse. In this moment, Frank shifts his focus from the horses to shielding his shaking little sister from that which is too much for her to visualize, the poorly completed burial of a dead body. Later in the text he explains, "[Cee] was the first person I ever took responsibility for. Down deep inside her lived my secret picture of myself—a strong good me tied to the memory of those horses and the burial of a stranger . . . guarding her . . . I wonder if succeeding at that was the buried seed of all the rest" (Morrison 2012, p. 104). This important moment of protection sets the stage for the subsequent narrative because Frank is in search of a manhood based in strength and goodness. By his declaration, Frank admires the horses' ability to stand like men and coupled with his admiration of manhood is the experience of shielding his sister, which becomes interwoven in his identity as a strong, good self. Morrison reveals a man who from his childhood seeks to protect and shield his sister. He prioritizes family over self and simultaneously makes the connection to manhood. This image contradicts the image of black men abandoning their families in pursuit of self-gratification. Instead, the imagery shifts the societal narrative away from Black male depravity to a place of responsibility, protection, and self-sacrifice.

In his struggle for the epitome of manhood, Frank is battling not only himself, but also the perception of Black manhood and sexuality that has shaped Black men's encounters with the American landscape. In *A Question of Manhood: A Reader in U.S. Black Men's History and Masculinity, Vol. 1—"Manhood Rights": The Construction of Black Male History and Manhood, 1750–1870*, Darlene Clark Hine and Earnestine Jenkins explain that the perception of Black sexual deviance stems from a long history of racism and an attempt to vilify Black manhood. "As racism grew in the nineteenth century, it was accompanied by the development of stereotypes and racial myths. Among the most pervasive and deeply embedded stereotypes is the black man as the rapist of white women, a negative symbol of iconic proportions" (Hine and Jenkins 1999, p. 38). Created with the intent to maintain the subjugation

of Black men, these myths would serve to incite fear and establish Black criminality. Additionally, these myths reinforced the lines between Black men and White women, assuring that all Black men would be viewed with scrutiny. Hine and Jenkins go on to explain, “Black rape myths began to appear during emancipation and exploded during Reconstruction, when whites expressed their fears of unprecedented black political power by creating the appearance of a solid white racial front. Only then did poor white women eventually become southern ladies, while every black man became a potential rapist” (Hine and Jenkins 1999, p. 39). This contrived stereotype functions to limit Black men and make them an immediate threat, juxtaposed to all that is pure and good. Morrison depicts a character whose actions, therefore, are shaped by his understanding of this history concerning the Black male in American society and his quest to liberate himself and his sister from that which plagues them.

While Frank sees himself as a strong, good self, he understands that he is viewed through a negative lens, which ultimately makes him defensive throughout the narrative. Telling his story to a presumed journalist or biographer, his tone suggests an irritation with the writer who is determined to compose his story. At the end of the first chapter, Frank’s voice is riddled with frustration, “*Since you’re set on telling my story, whatever you think and whatever you write down, know this: I really forgot about the burial. I only remembered the horses. They were so beautiful. So brutal. And they stood like men*” (Morrison 2012, p. 5). Whatever that writer may think he or she knows and whatever might be written, Frank wants his own authentic truth to be captured and recognized, not the negative stereotypes associated with his identity markers. In recalling the details of his narrative, Frank relies upon memory but memory need not be exact as much as it should capture the essence of what occurred and the context for its occurrence. Morrison explains how “memory (the deliberate act of remembering) is a form of willed creation. It is not an effort to find out the way it really was—that is research. The point is to dwell on the way it appeared and why it appeared in that particular way” (Morrison 1984, p. 385). To uncover the story of Frank Money is to understand how and why the events unfold as they do, causing Frank concern about the inscription of his manhood. Several times throughout the novel, Frank amends his point of view. Each time he is self-conscious of the ways in which he is viewed as a man. In one instance, he revises his stance on a man who he believes will go home and beat his wife for publically coming to his rescue and thereby emasculating him. At first, Frank sides with the man and says it makes sense and is expected that he would beat her. Later, he says, “I didn’t think any such thing. What I thought was that he was proud of her but didn’t want to show how proud he was to the other men on the train. I don’t think you know much about love. Or me” (Morrison 2012, p. 69). Morrison utilizes this approach to engage the idea of “the way [memory] appeared and why it appeared in that particular way”—meaning the importance of context to clarify social problems (Morrison 1984, p. 385). Frank is shown as behaving within the confines of gender expectations, in spite of his cognitive dissonance.

This historical perception of Black masculinity and deviant sexuality pervade the national psyche, which is why Morrison depicts a character entangled by it. Collins (2005) adds to the context of Black male representation in American society.

Historical representations of Black men as beasts have spawned a second set of images of that center on Black male bodies, namely, Black men as inherently violent, hyper-heterosexual, and in need of discipline. The controlling image of Black men as criminals or as deviant beings encapsulates this perception of Black men as inherently violent and/or hyper-heterosexual and links this representation to poor and/or working-class African American men . . . [.] but all Black men are under suspicion of criminal activity or breaking rules of some sort. (p. 158)

As Collins points out, historical representation determines the response to Black masculinity and sexuality. Consequently, while one may want to extract himself from cultural milieu, he is typically viewed through such a lens and treated according to corresponding ideologies.

What Morrison reveals in her narrative is a character’s internal spiritual battle as he contends with how society interprets his racial and gender identity in contrast to how he views himself as a

strong, good self and the lengths to which he will go to protect his positive identity. Frank's greatest sorrow and the event that imprisons him is the lie he tells about his involvement in the shooting of a Korean girl. In seeking liberation from the ghostly memories of war, he must confess that he was sexually aroused by a child and used her as a scapegoat to rid himself of culpability. Until he confesses, he is unable to gain liberation and thereby move forward. While patrolling his post, he notices a young girl who daily scavenges for food at the edge of the base. He cannot help but smile at her innocence, recounting how "each time she came it was as welcome as watching a bird feed her young or a hen scratching, scratching dirt for the worm she knew for sure was buried there" (Morrison 2012, p. 95). Reminiscing about her simplicity and sweet childish state, Frank shares how he is caught by surprise when another soldier comes over to replace him and sees the child's hand reaching through the trash looking for food. The child suddenly sees the soldier, and extends her hand to his crotch and smiling with two missing teeth says what sounds like, "Yum-yum." In a knee-jerk reaction, the soldier shoots the child in the face, leaving only her hand in the trash holding a rotted orange. Frank tells the writer that the soldier was not simply disgusted with the child, but "I think he felt tempted and that is what he had to kill. Yum-yum" (Morrison 2012, p. 96). At this stage in the narrative, Frank is unwilling to admit that he is the soldier who in fact killed the little girl. To do so would be to admit that he was aroused, which would reinforce the message of Black male sexual depravity. This realization becomes like a chain around his neck.

Every other war memory is bound up in his transgression against the girl child. When Frank finally admits that he was the one who killed the girl, he faces the demons he has tried to hide. Confessing to the writer, he says, "*How could I let her live after she took me down to a place I didn't know was in me? How could I like myself, even be myself if I surrendered to that place where I unzip my fly and let her taste me right then and there . . . . What type of man is that? And what type of man thinks he can ever pay the price of that orange? You can keep on writing, but I think you ought to know what's true*" (p. 134). Why is this confession so important? Through it, Morrison continues the conversation on Black male sexual deviance. She makes a statement about the kind of manhood that can come to grips with and own up to one's mistakes. Pedophilia is a taboo subject in American society. Black men are already combating the racist stereotypes that have been used against them historically. To admit to being aroused by a child is to suggest there is truth in the Black sexual deviance narrative. What Morrison does, however, is to "create discomfort and unease" but then move forward to contextualize and complicate that discomfort within the larger historical context.

Prior to Frank's confession, he is in a relationship with a woman named Lily who tempers his reality. In telling the writer about Lily, he says, "*You are dead wrong if you think I was just scouting for a home with a bowl of sex in it*" (p. 69). Again, Frank is defensive because he recognizes that Black men are perceived as sexual predators with insatiable appetites. To support this perspective, Collins' research bears relevance, as she argues, "[because of larger systems of oppression], Black women become reduced to sexual spoils of war, with Black men defining masculinity in terms of their prowess in conquering the booty" (Collins 2005, p. 151). Operating within this context, Frank has something to prove, so he must dissociate himself from the sexually depraved person the writer may think him to be. When he meets Lily, she brings comfort like the biblical example of a lily in the valley of the shadow of death. She represents life where before there was impending death. In her purity and innocence, Lily provides Frank with an emotional anchor that keeps him from drifting on the tides of war. It is her first time being intimate with a man, but Lily has a significant effect on Frank. She is different than the other women in Frank's past, and "he was not at all sure he could live without her . . . the lovemaking, entering what he called the kingdom between her legs . . . the nightmares folded away and he could sleep. When he woke up with her, his first thought was not the welcome sting of whiskey . . . he was no longer attracted to other women . . . he didn't rank them against Lily; he simply saw them as people (p. 21). At a time when he is being swallowed by spiritual death, Lily provides a reprieve and reminder of his humanity.



Frank becomes the person he longs to be when he is with Lily. Her calming presence and kindness cause him to be at peace and reawaken a desire to be a strong, good man. Through this relationship, Morrison expands the conversation on Black sexuality. She demonstrates a love in which a Black woman nurtures her partner and provides him stability—emotional, physical, and mental. Her love abates his dependence on alcohol, his nightmares, and attraction to other women. In contrast to his brokenness and inertness, Lily brings vitality and life. At the same time, Morrison shifts the narrative, as Frank gradually disengages from Lily and later becomes a burden to her. Over time, the romance is weakened—a sign that relationships must be balanced, if they are to be sustained. Unlike the narrative that promotes marital bliss, *Home* depicts a woman who is open to a loving relationship in which she freely expresses her sexuality but marriage is not her end goal. In fact, she fully expects Frank to be an equal partner and to realize that the apartment they share is theirs together and should reflect shared responsibilities. Lily becomes frustrated by Frank's long stints of silence, hours of aimless wandering, and days of lethargy. In effect, often, he is emotionally unavailable to her. Although he seeks to understand her disappointment and to ameliorate the relationship, Frank is spiritually wounded and therefore unable to successfully contribute to their courtship. Lily, on the other hand, "learned to let him be" remembering the early days "when she felt such sweetness waking up with him next to her . . . she regretted the loss of ecstasy but assumed its heights would at some point return" (p. 75). The two have come to an impasse because Frank must reconcile his inner spiritual battle based on the suppression of truth.

The state of Frank and Lily's relationship is best understood within the context of the time period in which it is set. In her text, *Coupling Convention: Sex, Text, and Tradition in Black Women's Fiction*, Ann duCille highlights the ways in which African American women writers have long written within the context of their time and reflected views of marriage and sex that stem from their current societal framework. During the late 19th century, there was a thrust towards marital unions in which women could lay claim to male protection, leadership, and provision. According to duCille, "For many members of the black female intelligentsia of the 1890s, the institution of marriage was the calling card that announced the civility and democratic entitlement which they attempted to claim for themselves and the black masses" (duCille 1993, p. 30). Not only was marriage an ideal to be promoted, but duCille discusses a secondary ideal of religious piety and morality that characterized the time period. Consequently, passionlessness became central to the idea of marriage. There was a need to juxtapose oneself against the stereotypes of Black female promiscuity, which ultimately motivated a politics of respectability. Higginbotham (1993) discusses the Black Baptist church as the vehicle towards racial advancement in her 1993 text, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880–1920*. Respectability, argues Higginbotham and others, was key in churches and in the Black women's club movements. This period is followed, writes duCille, by contrasting viewpoints regarding the sexual liberation of the 1920s and the sexual reticence of the bourgeoisie.

Along with scholars such as Hazel Carby (*Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist*, (Carby 1987)) and Angela Davis (*Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday*, (Davis 1998)), duCille's arguments provide perspective on the context of Black women's writings, and help to distinguish Morrison's strategic placement of Lillian Florence Jones—who exists in the 1950s against the backdrop of a White, sanitized, suburban, idyllic experience—but whose thinking extends beyond her time period. Lily's narrative serves as an opportunity to interrogate a Eurocentric paradigm that privileges marriage as the happy ending, an ending Lily is not seeking. In reflecting on the relationship, "The loneliness she felt before Frank walked her home [for the first time] . . . began to dissolve and in its place a shiver of freedom, of earned solitude, of choosing the wall she wanted to break through, minus the burden of shouldering a tilted man" (Morrison 2012, p. 80). To pursue the 1950s ideal of marriage, Lily would have to diminish her own entrepreneurial, self-possessed spirit. Besides being a seamstress whose business is growing, she maintains her long-held dream of home ownership, even when redlining is against her. Lily enjoys sexual ecstasy with Frank, however, it does not outweigh the burden of the relationship

and yet she does not initiate the break up; in this way, she is a product of her time period. Morrison helps shape the perception of Black women in the 1950s and allows readers to envision a woman who embraces her sexuality, yet is not broken by her failed relationship; instead she uses it as the impetus towards self-agency. In this regard, Morrison's work functions within a postmodern moment to reveal Lily's dissatisfaction with the status quo that leads her to choose an alternative. Like Lily, Morrison is operating within the context of her time period.

Cultural studies scholar Mark Anthony Neal provides insight into Frank's behavior within his romantic relationship. Neal believes "just because black men are under siege in White America, it doesn't mean that they don't exhibit behaviors that do real damage to others" (Neal 2005, p. 152). As a Black male himself, Neal does not reinforce what he calls a narrative of Black male privilege. He goes on to say "many of these young men [want to] excuse the behavior of black men because of the extenuating circumstances under which black manhood is lived in our society . . . . This is unacceptable because one form of oppression cannot be used to justify another. Furthermore, it neglects the fact that others, some black women, for example, are also oppressed by White America because of their race and gender" (p. 152). Neal's argument is key in this analysis because despite Frank's PTSD, behavior such as his continues under the guise of Black male privilege. It is what makes Lily tolerate him even after an extended period of emotional neglect. Frank is not in a place to understand the limitations imposed on Lily as a Black woman who has been denied opportunities to purchase her own home, despite having saved and prepared to purchase real estate. In his mind, Frank's pain takes precedence over Lily's because of a Black male privilege dynamic.

At the same time, Frank's actions are not deliberate, instead, they must be analyzed in the context of a spiritual paradigm defined by a Morrison-derived Christianity. Frank has committed the sins of murder, falsehood, and denial of his arousal at the hands of a Korean child, and yet, in Morrison's construction of justice, redemption is still possible. By drawing upon a Black or African American aesthetic, Morrison privileges an experience whereby people make mistakes but are capable of redemption and redefinition. Frank's inability to fully commit to Lily is directly linked to his spiritual battle to become a strong, good man. After making his way to Georgia, Frank determines to tell the truth in the form of a confession of his sins. He confides, "I have to say something to you right now. I have to tell the whole truth. I lied to you and lied to me. I hid it from you because I hid it from me" (Morrison 2012, p. 133). On the surface, Frank has made tremendous strides: he is sober, has found and delivered his sister from a racial and gendered system of oppression that led to a White doctor experimenting on her reproductive body, has found the courage to return home to Georgia, and is now in a place to care for others. But as he points out, there is a lie that impedes his path to complete freedom. Once Frank confesses his sin and turns away from it, he can become one who "has ears to hear what the spirit is saying" (Matthew 11:15). This biblical reference underscores one's responsibility to listen to the voice or guidance of God's spirit. In choosing to listen, the expectation is that one will subsequently act on the wisdom invoked by the spirit's leading. Confessing his sin is the only way to move forward, and in confessing, Frank is able to think and hear clearly, giving way to the ability to analyze his actions.

At the center of *Home* lies the idea that one must be spiritually whole in order to effectively navigate this life, an idea extending from a Christian framework. Throughout the entire text, Frank is shackled by the sin of his sexual response and ultimate murder of a child, which results in a struggle between his spirit and his flesh. In the introduction of *The Embrace of Eros: Bodies, Desires, and Sexualities in Christianity*, editor Margaret D. Kamitsuka points out that "Spiritualities across the spectrum of Christianity show [a] tension regarding the body. The body is necessary for one's devotional life of bodily practices; yet the body's sin-prone inclinations are at odds with one's spiritual aspirations" (Kamitsuka 2010, p. 6). Kamitsuka and others argue that humanity relies upon the physical body to enact God's will and yet the body betrays and undermines the desire to engage in a godly lifestyle because there is a sexual longing to which humankind most often surrenders. The conflict lies not in the sexual desire as much as in the fulfillment or expression of that desire. While my reading diverges

from several biblical-erotic interpretations in the collection, Kamitsuka raises a perspective that bears relevance to Frank in *Home*. She asserts, “gender perceptions intersect with this tensive attitude toward the body resulting in a mix of misogyny and eroticism” (Kamitsuka 2010, p. 6). When the Korean child touches Frank, his instinct is not to redirect the child or to remove himself from the situation. Instead, his response is to kill her because of what she represents to his own gender, age and sexuality. His actions could suggest an intersection of eroticism and misogyny, however, I read his behavior through the framework of the war between the spirit and the flesh, which states: “For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish” (Galatians 5:17). Prior to the fondling, Frank sees only childhood innocence and vulnerability. Afterwards, he sees the agent of his destruction and determines to eradicate her before she takes him farther down a deviant path. As a result, he becomes a spiritual victim overcome by guilt and shame, which lead to despondent living.

Frank is struggling with competing agendas of the Spirit and his flesh, as referenced in Paul’s letter to the Galatian church. To theorize Frank’s experience, I use the biblical metaphor of an inner spiritual battle wherein Frank contradicts himself, lies about his actions, and is overtaken by ghostly images; his is a struggle to break free of his past. Theologian J. Louis Martyn’s world-renowned research serves to clarify this scriptural reference. According to Martyn, “the Spirit to which Paul refers here is not an inherent component of the human being, comparable, let us say, to an individual’s heart. It is the Spirit of God’s Son, the Spirit that God has sent invasively into the human orb (4:6)” (Martyn 1997, p. 258). Martyn’s exegesis here reveals that humanity is not so much constantly caught between two warring equal entities, but instead the Spirit being referenced here is God’s Spirit that he placed within Christians when they came to accept Him as their savior. Once embracing Christ, “the beginning of the Galatians life as members of the church was not the result of a human act of deciding for the Spirit rather than for the Flesh. At that beginning lay God’s act of sending the Spirit into their hearts, begetting them by the power of the Spirit (4:29), and freeing their enslaved wills for obedience to him in the Spirit” (Martyn 1997, p. 264). Martyn’s position is that humans are not merely fighting an internal war, but instead man was fallen and sinful prior to accepting God. After acceptance, God implants his Spirit within, and ultimately those who profess to be Christians must simply listen earnestly to know what the Spirit is leading them to do. Paul “does not exhort them, therefore, to make a sovereign choice between the two . . . on the contrary . . . to be who they are” (Martyn 1997, p. 264). This theological positioning presupposes that once the Spirit is within, one’s true nature and identity is bound in a spiritual framework. One must simply lay claim to, listen to the inward prompting of who one knows oneself to be.

According to this viewpoint, Frank is already the strong, good self he once believed himself to be, however, his sin causes him to lose sight of his authentic identity. Morrison frequently employs the notion that there is redemption for those who seek it and *Home* is no exception. In a chapter titled “Brother-Mother and Othermothers: Healing the Body of Physical, Psychological, and Emotional Trauma in Toni Morrison’s *Home*,” Sampson-Choma (2017) asserts that Frank’s authentic identity is bound to his role as brother-mother and it is what stabilizes Frank. When he shifts away from that paradigm, Sampson-Choma articulates, he finds himself engaging with toxic definitions of masculinity and by contrast, when he is connected to his sister, he operates as his strong, good self. While the aforementioned argument assigns Frank’s identity to his philo—brotherly love—status and is a valid perspective, this essay maintains that Morrison is reconfiguring Frank’s identity from a spiritual position. In the theology that Morrison creates and shapes through her literature, there is the idea that one can be reborn, redefined, remade, redeemed. Beverly Foulks’s chapter titled, “Trial By Fire: The Theodicy of Toni Morrison’s *Sula*,” provides a discussion of Morrison’s self-created theodicy, that is, her framework or theology to interpret good and evil. Foulks writes, “Morrison develops in *Sula* a unique, local theology of one community’s experience with evil and how that experience informs their view of God” (Foulks 2006, p. 8). In Foulks’ estimation, Morrison “engages theology from within a particular community on earth” that distinguishes between “white speculation about heavenly matters



and black focus on earthly concerns” (Foulks 2006, p. 9). Morrison utilizes a Black aesthetic to create a theology that combines elements of Christian tradition, African and African American heritage, including oral culture, an interdependent Black community, self love, agency, personal responsibility, and the love of family and friends. As her novel concludes, according to the revised theology that allows for mistakes and creates opportunity for redemption, Frank has confessed, made retribution, and returned to his authentic identity of loving brother.

Under the new theology, Frank is now in touch with the Spirit and has a genuine concern for others that manifests in his reinvestment in the community. Returning to the moment that opened the novel, Frank and Cee have discovered the backstory of the dead body in the wheelbarrow. Frank senses a prompting to find and retrieve the bones of the dead body, which he and Cee then rebury. Afar off, Ycidra sees a man in a zoot-suit holding a pocket watch. Although her brother does not see the image, it is the same image Frank has seen throughout his post-war years. Much like the bones they are burying after White men forced a father and son to engage in a deadly dual, the zoot-suit man represents men from American history who were violently targeted and whose lives were lost at the hands of senseless racism; such kinds of killings fall within the scope of lynching. While Frank is not responsible for what happened to the zoot-suit men, or to the father and son, he assumes responsibility for them and sees that a proper burial is given and their souls laid to rest. In Morrison’s larger body of work, proper burial is a recurring motif in which unrest occurs when deceased individuals have not been given proper burials. This ideology is an extension of her engagement with death and the lines that separate the living and the deceased. In *The Grasp That Reaches Beyond the Grave: The Ancestral Call in Black Women’s Texts*, Venetria K. Patton points out “the end of the physical body does not mean the end of one’s connection to the community—communication continues through such things as dreams and visions” (Patton 2013, p. 55). Such dreams and visions of the dead are recurring in *Home* as Frank grapples with his past. When he and Cee lay the bones of a deceased father to rest, the zoot-suit ghost figure—who signifies the unjust deaths of various victims—is finally able to find peace. To further reinforce biblical imagery, Morrison has Frank create an upright grave with a horizontal sign stating, “Here Stands a Man.” It is a message for both the deceased man and the living Frank.

The narrative of *Home* is a story of redemption and reconciliation, which are biblical concepts that Morrison reconfigures in her own form of a liberation theology. In a chapter titled, “Telling Stories: Evolving Narrative Identity in Morrison’s *Home*,” Jan Furman highlights the perspective that “Frank acknowledges he can never be redeemed for taking a child’s life” but the reburial “moves him and the text toward resolution . . . he rights a wrong from his and the community’s past and eases tension in his disjunctive experiences” (Furman 2014, p. 239). While Furman’s observation focuses on the narrative changes brought about by the various epiphanies and subsequent actions within Frank’s experience, I argue that Frank undergoes spiritual changes in the form of a spiritual awakening. The grave markers form a cross, which ultimately signifies a connection to Christ, a deliberate choice on Morrison’s part. Spiritually, Frank is in a position to hear what the Spirit says about his true identity as a Black man. As theologian James H. Cone posits, “Until we can see the cross and the lynching tree together, until we can identify Christ with a ‘recrucified’ black body hanging from a lynching tree, there can be no genuine understanding of Christian identity in America, and no deliverance from the brutal legacy of slavery and white supremacy” (Cone 2011, p. xv). It would seem that Morrison underscores Cone’s Black liberation theology, as she revises the narrative regarding Black male sexual depravity and frames it within a context of spiritual redemption, familial love, community interdependence and personal responsibility. The significance of the novel concluding at the cross cannot be understated. In this symbolic space and historical context, Morrison converges African and African American spiritual and cultural ideologies with concepts of manhood, familial love, self-agency, and personal responsibility. She erects her own theology, which may create “discomfort and unease” but nonetheless shifts the societal narrative away from Black male depravity to a place of deliberate, conscientious, mutually beneficial relationships.

**Funding:** I received no funding for the research and preparation of the essay.

**Conflicts of Interest:** I have no conflict of interest.

## References

- Burr, Benjamin. 2006. Mythopoetic Syncretism in *Paradise* and the Deconstruction of Hospitality in Love. In *Toni Morrison and the Bible: Contested Intertextualities*. Edited by Shirley A. Stave. New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc., pp. 159–74.
- Carby, Hazel. 1987. *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Collins, Patricia Hill. 2005. *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism*. New York: Routledge.
- Cone, James H. 2011. *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books.
- Davis, Angela. 1998. *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- duCille, Anna. 1993. *Coupling Convention: Sex, Text, and Tradition in Black Women’s Fiction*. Cary: Oxford University Press.
- Foulks, Beverley. 2006. Trial by Fire: The Theodicy of Toni Morrison in *Sula*. In *Toni Morrison and the Bible: Contested Intertextualities*. Edited by Shirley A. Stave. New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc., pp. 129–58.
- Furman, Jan. 2014. Telling Stories: Evolving Narrative Identity in Morrison’s *Home*. In *Toni Morrison: Memory and Meaning*. Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, pp. 231–42.
- Higginbotham, Evelyn Brooks. 1993. *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880–1920*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Hine, Darlene Clark, and Earnestine Jenkins. 1999. Black Men’s History: Toward a Gendered Perspective. In *A Question of Manhood: A Reader in U.S. Black Men’s History and Masculinity, Vol. 1—“Manhood Rights”: The Construction of Black Male History and Manhood, 1750–1870*. Edited by Darlene Clark Hine and Earnestine Jenkins. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, pp. 1–58.
- Hunt, Patricia. 1994. The Texture of Transformation: Theology, History and Politics in the Novels of Toni Morrison. Ph.D. dissertation, City University of New York, New York, NY, USA.
- Jessee, Sharon. 2006. The ‘Female Revealer’ in *Beloved*, *Jazz*, and *Paradise*: Syncretic Spirituality in Toni Morrison’s Trilogy. In *Toni Morrison and the Bible: Contested Intertextualities*. Edited by Shirley A. Stave. New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc., pp. 129–58.
- Kamitsuka, Margaret D. 2010. Introduction. In *The Embrace of Eros: Bodies, Desires, and Sexualities in Christianity*. Edited by Margaret D. Kamitsuka. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, pp. 1–12.
- Martyn, J. Louis. 1997. *Theological Issues in the Letters of Paul*. Edinburgh: T & T Clark, Ltd.
- Morrison, Toni. 1984. Memory, Creation, and Writing. *Thought* 59: 385–90. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Morrison, Toni. 2012. *Home*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Neal, Mark Anthony. 2005. *New Black Man*. New York: Routledge.
- Patton, Venetria. 2013. *The Grasp That Reaches Beyond the Grave: The Ancestral Call in Black Women’s Texts*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Sampson-Choma, Tasha. 2017. Brother-Mother and Othermothers: Healing the Body of Physical, Psychological, and Emotional Trauma in Toni Morrison’s *Home*. In *Toni Morrison On Mothers and Motherhood*. Edited by Martha Satz and Lee Baxter. Bradford: Demeter Press, pp. 253–69.
- Stave, Shirley A. 2006. Introduction. In *Toni Morrison and the Bible: Contested Intertextualities*. Edited by Shirley A. Stave. New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc., pp. 1–7.
- Stave, Shirley A. 2013. “More Sinned Against Than Sinning”: Redefining Sin and Redemption in *Beloved* and *A Mercy*. In *Contested Boundaries: New Critical Essays on the Fiction of Toni Morrison*. Edited by Maxine L. Montgomery. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publisher, pp. 126–41.
- Surányi, Ágnes. 2006. The Bible as Intertext in Toni Morrison’s Novels. In *Toni Morrison and the Bible: Contested Intertextualities*. Edited by Shirley A. Stave. New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc., pp. 116–28.

