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How Parents Interact with their Children in Literature and How it Affects the Child's Development

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How Parents Interact with their Children in Literature and How it Affects the Child's
Development

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Senior Honors Project

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Abstract

Characters in literature have several different relationships, but one kind of relationship that stands out is that between a parent and a child. This kind of relationship can be loving, abusive, or in some cases, both. Just as in reality, this kind of relationship heavily affects how the characters grow and develop. The goal of this project is to examine how different parent/child relationships are depicted in different styles of writing and how it affects character development for the child. The difference between mother and father characters will also be examined to show how they interact with their children in separate ways and how these diverse parenting styles affect the growth of the child.

The following works will be closely studied because they encompass various writing styles and portray healthy and unhealthy relationships among parents and children: *Iphigenia at Aulis* by Euripides, “Those Winter Sundays” by Robert Hayden, “Girl” by Jamaica Kincaid, *Bastard out of Carolina* by Dorothy Allison, and *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison. This project will provide a new analysis of these works and their characters to determine how they portray the same theme of parent/child relationships differently, and how the child characters develop emotionally because of this. Looking at the craft of these works will also help me with writing stories of my own that involve this theme. These stories will be included at the end of my research.

Research Design

This thesis examines different kinds of parent/child relationships that are present among different genres of literature and how these relationships affect the child's character development. I decided to research the following works of literature for this project: *Iphigenia at Aulis* by Euripides, "Those Winter Sundays" by Robert Hayden, "Girl" by Jamaica Kincaid, , *Bastard out of Carolina* by Dorothy Allison, and *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison. These works include relationships among parents and children that are loving, abusive, and a combination of the two. Mothers and fathers are expected to be loving and supportive of their children. They are expected to be physically and emotionally available to their children. Within these works, there are mothers and fathers who live up to this expectation completely, partially, or not at all. The parents who completely live up to this expectation do so in traditional ways, meaning they give their children physical affection and connect with them on an emotional level by conversing with them and trying to understand them. The parents who partially live up to the expectation do so in non-traditional ways, such as caring for their children without giving them physical affection or complete emotional support. There are also parent characters who emotionally and/or physically abuse their children, and they do not live up to the expectation at all. However these parents interact with their children in these works also affects the child's character development, especially mentally, which occurs in real families.

My readings are based on peer-reviewed secondary research which analyzes family dynamics in our society and how they affect children, and I applied them to the works. I found articles that give a broad examination of parent/child relationships and works that specifically comment on the relationships in the writings I chose and how they affect the child's development. These articles were mostly written within the last twenty years with an exception

of one article about *The Bluest Eye*, which was published in the eighties, but the novel was published in 1970, and the article remains relevant to my topic. I chose more recent articles because they have a fresh perspective on the works I am writing about.

Literature Review

Eric Miller researched father-son relationships and how sons feel “father wounds” when they have been rejected from having traditional fathering. A “father wound” is a pain someone feels when they do not feel loved by their father because they did not receive affection, such as hugs and kisses, or emotional support from him. Ann Gallagher, a critic of “Those Winter Sundays” argues that the son in the poem is a victim of this “father wound” without using that exact term. She states that the child does not receive any affection from his father and there is a coldness in their relationship, not just in the house. She also argues that the reflection at the end of the poem is the son remembering love from his father instead of actually having felt it. Harry Moore, on the other hand, argues that everything the father did for his son were acts of love, which the son realizes at the end of the poem. Moore believes the love was tangible, unlike Gallagher.

The previous critics wrote about a father’s way of parenting, but Daniel G. Lagacé-Séguin and Amie E. DeLeavey researched several different parenting styles and how they affect children. They write about three parenting styles: authoritarian, authoritative, and permissive. They argue that children with authoritarian parents have lower self-esteem than children raised under the other parenting styles. Children under an authoritative style tend to become independent and do well under stress. Lagacé-Séguin and DeLeavey argue that this parenting style is best for parents to have. They found that permissive parents tend to have children who are aggressive and do not have much self-control.

There is also research that solely focuses on motherhood. Alizade edited a book with chapters by different authors on motherhood. The two chapters I focused on were “Motherhood is unending” by Ruth F. Lax and “The impossible being of the mother” by Alica Leisse de

Lustgarten. In her chapter, Lax argues that it is hard for mothers to live up to the stereotype of always being available and self-sacrificing for their children because there are negative feelings as well as positive that go along with being a mother. Lax argues that mothers sometimes experience anger, disappointment, and even hate towards their children because their lives drastically change once they have a child. Lustgarten continues this argument that mothers are not perfect in her chapter. She states that society defines a woman as a mother and a mother as a woman, which does not take into consideration the actual being of the person. A person cannot be solely defined by the word “woman” or “mother;” they have lives outside of that label.

Carol Bailey and K. Jayasree specifically analyzed the mother in “Girl,” and they have similar views on the work. They both see the work as a narrative on the culture of Barbados, which is a misogynistic society. They view the mother as protecting her daughter from the patriarchy by teaching her how to dress, cook, and act in ways that are deemed respectful towards men. Bailey and Jayasree also see the mother as a rebel, however, who is telling her daughter that she just has to act this way in public but not behind closed doors.

Marie Umeh and Susmita Roye examined the mother of the main character in *The Bluest Eye*, and they also write about how the mother is oppressed, but in this case it is by the entire white society and not just men. Umeh and Roye argue that the mother neglects her daughter because of this oppression, but she also longs to be a part of white society. Kelly Macías comments on black motherhood in general, and how black mothers have continued to be devalued through stereotypes and how some black mothers see their motherhood as something else that takes away their freedom. Roye also goes into how the daughter in the novel is affected by race as well. Emy Koopman also commented on the racism in this novel, and how it affects the parents and daughter, but he suggests that the daughter also wants blond hair and blue eyes to

cleanse herself of her father's rape. Cox and Paley's article was also applied to this novel because it is about how negative husband/wife relationships affect the relationship they have with their children, which occurs in *The Bluest Eye*. They argue that relationships among husbands and wives have to be worked on first before they can have a more positive relationship with their children.

Peggy Bailey and Natalie Carter commented on the negative relationships in *Bastard out of Carolina*. They both examined the abuse of Bone by her step-father Glen and the abandonment of Bone by her mother Anney. They both argue that Anney's abandonment of Bone is more traumatizing for her than Glen's abuse because Bone counted on her mother to always be there for her and to protect her. They talk about how Glen affects Bone as well, but ultimately it is Anney choosing Glen over her daughter that puts Bone down.

Traditional Love

Iphigenia at Aulis

Iphigenia at Aulis was written by Euripides around 410 B.C.E. Unlike the other works in this project, this play presents a fairly positive traditional relationship between a daughter and her parents; they live up to the expectation. In the play, King Agamemnon is told by the goddess Artemis to sacrifice his daughter Iphigenia so that his fleet can continue to sail to Troy for the retrieval of Helen. At first, he reluctantly accepts his daughter's fate for the good of his people, but he soon wishes he could stop the sacrifice because he cannot bear to lose his daughter. Clytaemnestra, on the other hand, is immediately heartbroken when she finds out and actively tries to stop the sacrifice from happening, no matter the consequences.

At the beginning of the play, Agamemnon says when he was told to sacrifice his daughter, "My heart would never let me slay my darling child. But hearing this my brother, Menelaus, plying every kind of reason, swayed me, in the end, to face this dreadful act," and so he agrees to her death (Hinds 25). At first Agamemnon cannot fathom sacrificing his daughter, but his brother reminds him that he is leading all the Greeks to Troy and therefore has a duty to his people, not just to his family, so he agrees reluctantly to sacrifice Iphigenia. The situation warrants him to think about more than just himself and his daughter. Although it seems like his decision should be easy (not to sacrifice Iphigenia), he does have a responsibility to his armies, which he cannot carry out unless he follows through with the sacrifice. It is obvious, though, how much Agamemnon loves his daughter and how anguished he is because he does not want to lose her. He even tries to keep her from coming to Aulis, but the attempt is futile.

When Iphigenia arrives, Agamemnon internally struggles with his secret and tries to keep it from Iphigenia and Clytaemnestra. Iphigenia is excited to see her father, exclaiming, "Father!

After all this time I want to run and hold you to me. How I long to see your face –” (52).

Clytaemnestra adds, “Of all the children I have borne your father, You have always loved him most.” This dialogue shows just how much Iphigenia loves her father, and it seems they have had a good relationship throughout her whole life, considering how animated she is when she finally gets to see him and because of Clytaemnestra’s comment. They also share a more traditional relationship, unlike in “Those Winter Sundays” and “Girl,” which is shown in the way Iphigenia wants to hug her father. They have open displays of affection. She did not have “a rejection of traditional fathering,” meaning Agamemnon participated in “emotional expression” and was “involv[ed] in [his] child’s life” (Miller 194). Iphigenia does not doubt her father’s love for her. Agamemnon is withholding the truth from her, however. He tells her, “There can [be tears]: Our coming separation will be long,” but he does not tell her the truth about why (Hinds 53). He is protecting her by making her think he is only upset about her leaving due to her marriage. Although he is lying to his daughter, he is doing it in order to keep her from hurting.

Clytaemnestra is also very fond of her daughter and has a good relationship with her. When Agamemnon apologizes to her for grieving, she tells him, “No need to beg forgiveness – I am not without such feelings of my own,” so she is also sad about giving up her daughter while she believes Iphigenia is to be married (56). When she finds out about Iphigenia’s sacrifice, though, she does not think about her husband’s people; she only thinks about her daughter. She turns to Achilles, begging him to help her. She is frantic, willing to do anything to help her daughter, which shows just how much she loves her and does not wish to lose her. She asks Achilles rhetorically, “Is anything more precious than my offspring?” (69). She is showing her maternal instinct to protect her daughter and to put her daughter’s wellness above all others.’ In her chapter titled “Motherhood is Unending,” in the book *Motherhood in the Twenty-First*

Century edited by Alcira Alizade, Ruth Lax states, “motherhood means a loving reliability, keeping the child’s trust and faith, anticipating needs with sensitivity, being available to the child, and yes, if need be, with disregard for the self” (10). Clytaemnestra takes her role of mother seriously and feels responsible for her daughter’s health and safety. She even considers her daughter above herself, which is proven in the way she does not see anyone or anything more “precious” than her daughter. This is not the case for the mothers in *Bastard out of Carolina* and *The Bluest Eye*. It is also not the case for Agamemnon, as he is putting his people above his daughter.

Unlike Agamemnon, Clytaemnestra wants her daughter to know about her fate, so she accosts Agamemnon and makes him confess in front of Iphigenia, who is understandably upset. She tries to convince her father not to go through with the sacrifice by reminding him of their loving relationship. She tells him, “I hear you saying: ‘Shall I see you happy in your husband’s house, thriving in a manner worthy of a child of mine? . . . I would reply: ‘What future, father, do I see for *you* . . . when you are old, repay the pains you took to raise and nurture me?’ ” (85). Agamemnon has always wanted his daughter to be happy, and Iphigenia is thankful for his care for her. This reinforces the idea that Agamemnon and Iphigenia have been emotionally invested in each other’s lives, which is why Iphigenia does not understand why her father would ever want her life to end. He tells her that “It is for Greece! It is for her that I must sacrifice you . . . our country must be free” (88). He loves his daughter, but he has further evolved into his role as King, so he has to make choices based upon what is right for the majority of his people, not just himself and his family. At first, Iphigenia feels betrayed by this decision; she tells her mother, “The father who begot my wretched self betrays me” (89). But it does not take long for her to realize that she will be praised by Hellas when she is sacrificed and that she will be helping her

country, so she stops feeling upset by the situation. Clytaemnestra, on the other hand, still does not want to follow through with it.

Unlike Agamemnon, Clytaemnestra does not have a duty to the people of Greece; she is only responsible for her children, and that responsibility includes keeping her daughter alive. While talking to Achilles about their plan, she says, “Be sure, if that can save her she will not be slaughtered” (93). This is not a sacrifice to her, but a murder. She sees people trying to harm her daughter, so she is doing everything in her power to stop it. Her attempts prove to be futile, however, when Iphigenia agrees to go along with the sacrifice. This hurts Clytaemnestra because Iphigenia tells her not to grieve for her and Clytaemnestra responds with, “How can you say this? After losing you!” (97). Iphigenia is trying to soothe her mother, but it is natural for a mother to grieve the loss of her daughter, especially when they have such a close relationship. Iphigenia also requests one last thing from her mother, which is: “Do not hate the man who is my father and your husband” (98). This shows how her love for her father stays strong even after everything, and Iphigenia does not want her mother to hate her husband and to blame him for her daughter’s death, but this is a lot to ask of her mother. She is about to watch her own daughter die, and it was her husband’s decision, so she should be able to grieve and feel angry. She laments to her daughter, “Stay! You must not leave me!” but her daughter goes, leaving her mother and father with one less child (99).

Even though her mother begs her to stay, and both her parents will miss her terribly, they raised her to be independent and mature. In an article titled, “Memories of Adolescence: Can Perception of Social Supports be Predicted from Baumrind’s Traditional Parenting Typologies? Legacé-Séguin and DeLeavy describe different parenting styles. They define authoritative parents as parents who “exercise control in combination with warmth, nurturance, democracy,

and open parent-child communication” (247). Both of Iphigenia’s parents gave her physical and mental love with hugs and open communication. They allowed her to express her wants and needs. She is confident in herself when she makes her decision to die because her parents taught her to be strong. She also shows maturity by asking her mother not to be angry with her father, even if she does have a right to be angry. Iphigenia could have hated her father and refused to help Greece, but she makes the decision to forgive and do what feels right because that is what her parents taught her to do. They live up to the expectation of a healthy relationship, giving their child every aspect of love and support they can. All of the parents in the following texts do not live up to this expectation.

Untraditional Love

“Those Winter Sundays”

Robert Hayden wrote “Those Winter Sundays” in 1962. It is a poem spoken by a son, who is reflecting back on his rough relationship with his father. When he was a child, he experienced a “father wound.” He felt neglected by his father because he did not receive traditional affection such as hugs, kisses, and emotional encouragement from him, which is what Iphigenia received from both her mother and father. At the end of the poem, however, the matured son comes to the realization that his father did love him, just not in traditional or obvious ways.

The poem begins with the speaker describing how his father gets up early, even on Sunday mornings, to care for his family. The father wakes every morning for work, but the fact that he also gets up on Sundays, a day for rest, shows how he is dedicated to caring for his family. Since the father’s hands are “cracked” from “the weekday weather” we can assume that

his work consists of manual labor outside, even during winter, when it is cold and dark (lines 3-4). He is probably tired and weary from working all week, but he still gets up to make the house warm. Although “No one ever thanked him,” he continues to get up every day and make a fire to warm the house (5). This is a depiction of a father who is both a “breadwinner” and a “caretaker.” He supports his family by making money, which is considered the father’s role, but he also takes on what is considered as the mother’s role by doing chores around the house and caring for the children. By taking on both of these roles, we see that he is a strong father who honestly wants to care for his family, no matter how much work he has to put in.

The second stanza introduces the speaker as a child who feels uncomfortable in his own home. He describes how after the “rooms were warm, he’d call, / and slowly I would rise and dress . . .” (6-9). The father waits for the house to warm before he wakes his son, which is an act of affection. Harry Moore, in his essay “Offices of Love”: A New Look at the Ending of Hayden's *Those Winter Sundays*," states the “father’s morning routine . . . consists of acts of service, kindness, and attention” (58). The father wants to warm the freezing house for his son, and he lets him stay in bed to keep warm until the house is heated enough for him to get up. As a boy, the son does not recognize this as an act of love and “fear[s] the chronic angers of that house” (Hayden 9). There is something going on that the reader does not know about and never comes to know. It is possible there is something going on between the mother and father because the mother is never mentioned, but this cannot be proven. There is obvious tension between the son and father, though, which causes the son to act cold toward his father. He rises “slowly,” so he is in no hurry to leave his room and meet his father (8). It is never explicitly stated what the son fears, but it is enough to inform the reader that something is keeping the son from having a

good relationship with his father. Eric Miller, a researcher of father-son relationships, states, “a father may have been, objectively speaking, a provider to his son and encouraged stereotypic behaviors associated with the male role (e.g. showing emotional strength and assertion, encouraging the value of work) and yet his son may report such a father wound as well” (198). It seems like this is what happened to the son in this poem. His father cared for him and provided a model for hard-work, but there is an “internalized, unresolved conflict between [him] and [his] son” (194-95). There is something missing from their relationship that causes the son to question if his father actually cares for him. This thing that is missing may be an emotional bond. They do not have open communication and affection, which is what helped Agamemnon and Clytaemnestra have a strong relationship with Iphigenia.

In the third and final stanza, the speaker reflects upon his childhood and seems to feel regret with how he acted towards his father. He spoke “indifferently” to his father, even though he warmed the house for him and “polished [his] good shoes as well” (Hayden 10,12). His father may not have showered him with affection, giving him hugs and encouragement, but he provided for him, and the speaker is now realizing that he should have been more thankful for what his father did for him. When a child is young, however, “a rejection of traditional fathering practices” can leave them feeling unloved by their parent (Miller, 194). The question the speaker raises in the end: “What did I know, what did I know / of love’s austere and lonely offices?” further reinforces the idea that he was too young at the time to understand that what his father was doing was out of some form of love (Hayden 13-14). The repetition of the question “What did I know?” shows how the reader is anguished over this. His indifference has been replaced by regret.

There has also been some debate among critics on what these final two lines mean. Ann Gallagher states that the speaker “sees [the past] as ‘austere and lonely’ still, but he also understands that the pathetic ‘offices’ performed by an apparently well-meaning father were, after all, informed by some kind of love remembered more than felt” (246-47). Gallagher does not consider the speaker’s father as good and clearly does not think he tried hard enough to care for his son, considering her use of “pathetic.” The fact that he works and cares for the house, however, proves that he does indeed try hard to care for his son. She also does not think the father loved his son because she states that the son is remembering love that was not there since it was never felt. The son is feeling it now, though, which does not make it any less real.

Moore, in his article on “Those Winter Sundays,” also believes that the father truly cared for his son. He states that Gallagher’s view “at once overvalues feeling or sentiment as the substance of love in the poem and fails to appreciate the genuine emotion evoked by the understated conclusion” (57). He sees how the matured son is realizing his father’s love, which is how I also see the ending. He pronounces that “love . . . is difficult, ‘austere,’ and ‘lonely’ . . . In lowly and unexpected ways that may not be recognized until long after the fact, love seeks the good of others. Such love is not cozy or romantic, but it is real” (59). The speaker recognizes later on in his life that his father did love him; it was just not the “cozy” kind of love that would have been easier to recognize.

“Girl”

“Girl” is a short work that was published by Jamaica Kincaid in 1978. The style of this piece is very different from the other works I’m examining because it cannot be categorized into one style of writing. It is only a page long, but it is neither a poem nor a short story. It reads as a constant stream of commands from mother to daughter, explaining how to wash clothes, cook,

act, etc. This work is another example of untraditional love, but in this case the mother gives her daughter tough love in order to protect her in the patriarchal society they live in.

At first, the commands such as “Wash the white clothes on Monday and put them on the stone heap; wash the color clothes on Tuesday and put them on the clothesline to dry; don’t walk barehead in the hot sun . . .” just seem like they are coming from a picky mother who wants her daughter to do the chores the way she likes, but this is not entirely the case. K. Jayasree in her article “Linguistic-Literary Camouflage in Jamaica Kincaid’s ‘Girl,’ ” states that the “first half of [“Girl”] is for the men of a patriarchal society who would condone the severe reprimands of the mother regarding her daughter’s behavior” (82). If the mother does not teach her daughter how to act the way the men in their community think she ought to act, then she and her daughter will be considered outcasts. The mother is “teach[ing] the daughter how to protect herself against a misogynist society without any overt confrontation” (Jayasree 82). This is why she tells her daughter “this is how you iron your father’s khaki shirt so that it doesn’t have a crease” and “this is how to love a man.” She is teaching her daughter how to please men so that she is not completely disrespected by them.

The mother also teaches her daughter how to cheat the system, meaning she can be improper without receiving consequences. Her mother tells her “this is how to bully a man” and “this is how to spit up in the air if you feel like it, and this is how to move quick so that it doesn’t fall on you.” Her daughter can play “marbles;” she just has to be careful not to “squat down” while playing. She doesn’t just want her daughter to do everything to please the patriarchy; she wants her to have some fun too. She just has to be careful.

There is also a phrase that stands out starkly among the other commands, which is “like the slut you are so bent on becoming.” This is repeated four times in this short piece. The term is

not meant to be completely negative, however. While Kincaid “is using harsh language denied to women, she cloaks it by using it for the indoctrination of patriarchal values, thus taking away the rebuke the usage would have earned her from society” (Jayasree 82). The mother is empowering her and her daughter by disguising the word “slut” behind the patriarchy. It seems like she is chastising her daughter for being promiscuous, when in fact she is just warning her daughter to be wary of how she portrays herself in public. Carol Bailey, in her essay "Performance and the Gendered Body in Jamaica Kincaid's "Girl" and Oonya Kempadoo's Buxton Spice," states “the speaker stresses the public performance of a particular virtuous gendered self as a survival strategy on this stage, as she implies that there is a possibility for the existence of an offstage self” (110). The daughter can be whoever she wants to be when nobody is looking; she just has to be careful not to show this side of herself when the community is watching.

The daughter responds twice in the piece, which is shown by italics, but it is unclear whether or not her thoughts are voiced out loud the first time. The first response the daughter has is: *“but I don’t sing benna on Sundays at all and never in Sunday school.”* Benna is a style of singing that is “filled with bawdy lyrics, is used as a platform to pass on folk issues and rural news and has scandalous gossip as its pivot,” so it is not something that should be sung by young women (Jayasree 83). The daughter wants her mother to know that she is acting as she is supposed to, that she is being a respectable young lady. The second time the reader hears the daughter’s voice is when she says, *“but what if the baker won’t let me feel the bread?”* after the mother tells her to “always squeeze bread to make sure it’s fresh.” We know the daughter speaks out loud for sure this time because the mother responds, “you mean to say that after all you are really going to be the kind of woman who the baker won’t let near the bread?” Her mother is

scolding her because she does not seem to understand how important everything she just told her is. Her mother needs her daughter to understand what she is teaching her because it is for her own protection; it is how she is going to have to live in their society. The daughter does not seem to quite grasp this yet, but her mother is teaching her now so that she is prepared to be a wife and mother herself when she leaves the house.

There are not any words of affection spoken to the daughter in “Girl” as there are not any in “Those Winter Sundays,” but like the father in that poem, the mother is showing her love for her daughter in other ways. The father in the poem warms the house and polishes his son’s shoes, and the mother in this work teaches her daughter how to stay under the radar so she does not become a disrespected member of the community. It is not the warm love that children usually desire, such as the love Agamemnon and Iphigenia share, but it is the kind of love that the mother and daughter’s society warrants. In a book titled *Motherhood in the Twenty-first Century*, editor Alcira Alizade states “The absolute and unmitigated demand that mothers be perfect and know no flaws -- an impossible requirement -- ignores the fact that the capacities of all women are finite; embodied in the maternal figure, she can never be . . . quite-good-enough as a mother” (x). The mother may not be giving her daughter lots of affection, but she is doing what she can to protect her daughter, as the father in “Those Winter Sundays” did what he could to care for his son. Neither a mother, nor a father, can be perfect. They both have to care for themselves while also caring for their children, so it is impossible for them to live up to all their expectations as parents.

Abusive Relationship

Bastard out of Carolina

The novel *Bastard out of Carolina* was published by Dorothy Allison in 1992. It is a coming-of-age story narrated by a girl named Bone as she ages from six to thirteen. Her relationship with her mother and step-father is very different from Iphigenia's relationship with her parents. Throughout the novel, Bone is abused by her step-father, both sexually and emotionally, and her mother chooses to ignore the abuse. This causes Bone to go down this path of anger, and she questions who she is until the end of the novel, when her mother leaves her at the age of thirteen.

In the beginning of the novel, Anney, the mother, is depicted as a very caring mother who is just looking for someone to love her. She wanted "more than anything else in the world . . . someone strong to love her like she loved her girls" (10). It is obvious in this quote that she loves her children, but she feels lonely and is looking for someone to fill the void. This is when she meets Glen Waddell, who becomes Bone's step-father. He is caring towards Anney's children at first; "he would carry us out to [Anney's] car when Reese got sleepy, holding us in his big strong arms with the same studied gentleness as when he touched Mama" (33). This is what leads Anney to trust Glen and marry him. She believes he will be good to her children, and she feels loved herself. Soon after the marriage, though, Glen begins to abuse Bone.

On the night Anney delivers Glen's son, (who turns out to be still-born), Glen sexually abuses Bone in the parking lot of the hospital. She is confused as to what exactly he is doing, but she is "too afraid to cry, or shake, or wiggle, too afraid to move at all . . . [as] he grunted, squeezed [her] thighs between his arm and his legs. His chin pressed down on my head and his hips pushed up at the same time. He is hurting me, hurting me! (47). This experience leaves Bone wondering if Glen actually loves her and her family: She "remembered those moments in the hospital parking lot like a bad dream, hazy and shadowed. When Glen looked at [her], [she]

saw no sign that he ever thought about it at all” and she “wanted him to love [them]. [She] wanted to be able to love him” (51-52). Natalie Carter, from Butler University, states that “Bone is confused by her abuser/captor’s nonchalance following the attack; she is entering a stage of doubt and denial; and yet, heartbreakingly, she still desires her abuser’s approval” (896). Glen is her father now, so she desperately wants to believe he loves her, and she wants to love him so they can be a unified family. She “wanted to be locked with Reese in the safe circle of their arms” (52). She wants to belong in the family like her sister seems to do so easily, but she is on the outside not knowing if she can trust Glen or not.

Glen does not provide love for Bone, however, which is evident in the way he continues to get angrier as the novel goes on and more physically abusive towards Bone. He tells her once, “I know how much your mama loves you” but while he tells her this, he is “putting his hand on [her] arm, squeezing tight. When he let [her] go, there was a bruise . . .” (70). Her mother responds with, “Glen, you don’t know your own strength!” but that is all she says to him (70). She does not get angry with him for hurting her daughter, and she doesn’t tell him to be gentler with Bone as we would think a mother would do. He tells her, “You know how much I love you all, Anney,” and she believes him, so she does not think he meant to hurt Bone (70). This strength of Glen’s puts fear in Bone, however; she narrates that she has dreams that consist of “hands that [reach] around doorframes and [creep] over the edge of the mattress, fear in me like a river, like the ice-dark blue of his eyes” (70). She cannot even escape her step-father in her dreams, which demonstrates how much she fears those hands that cause her pain. The other children in the previous works have not felt this kind of fear; they did not fear being physically assaulted in their own home. It is true that the son in “Those Winter Sundays” did feel some fear within his house, but it was not as severe as Bone’s.

Although Anney does not do much about Glen bruising her daughter, Allison depicts her as a loving mother who provides for her children, even if she has to make sacrifices. Just a few pages after the bruising scene, Anney is trying to feed Bone and Reese, even though “there was not even flour to make up the pretense of a meal” (72). She gives them what she can, which is just soda crackers with ketchup, and Bone states how “Mama made us laugh with her imitations of her brothers and sisters fighting over the most disgusting meals they could dream up,” (73). Her mother is entertaining her and her sister so they are distracted from how hungry they are. Unlike the mother in “Girl,” who takes on a more demanding approach of protecting her daughter, Anney gives her daughters something fun to do in order to protect them from feeling hunger. Anney even yells at Glen because he hasn’t gotten another job to pay for food. She tells him that she was “Never . . . gonna have them hungry or cold or scared. Never, you hear me? Never!” (73). She won’t protect Bone from Glen’s sexual and physical abuse, but she does this time when her daughters are hungry, and I think it is because Anney sees this as an easier fix. She knows she can do something about the situation. It is hinted that she prostitutes herself in order to get money for groceries: “Mama put on a clean bra and one of the sleeveless red pullover sweaters . . . Mama outlines her mouth in bold red lipstick . . . [and pulls] out the box where she stored her shiny black patent-leather high heels” (74). She is willing to give herself to a stranger in order to care for her children, which shows how much she truly loves her children. In this scene, she is similar to Clytaemnestra; Anney seeks a way to resolve her children’s hunger as Clytaemnestra sought out a way to save her daughter from being sacrificed.

Even though Anney stood up to her husband, she continues to let her love for him get in the way of her love for Bone, which further causes Bone inner turmoil. Glen beats Bone with a belt for running in the house, and Anney blames Bone for her beating instead of Glen, saying,

“Baby, what did you do, what did you do?” (107). Anney justifies Glen’s abuse by making it Bone’s fault that he hurt her. This causes Bone to question her mother’s love for her. Bone narrates how she “wanted [Anney] to love me enough to leave him, to pack us up and take us away from him, to kill him if need be” (107). Bone doesn’t believe that her mother loves her enough because she is making Bone stay with her abuser. Why would her mother make her stay with someone who is physically and emotionally causing her pain? As mentioned earlier, it is possible that Anney feels like she has no control over the situation. Glen obviously has the power in the household, and she does not know how to overcome it. He beats Bone so much that she begins to believe there is something innately wrong with her: “It was just me, the fact of my life, who I was in his eyes and mine. I was evil. Of course I was” (110). Glen is so demeaning to Bone that she begins to believe everything he says to her is true. He tells her that she is “Cold as death, mean as a snake, and twice as twisty” (111). He is her step-father and therefore has superiority over her, and she is a young, impressionable child, so she believes him. He practices an authoritarian parenting style, which “involves power assertion without warmth, nurturance, or two-way communication . . . Children of authoritarian parents report low self-esteem . . . and have been considered by others to be fearful, apprehensive, moody, unhappy . . . (Lagacé Séguin, DeLeavey 246). Glen asserts his power over Bone, which involves abuse, and it leaves Bone feeling ashamed in herself. She does not feel confident in herself like Iphigenia did because she does not have parental support. There is a distinction in the way these daughters hold themselves due to the way their parents love them. Iphigenia is comfortable standing up to her father and mother because they showed her compassion and interacted with her in a positive manner. Bone shrinks inside herself and fills up with anger because her mother and step-father do not share compassion with her and do not listen to her.

Bone still feels compassion towards her mother, however, even though she is questioning her mother's love. She still worries about her mother more than herself and is dedicated to protecting her. She narrates that she is "More terrified of hurting her than of anything that might happen to me, [so] I would work as hard as he did to make sure she never knew" (118). She does not want her mother to know about the sexual abuse she endures from Glen because it would hurt her mother, even though Bone is constantly being beaten and sexually abused. This proves how much love Bone has for her mother and the responsibility she feels towards her. She has seen her struggle with feeding her and her sister, and she does not want to add to the stress. This is a sign of maturity, even though she is continuing to be miserable. When her mother is happy, though, it makes her feel safe, which shows that she is still young and relies on her mother. Bone narrates that her mother "smiled, and I hugged her. I loved it when she looked like that. It made the whole house feel warm and safe" (197). Even with all the beatings and Anney still not leaving Glen, Bone loves her mother and wants her to be happy. She is dedicated to her even though Anney is more dedicated to Glen.

After Bone receives another beating from Glen, Anney tells her sister, "He loves her. He does. He loves us all. I don't know. I don't know. Oh God. Raylene, I love him. I know you'll hate me. Sometimes I hate myself, but I love him. I love him" (246). She is in denial, choosing to think that the situation is not as bad as it is, and she keeps choosing to believe that Glen loves Bone, when it is blatantly clear that he doesn't. If Anney was to put her children first as a mother ought to do, she would have left Glen. In the first chapter of *Motherhood in the Twenty-First Century*, Ruth Lax states that "primary preoccupation with the child, availability to the child, self-sacrifice to the child are values upheld as inherent in good motherhood" (1). Although she did sacrifice herself to feed her girls, she does not put her children first, and she does not make

herself emotionally available to her children. She does not even prioritize Bone over Glen when he brutally rapes Bone towards the end of the novel..

When Anney sees Glen raping her daughter, she does get angry and protective over her, but then she once again chooses Glen over her own daughter. Anney starts “grabbing things, canisters off the stove, pans, glasses, plates, anything she could throw at him” (286). She then rushes to her daughter, ignoring Glen’s pleas, trying to get Bone up and into the car to take her to the doctor. She even “punched him full on” to get him away from her and her daughter (288). This seems like the last straw for Anney, the event that will finally persuade her to take her daughters away from him, but she gives in to Glen’s pleas and holds him, causing Bone to think, “Could she love me and still hold him like that? . . . I wanted everything to stop, the world to end, anything, but not to lie bleeding while she held him and cried” (291). Even after Glen brutally rapes her daughter, Anney still comforts him while her daughter bleeds in the passenger seat of her car and questions if her mother loves her. Anney feels devoted to her husband, as Agamemnon felt devoted to Greece and his army. This devotion is so strong that Anney still comforts her husband, even though he severely hurt her daughter. Agamemnon agreed to the sacrifice of his daughter because of his own strong devotion to his people, but he had a greater responsibility than Anney. He was in charge of a whole group of people before he had his daughter, and it was his responsibility to look out for all of them; it was his priority. Anney had her daughters before she met Glen, so they were supposed to be her priority, but she allowed him to be first. She is more worried about receiving love than giving it.

At the end of the novel, Anney makes the final decision to leave Bone with her aunt, who doesn’t know where Anney’s going (308). Carter states that “Daddy Glen’s abuse of Bone may be horrifying and repulsive, but it is not entirely unexpected. What is unexpected, however, is

Anney's abandonment of her daughter, both symbolic and literal" (Carter 887). Stereotypically, it is the mother who is always there for her children, no matter what, so it is surprising that she leaves. It is traumatizing for Bone when her mother walks out of her life. Before she leaves Anney tells her daughter, "Bone, I never wanted you to be hurt. I wanted you to be safe . . . I never thought it would go the way it did . . . And I just loved him . . . I just loved him so I couldn't see him that way" (306). Anney saw how Bone was always hurt, and she knew Glen beat her in the bathroom, yet she refused to believe he was a corrupt man because she loved him. She let her daughter be abused because of this blinding love she had for Glen. It seems like she regrets doing this to her daughter, though, which may be why she chooses to leave. She tells her daughter, "'You don't know how much I love you . . . ' her face as stark as a cracked white plate. 'How much I have always loved you' " (307). Her pale face represents that she feels awful for leaving her daughter, but she does let her know that she loves her. Peggy Baily, from Henderson State University, mentions that Anney leaving "placed Bone out of the range of Glen's sadism and rage," so in Anney's own way she is protecting her daughter (279). Bone does not feel protected, though, as she narrates, "My heart broke all over again. I wanted my life back, my mama, but I knew I would never have that. The child I had been was gone with the child she had been. We were new people, and we didn't know each other anymore" (Allison 307). This is similar to how Clytaemnestra feels when her daughter decides to go through with the sacrifice. Clytaemnestra's heart breaks because of the loss of her daughter, and Iphigenia just walks away, not caring about the consequences her absence will have. Anney does the same to her daughter. Bone has matured since the beginning of the novel, but she is still only thirteen and needs/wants her mother. She is left with her aunt, not knowing how anything will turn out for her. The mother

in “Girl” was tough on her daughter, but all of the commands she gave her showed that she cared. Anney just gives up on Bone and chooses to leave.

The Bluest Eye

Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* (1970) is primarily a statement on race that involves abusive parents. It is about a young African-American girl named Pecola who is neglected by her mother and father, and her father also rapes her. Similar to Bone in *Bastard out of Carolina*, Pecola despises herself, which is in part due to her parents. She sees herself as an ugly black girl. Unlike Bone, however, she has been neglected by her parents since birth, so the effects of her abuse are seen right away in the beginning of the novel.

Pecola’s parents, Cholly and Mrs. Breedlove, are always fighting each other, and it causes Pecola to fold into herself and wish she didn’t exist. The narrator states, “[Pecola] struggled between an overwhelming desire that one would kill the other, and a profound wish that she herself could die . . . she was whispering, ‘Don’t, Mrs. Breedlove’ . . . Pecola . . . always called her mother Mrs. Breedlove” (Morrison 43). The fact that Pecola is struggling between wanting one of her parents to die or herself to die shows that she is not even close to living in a loving and safe environment. Susmita Roye in her article “Toni Morrison’s Disrupted Girls and their Disturbed Girlhoods” states that “Despite having a family, Pecola’s loneliness is acute” (219). She has a mother and father present, but unlike Iphigenia’s parents, Pecola’s do not show her any affection or even give her any attention. Therapists have “long noted that problems in the parent-child relationship [are] often associated with marital distress. As a result, parent-child issues [are] difficult to resolve unless problems in the marriage [are] first . . . addressed” (Cox and Paley 193). Pecola and Cholly have an unhealthy marriage they never resolve, and this relationship is reflected on the one they have with Pecola. The “violence [and] aggression [also]

threatens the child's sense that . . . she can feel safe and emotionally secure in the family," (194). This is proven in the way Pecola wants to die in order to get relief from her family.

The fact that Pecola calls her mother Mrs. Breedlove instead of a variation of "mom" means she does not even consider Mrs. Breedlove as her mother or even someone close to her. By calling her this, she sees her mother as an unfamiliar stranger. Mrs. Breedlove does not show any kind of affection towards her daughter either. In one part of the novel, Pecola is helping Mrs. Breedlove at work, where she is a maid for a white family, and Pecola accidentally drops a blueberry pie. Mrs. Breedlove is instantly on Pecola, "and with the back of her hand knock[s] her to the floor . . . yank[s] her up by the arm, slap[s] her again . . ." (Morrison 109). This physical abuse hurts Pecola, but what hurts her more is seeing Mrs. Breedlove comfort the white family's little girl, saying to her, "Hush, baby, hush. Come here. Oh, Lord, look at your dress. Don't cry no more. Polly will change it" (109). Mrs. Breedlove provides more comfort to this child who isn't hers than to her own daughter, and the girl even refers to Mrs. Breedlove as Polly, which is an endearing nickname. The little girl sees Pecola's mother as a more familiar figure than Pecola does. This incident further "reinforces Pecola's self-image of worthlessness" (Umeh 40-41). She watches her mother care for another girl, which makes her feel as though she is not good enough for her mother's comfort.

We do get to see the mother's point-of-view, however, which gives some background about her actions towards Pecola. We did not get to see Anney's thoughts in *Bastard out of Carolina*, so it is hard to completely understand why she put up with Glen's abuse of Bone, but Mrs. Breedlove narrates how she felt about her children, and how their lives affected her. She states,

“[I]t weren’t like I thought it was gone be. I loved them and all, I guess, but maybe it was having no money, or maybe it was Cholly, but they sure worried the life out of me. Sometimes I’d catch myself hollering at them and beating them, and I’d feel sorry for them, but I couldn’t seem to stop. When I had the second one, a girl, I ‘member I said I’d love it no matter what it looked like . . . But I knowed she was ugly. Head full of pretty hair, but Lord she was ugly” (Morrison 124, 127).

Mrs. Breedlove was not expecting motherhood to be how it is. In her chapter of Alizade’s *Motherhood in the Twenty-first Century*, Alica Leisse de Lustgarten states “Being subjected to long-term demands conflicts with the right to one’s own existence, so that motherhood involves a change in the woman’s private life as such. The new life cannot but be intrusive . . .” (194). Mrs. Breedlove seems to feel like her children are impeding upon her life, which is represented in the way she narrates how her children “worried the life out of [her]” (Morrison, 124). She could not bring herself to stop yelling at her children and beating them. She cannot even say outright that she loved her children, and the fact that she uses past tense means that she does not have any love for them now.

This feeling of her children, and her husband, hacking away at her life doubled once she started working for the white family. She “neglected her house, her children, her man – they were like the afterthoughts one has just before sleep, the early-morning and late-evening edges of her day” (127). She neglected her own children for another family, basically leaving her children on their own. Ruth Lax mentions how a mother “may have conflicts regarding her culturally assigned, and frequently consciously and unconsciously self-imposed, role. Further, it is inadmissible that these conflicts may evoke feelings or, even worse, hate for the child in the

mother and a wish to vent it aggressively, to act out her frustration” (Alizade 2). Mrs. Breedlove does not like the black mother role she has been given, and she resents her children for it. In an article titled “Sisters in the Collective Struggle: Sounds and Reflections on the Unspoken Assault on Black Females in Modern America,” Kelly Macías states, “many Black women have internally conflicting views about motherhood and see it as incompatible to their liberation and empowerment . . . [and] see it as a burdensome condition which stifles creativity, exploits their labor, and makes them partners in their own oppression” (263). Mrs. Breedlove is already oppressed by white people, and her children just take away more of her freedom. When she is with the white family she works for, some of this oppression is lifted because she feels important. Like Pecola, she feels hatred towards her blackness. She feels lighter when she is a part of the white society, and this keeps her from wanting to go home and care for her family. She is unlike Anney in this sense because Anney made sure her daughters had basic needs; she provided them with food and new clothes. She also interacted with her children by talking to them and telling them stories about her childhood. She may have been in denial about Glen’s assault, but she still had a level of awareness when it came to her girls, and she still made sacrifices to care for them. Clytaemnestra also devoted her life to looking after her children. Anney and Clytaemnestra do not, however, face the same oppression that Mrs. Breedlove does, so they do not feel like they have to shut out their family completely in order to feel more free.

Mrs. Breedlove further contributes to Pecola’s low self-esteem and identity crisis by calling her ugly. Throughout the novel, Pecola is obsessed with having blue eyes. She thinks if she had them, “if those eyes of hers were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different . . . If she looked different, beautiful, maybe Cholly would be different, and Mrs.

Breedlove too. Maybe they'd say, 'Why, look at pretty-eyed Pecola. We mustn't do bad things in front of those pretty eyes' " (47). She thinks it is because of her appearance that her parents treat her the way they do, and her parents let her believe this. She continues to think she is ugly because she is not white, which is what society deems as beautiful, and her parents do not try to tell her otherwise, so she continues to think she's worthless. Lagacé-Séguin and DeLeavey state "unconditional parental acceptance is essential for adolescents to maintain good levels of self-confidence for social development" (248). Without Mrs. Breedlove's and Cholly's acceptance, Pecola does not accept herself and does not feel confident in herself. Iphigenia's parents accepted her her entire life, which helped instill her confidence.

There is a point in the novel when Cholly sees his daughter as beautiful, but what he does when he notices her beauty is disturbing and violent. He comes into the house drunk and sees his daughter washing dishes, and "The sequence of his emotions was revulsion, guilt, pity, then love . . . He wanted to break her neck – but tenderly. What could he do for her – ever? . . . How dare she love him? Hadn't she any sense at all? What was he supposed to do about that? Return it? How?" (161). He claims he feels love for his daughter, but he questions how he could give her love because he doesn't know how. It does not seem like he truly feels love for his daughter because he does not know what it is like for a parent to love a child. When he was just "four days old, his mother wrapped him in two blankets and one newspaper and placed him on a junk heap by the railroad" (132). When he's a teenager, he goes looking for his father, and when he finds him his father yells, "get the fuck outta my face!" (156). He did not have any parents to be a good role model for him. The first emotion he feels when he looks at his daughter is also "revulsion," which is not a feeling a father has towards his daughter if he loves her. He does feel guilt, which suggests he has some remorse for how he has treated her, but there isn't evidence to

further support this. He also rapes her after all these emotions flow through him, which obliterates any remorse he has. After he removes himself from her, “hatred mixed with tenderness. The hatred holds him back from picking her up, the tenderness forces him to cover her,” but he leaves her unconscious on the floor (163). He forces himself onto his own daughter and only bothers to cover her up before leaving her alone. Whatever love he felt for her was not healthy, for either him or Pecola, and it was twisted. Shortly after this incident Pecola becomes mad.

As mentioned above, Pecola is obsessed with blue eyes, but this obsession becomes worse after she is raped by her father. She believes blue eyes are the only thing that will make her pretty and “will cleanse her” after being raped by her father (Koopman 307). At the end of the novel, she appears to have a conversation with someone, who is actually herself, during which she believes she has blue eyes. When she is talking to the imaginary person, she tells them, “Ever since I got my blue eyes, she look away from me all of the time. Do you suppose she’s jealous too?” (Morrison 195) Pecola wants to think that her mother is jealous of her because she now has pretty blue eyes, but it is possible because of what Cholly did to her that her mother can’t stand to look at her. Pecola thinks Mrs. Breedlove did not believe her when she told her about the rape, but in fact she had to know what happened because she found her unconscious on the floor. This may be worse than actually not believing her because Mrs. Breedlove did not do anything about the situation. Cholly continued to live in the house with them, and there was a “*second time, when [she was] sleeping on the couch*” but Pecola didn’t even bother to tell her mother about it because she does not think she believed her the first time (200). Pecola cannot confide in her own mother, even though she has been traumatized and is losing her mind. She is only able to escape from her father when he dies at work, and there is not

much hope for her at the end of the novel when other girls see her digging through the trash. She is stuck living with her mother and living through her trauma.

Conclusion

All of these texts represent the effects parents have on their children based on how they treat them, divided into traditional, non-traditional, and abusive ways. In “Iphigenia at Aulis,” Agamemnon and Clytaemnestra give their daughter traditional ways of affection, such as hugs and emotional support, and it helps her to become confident in herself, which is not something the characters achieve in the other works. In “Those Winter Sundays” and “Girl,” the father and mother show their love for their children in untraditional ways, and it leaves the son and daughter feeling as if their parents do not care for them. Without some level of affection, they do not understand that what their parents are doing for them are acts of love. In *Bastard out of Carolina* and *The Bluest Eye*, we see young girls that are emotionally and physically abused by their parents, and they suffer greatly from it. They are filled with self-doubt and trauma that will continue to affect them into adulthood. By looking at these five works together, we are able to see how important it is for parents to have a positive, healthy relationship with their children because when they do not, whether it is physically or mentally abusive, the children adopt a negative view of themselves and do not feel as though they have any importance. When a child has a strong, positive relationship with their parents, however, they gain self-esteem and confidence, which they carry into adulthood.

Creative Writing

Sweetpea

“Come here Sweetpea,” her dad calls to her, who is laying on the floor belly down across the room, coloring a picture of a purple bunny she just decided to name Mr. Snuggles. She’s four-years-old, wearing her favorite cut off jean shorts with an over-sized gray t-shirt with a faded American flag printed on it. Her dad is wearing jeans with an Outer banks t-shirt, his hair a blend of red and yellow delicious apples. He holds his arms out for his daughter.

“Coming Daddy!” She gives one last glance at Mr. Snuggles, proud of its purpleness and fluffiness and runs the short distance across the living room to her dad seated on the couch. She leaps onto her dad, pushing him into the couch cushions. She wraps her short arms around his neck, giggling. Her dad laughs and hugs her back and then settles her on his knee, which he automatically begins to jiggle up and down, making his daughter giggle again.

“Whatcha drawing over there?” her dad asks.

“Mr. Snuggles, my purple bunny. I want a real one, Daddy,” she wiggles around to face her dad, batting her eyelashes and giving him her best puppy-dog look.

“I don’t think bunnies come in purple, Sweetpea” he tells her, ruffling her long, chocolate lab hair. She immediately smooths it down; she hates it when he does that.

“Pleeeeeeaaaaassssseeee Daddy!” She squeezes him hard, putting all of her want for that bunny into her hug.

“Maybe in a few years, when you can take good care of it.” He hugs her back and then tickles her, causing her to flop around on his knee, laughing and struggling to breathe. For the moment, she forgets about Mr. Snuggles.

*

“Come on Sweetpea!” Her dad yells from the bottom of the stairs.

“Almost done Daddy!” She bellows back, using her twelve-year-old lungs. She finishes tying her red soccer cleats and puts her hair in a messy ponytail and clops down the stairs, jumping over the last two, waking up the sleeping furniture in the living room. Her dad just rolls his eyes and tells her to get into the car. As they drive to her game, she sticks her head out the window like a dog, loving the feel of the wind on her face and how it makes her hair swing in all directions. Her dad shakes his head but smiles, her head out the window until he parks his car at the field. He turns to her in his seat and asks, “Ready to kick some butt Sweetpea?”

“Always. I’m going for three goals this time. Think I can do it?”

“Nope. I *know* you can.” He reaches over and ruffles her hair, making her back up against the door.

“Dad, come on!” She takes her hair out and redoes her ponytail, just as messy as the first one, but she smiles at her dad before hopping out of the car and jogging across the field to her teammates. He takes a lawn chair out of the car and sets it up right behind the white line outlining the field, not wanting to miss a single second of the game.

As soon as the whistle blows, he stands up, almost knocking over his chair, and yells, “Go Sweetpea! You got it!” He does this every game, shouting over all the other parents. She learned to tune it out over the years, focusing on the game, but she always knows he’s on the sidelines, shouting until his voice crashes like the end of a sugar high. “Yes, yes, yes!” he yells as she scores the first goal for her team. He continues to yell like this the whole game, his voice barely holding on until the end of the game. Her team wins, but she didn’t reach her goal of

three. After saying, “good game” to the other teammates, she walks over to her dad, her shoulders a little drooped.

“There’s always next time Sweetpea,” he tells her and hugs her to him tightly, not caring that she’s wearing a cloak of sweat.

*

“Happy Sweet Sixteen Sweetpea!” Her dad announces, as he brings a gigantic carrot cake to the table. They both just finished a heaping pile of honey chicken, but there is always always *always* room for dessert in this household. Her dad always insists upon it.

“Thanks dad! I LOVE carrot cake! It should be my birthday every day!”

“I don’t think my gut could handle that, Sweetpea.”

“Wimp,” she replies, then blows out the candles. “I guess you don’t want any of this cake then.”

“Hey now, I didn’t say that,” he tells her as he gives her a fork. They dig into the cake, not bothering to cut it into pieces.

After eating several large bites of cake, cream-cheese frosting on her lip, she asks, “So Dad, what’s that surprise you’ve been torturing me about all week?”

“Why don’t you go outside and see?” he tells her, sporting a matching cream-cheese frosting mustache.

“Are you serious!” she yells, her lungs still going strong. She leaps up from her chair, almost causing a cake catastrophe, and runs to the front door, slipping on the floor in her fuzzy purple bunny socks. She doesn’t bother to put shoes on as she flings the door open and runs down the steps. She barely stops before she crashes into a cage in the middle of the sidewalk. Inside is a baby rabbit with gray fur speckled with brown, and she has ears that flop down to her

feet and her tail sticks up, showing a white underside. “Oh my god, she’s so cute!” she squeals as she opens the cage and lifts the bunny into her arms. The fur is softer than velvet as she runs her hand over the bunny’s fur.

“They were all out of purple ones, but I figured this one would do” her dad calls from the front door.

“She’s perfect. You’re the best, Daddy.”

“Oh, I know,” he says, a huge smile on his face.

“Come on, Mrs. Snuggles, I’m gonna show you your new home.”

*

“You got everything Sweetpea?” her dad asks as he packs boxes into his car, getting ready to take her to college. Both her and his car are packed to the brim with boxes full of clothes, sheets, toiletries, posters, etc.

“Yep. I triple checked” she tells him while shoving the last box into his car.

“Then let’s go.”

Two hours later they pull up in front of her dorm building to VCU, where she’s going to study nursing. It takes her and her dad an hour and a half to drag all of her boxes up five flights of stairs and another two hours to unpack and set everything up just the way she wants it. She sets down a picture of her and her dad taken the day her high school team won the state soccer championship. His hair is less full and glossy as it used to be, and lines have multiplied on his face, but his smile and eyes are just as bright as they were the day she was born.

“Do you need anything else before I head home?” he asks as he finishes putting purple sheets on her twin mattress.

“I don’t think so,” she says, looking around her room to see if anything is missing.

Everything’s present and in place.

“I’m so proud of you Sweetpea” he tells her, pulling her in for a long hug. She squeezes him tight, suddenly reluctant to let him go. He pulls back; both of them have tears in their eyes, but they don’t want to release them.

“I love you Daddy” she tells him, giving him one last hug.

“I love you too Sweetpea.” He ruffles her hair and walks out the door and heads home to his new, empty house.

She sits down on her new lumpy bed, her hair still messy, and releases the tears, her mind going back to the time of Mr. Snuggles and bouncing on her father’s knee, a place she’s too big for now but a place she most desires to be.

Mothers

Baby sea turtles are on their own from the start. Mothers only carry their fertilized eggs for a few weeks before going ashore at night to lay them, so they don't become familiar with their children at all. They create nests in the sand and bury between 50 and 200 eggs and then take one last look at their covered-up nest before heading back into the ocean, never to see their babies again. They don't even experience the birth of their own offspring.

My mother carried me for nine months, and she never lets me forget it. She protected me in her womb, keeping me warm. She fed me and went to the doctor to make sure I was healthy. She was my home for almost a year, never leaving me although I'm sure she wanted to at times; I've been told that I was not an easy baby to carry. I was a tad large for my short mother, so I was like a fat squirrel smushing myself into a too-tight hole in a tree. But she stuck with me because I was hers, and she didn't look back because she never left.

*

After the female lays her eggs, they take about 60 days to hatch, and once they do, they are faced with the task of crawling out of the nest their mother built for them, the only nurturing they ever received and will ever receive from their mother. They have to leave warmth and safety, the only things they have ever known, to fight their way to the ocean. Hatchlings are faced with the brutality of life as soon as their shells crack open and their first breath of earth enters their lungs. Only 1 in 1000 hatchlings make it to maturity, many of them dying before they even get to feel the cool, salty waves wash over their shells and flippers. They get eaten by birds or confused by light pollution, thinking they're going to the ocean that is their salvation when in reality they are going towards the highway that is their death. Even the ones that do

make it to the ocean are just beginning their voyage of troubles, having to journey across the ocean without getting eaten or starving.

*

Just like sea turtles, I was welcomed into this earth with a blast of cold air, making me wail for warmth, but unlike these reptiles of the sea, I was born at AMC hospital at 9:20 in the morning, and I was immediately checked by a doctor to ensure my health. I was also swaddled in a blanket, given a name, and kissed with a promise by my mother and father to always take care of me. I was held by other family members who already loved me without even knowing me yet, including my four-year-old brother who was actually excited to share his parents with me. He annoyed me even as a baby, always getting in my face, but he was another protector that kept me safe and gave me company while growing up.

*

Sea turtles have some company while maturing, but it is of another species, and this species doesn't even know the role it plays in a sea turtle's life. The young sea turtle spends its days floating on seaweed until they get to be about 8-12 inches long. This seaweed acts as a parent, keeping its baby warm, fed, and protected. The plant absorbs the sun, keeping the hatchling nice and warm. Other organisms also make their home in the seaweed, such as small fish and invertebrates, that the sea turtle feeds on. As for protection, the seaweed keeps the hatchling hidden from birds and sharks. The seaweed is the closest mother-figure these animals have, helping them reach maturity. But the same as us, there comes a time when the sea turtle is ready to leave his nest, and he has to go off on his own. He leaves the safety of his seaweed mother, which he may be with for up to ten years, and travels to a bay or estuary in order to gain strength and reach full maturity.

*

While I was growing up, I stayed in my mother and father's house with my brother, always surrounded by people who made sure I got what I needed. Food was always provided for me, whether it was cooked or bought, but I never had to forage for food or worry about going hungry. I had a roof over my head to keep me out of the cold, and I had a bed that was always covered in the softest blanket my mother and I could find at the store. If I needed anything at all, I had to do was ask mom or dad and they made sure I got it. When I was old enough to go to school, I was still taken care of by teachers, who made sure I had all the knowledge I would need to get a job one day and to be able to take care of myself. The only true predators I had were some bullies at school and stomach-aches from eating too much pizza or chocolate, but mom and dad were always there to tell me to just ignore the bullies because what they're saying isn't true, and to give me tums and ginger ale to calm my stomach. My parents were there for every stage of my development: infant, toddler, child, teenager, and now they are about to embark with me upon what I hope will be my stage of successful adulthood.

*

Sea turtles reach maturity between 10 and 50 years depending on their species, and what this means for them is that they are able to reproduce. After females mate, they travel across the ocean once again to return to the same beach their mother laid her eggs on. They instinctively know their way home and have a connection with their mother even though they never met her. These females will go through the same steps, laying their eggs and covering them up to keep them safe, then continuing on their journey without another thought of their babies.

*

When I turned 18, I was legally an adult, but I was and still am nowhere near maturity. I still need my mom and dad's help with paying for college and food and other necessities. I still have no idea whatsoever how to do taxes or how to go about buying an apartment or how to pay bills when that time comes. I call my mom or dad whenever there is a problem with my car or bank account or any inconvenience in my life really (I'm lucky they still pick up the phone when they see it's me). They took on a life-long responsibility, though, when they had my brother and me. My grandmother still takes care of my mother who takes care of me who will take care of my own children until I die. Death is what is going to part me from my mother, unlike the life that parts sea turtles from their hatchlings. Females always find their way back home, though, to the same spot where their mother's once were, and I will always return to my mother, where my life began.

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