

Meeting B'rer Rabbit and the Hoodoo Priests

African Mythological Figures in the Literature of Toni Morrison, Gloria Naylor
and Rudolph Fisher

Diplomarbeit

zur Erlangung des akademischen Grades

einer Magistra der Philosophie

an der Karl-Franzens-Universität Graz

vorgelegt von

Julia POMMER

am Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik

Begutachter: Mag. Dr. Phil. Univ. Prof. Walter Hölbling

Ich bestätige hiermit, dass ich die nachstehende wissenschaftliche Arbeit selbstständig und ohne fremde Hilfe verfasst habe und keine anderen als die angegebenen Quellen und Hilfsmittel benutzt habe. Auch sonst habe ich mich keiner unerlaubten Hilfe bedient.

Acknowledgments

First of all, I want to thank my family, my mum and my dad, who always supported me and believed in me and my abilities. Furthermore, I want to thank my boyfriend, Alen Palaic, who was at my side through every step of the way to my graduation and has always supported me mentally and technically. I also want to thank my old friend Nicole Linhart, who let me participate in her knowledge of university processes concerning handing in a thesis and answered patiently the hundreds of questions I asked. In addition I want to thank Elisabeth Braunstein, who accepted, without hesitation, to proof read and revise my thesis on such short notice.

Moreover, I want to thank my professor, Mag. Dr. phil. Walter Hölbling, whose abundance of patience helped me through the process of writing, correcting and handing in my thesis against all technical and other problems.

Without the support, help and understanding of the above mentioned people, this thesis would not exist. I want to thank you all for your patience.

Danksagungen

Ich möchte meiner Familie danken, meiner Mutter und meinem Vater, die mich immer unterstützt haben und in mich und meine Fähigkeiten geglaubt haben. Weiters möchte ich auch meinem Freund, Alen Palaic, danken, der während des gesamten Entstehungsprozesses immer an meiner Seite war und mich nicht nur mental, sondern auch bei technischen Problemen immer unterstützt hat. Ebenfalls bedanken möchte ich mich bei meiner langjährigen Freundin Nicole Linhart, die mich an ihrem Wissen über die universitären Abläufe teilhaben ließ und die geduldig meine hunderten Fragen bezüglich des Einreichens meiner Arbeit beantwortet hat. Zusätzlich möchte ich mich auch bei Elisabeth Braunstein bedanken, die sich so kurzfristig und ohne Zögern dazu bereit erklärt hat, meine Arbeit zu korrigieren.

Darüber hinaus möchte ich meinem Professor und Betreuer, Mag. Dr. phil. Walter Hölbling, danken für seine unendliche Geduld, die mir durch den gesamten Prozess des Schreibens, Korrigierens und Einreichens meiner Arbeit geholfen hat - allen technischen und anderen Problemen zum Trotz.

Ohne die Unterstützung, Hilfe und das Verständnis der oben genannten Personen würde es diese Arbeit nicht geben. Ich möchte euch allen für eure Geduld danken.

Table of Content

1	Introduction	1
2	General Historical Background	4
2.1	The oral tradition of Africa.....	5
2.2	Intertextuality and its importance for African American literature	8
2.3	The influence of Christianity on African American literature.....	10
2.4	Who is Esu-Elegbara?	12
2.5	Esu becomes B'rer Rabbit and a hoodoo priest	15
3	B'rer Rabbit and the hoodoo priests.....	17
3.1	B'rer Rabbit	18
3.2	Mother Nature and the tradition of root doctoring	20
3.3	The Conjure Man.....	23
4	Toni Morrison's <i>Tar Baby</i>	26
4.1	Plot summary.....	26
4.2	The main characters in <i>Tar Baby</i>	29
4.2.1	Jadine Childs	29
4.2.2	Son Green	34
4.2.3	Valerian Street	37
4.3	The <i>Tar Baby</i> and intertextual references.....	38
4.4	B'rer Rabbit and his quest for being free	43
4.5	How the mythological figures in <i>Tar Baby</i> work themselves into this world	44
5	Gloria Naylor's <i>Mama Day</i>	46
5.1	Plot summary.....	46
5.2	<i>Mama Day</i> - a characterization.....	48
5.3	<i>Mama Day's</i> root doctoring - the case of Bernice Duvall.....	49
5.4	<i>Mama Day's</i> hoodoo - Ruby's case.....	51
5.5	<i>Mama Day's</i> sixth sense - bridging the time.....	53
6	Rudolph Fisher's <i>The Conjure-Man Dies. A Mystery Tale of Dark Harlem</i>	57
6.1	Plot Summary	57
6.2	Exploring the conjure-man - who is he and how does he work?.....	60
6.3	The development of the conjure-man in the literature of the 20th century	62
6.4	How does Fisher's <i>The Conjure-Man Dies</i> fit into the works of Naylor and Morrison?.....	65
7	Conclusion.....	68
	Bibliography.....	71

1 Introduction

Having a relatively young literary tradition, African American writers, nonetheless, have access to a cornucopia filled with various influences. Be it ancient African mythology and spirituality or the adoption of white religious oratorical and imagist communication. The use of already existing texts and themes to establish a new meaning and understanding is called "signifying". Henry Louis Gates uses this term in his basic work *The Signifying Monkey*, also various other scholars of the African American Literary tradition refer to the incorporation of sources into a literary text as 'signifying'. As a narrative form, it is essential to every text written by an African American author. Since I want to focus this work on African mythological figures, the influence of Western religion and culture on those figures and their utilization as a means of revealing an ongoing struggle for identity, equality and freedom in the African American culture, I have chosen three rather outstanding and quite exemplary works showing the binary -African and American - influences on the characters depicted in the respective texts. I chose Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby*, Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* and Rudolph Fisher's highly interesting black detective novel *A Conjure Man Dies*. I understand the latter as situated at the beginning of a still ongoing process of finding a place as an African American in the white American society, a place in which it is possible to exist as a human being that unites two cultures in one person.

To establish a logical development from African spirituality to the religious education of the slaves in the United States and its consequences, I start this paper with a general overview of the spiritual foundation of the African slave and the changes it was subjected to by centuries of white supremacist influence. Beginning at the times of slavery, the use of the white suppressor's religion was a means to re-establish the Africans' humanity denied to them as a means of justifying slavery. This re-establishing process extended into the twentieth century, when African American scholars, mainly during the Harlem Renaissance, propagated a return to the African roots in order to establish a self-contained image of the African American population - an image that would set apart the white racist view of the content slave from the self-perception of the angry black. These two viewpoints are united in the person of the African American and, thus, establish the African American text as an evidence for a deeply uprooted people and its ongoing struggle for finding an equilibrium in a, still, hostile and prejudiced world. The search for this balance and the mixing of traditional African features, such as orality and spirituality, with white Euro- and Americentric traits creates an

air of conflict that makes African American Literature the more fascinating. The double-consciousness expressed in the texts I chose and the urge for merging two contrasting cultures into one of equality and freedom is what interests me the most.

Having established a basic point of operation by giving a general overview over the development of the double-conscious African American, chapter three will focus on the main mythological figure that survived not only the Middle Passage, but also the hardships of slavery, and, finally, has worked its way into the minds and hearts of the twentieth century's African Americans. Although he underwent a change of name and appearance and he was split up in various different new characters, Esu - Elegbara remains the center of every story handed down from one generation to the next. On his journey from Africa to the United States, he took on various looks and names, but in his basic character traits he remained the same. His successors in the New World were, amongst others, the clever slave John, B'rer Rabbit and his animal friends and, in the world of the mysterious and spiritual, the hoodoo priests of New Orleans who incorporated the bridging function of Esu. I will introduce the stories of B'rer Rabbit and the hoodoo priests as depicted by Zora Neale Hurston and Richard M. Dorson and establish the shared features with their ur-father Esu-Elegbara, before I analyze in chapters four, five and six the respective works' usage of the myths depicted in chapter three.

Among numerous articles on intertextuality and African-based myths used in the chosen books, my work is based on two main critical works, namely Henry Louis Gates' fundamental book *The Signifying Monkey* and Tuire Valkeakari's recently published study *Religious Idiom and the African American Novel*. The former, I will use as a means to illustrate the main Africanistic influences on the way myths and historical facts are handed on orally. The latter, however, will enhance the topic of the influence the dominant white religion exercised on the African mindset and how it was incorporated on their own terms. For establishing a basis for my theory of Esu-Elegbara being still tangible in African American Literature, I use Zora Neale Hurston's dated, but still important, semi-anthropological collection *Mules and Men*, and Richard M. Dorson's folktale collection *American Negro Folktales*. Based on these two works, I am exploring whether the trickster figures depicted in those collections have evolved by their constant use in contemporary African American literature in order to illustrate the progress on double-consciousness and identity-struggle .

Not only do I intend to show a development in the characteristics of the trickster figures analyzed in this work, I also wish to establish a connection between B'rer Rabbit and

the hoodoo priests and their ur-father Esu-Elegbara, which has not yet been done explicitly in the corresponding critical literature supporting my thesis.

2 General Historical Background

Is the Negro only an American and nothing else? With no values and culture to guard and protect? If he is not, what are the sources of the authenticity, authority, and agency of black American culture and character? To what degree are they a product of Africa? Of American racism? Of language? Of poverty or economic marginality? Of the will of the black? (Bell:2004:60).

Bernard Bell asks the fundamental question of the influences on Black culture in the United States and how much of this influence was brought over from Africa to be integrated into the newly developed African American community.

African American culture, as well as literature, is strongly influenced by what their ancestors brought with them as slaves over two hundred years ago. It is, thus, amazing, how much has survived the Middle Passage and, although it took on new forms, was handed down from one generation to the next, either orally or literally. This process of telling and re-telling the stories of the ancestors forms the foundation for all texts written in the African American literary tradition. The younger generations of black writers use even more ancestral influences than did their forefathers during the era of Abolition and Reconstruction. Current authors use the 'old stories' to lay open and evaluate the development of African American life and culture over the past two decades. Although various African cultures were fused together during the times of slavery, all these various people drew their strength, faith and hope from those African cultures that remained basically unaffected by the dominating white culture (cf. Bell:4).

In the early times of white anthropological studies beginning to investigate the 'black individual', scholars such as Melville J. Herskovits and Franz Boas explored how the African people were integrating themselves into their new, white surroundings. Bell summarizes in *The Afro-American Novel and its Traditions* Herskovits' claim of the African being enclosed in a particular way of thinking, as follows:

black Americans [are] a socially disorganized people without a past. [...] through the process of retention (the continuity of some African interpretations of phenomena), reinterpretation (the interpretation of white cultural patterns according to African principles) and syncretism (the amalgamation of African and American cultural patterns and sign systems) the African heritage - i.e. the culture of African peoples south of the Sahara, especially the Yoruba and Dahomeans - was a continuing force in black American life. (Bell:1987:11)

Bell calls this process "secondary acculturation" (9), for early anthropologists, however, it was this maintaining of African cultural patterns, especially the blacks' accentuation of orality that was seen as the proof of an innate inferiority of the 'black individual', and, thus, a justification for slavery, exploitation and bondage. Recounting creational myths and historical facts orally, as it is known today, plays an immensely important role in the cultural exchange and adaptation of the African American culture.

2.1 The oral tradition of Africa

Since African slaves were forbidden "by custom and law" (Bell:2004:72) to be taught how to read and write, the African Americans were, basically, forced to further rely on their oral traditions. As Bell cites Richard M. Dorson, "the Negro maintained a fully-blown storytelling tradition. [...] remaining a largely oral, self-contained society with its own unwritten history and literature" (72-73). The main reason for the slaves' prohibition of access to the educational system was the white supremacists' fear of uprising and the loss of the superiority of the white race, since writing counted as "the chief mode of acculturation in Euro-American society" (72). African American literature is, therefore, primarily affected by the African myth of the "talking book or text", as Henry Louis Gates calls it in his book *The Signifying Monkey* (1988). According to this critical examination, African cultures have not developed a real writing system, as compared to Euro-American cultures. The elders rather depended on the spoken word in order to hand over the traditions of their cultures to the next generations. In their way of seeing the world, the spoken word had a greater value than the written word. They, in fact, saw the latter as inferior to telling stories. "[...] In the morning all the Whitemen used to come to Ela [the son of the King of the Air] to learn how to read and write, and in the evening, his African children, the babalawo, gathered around him to memorize the Ifa verses and learn divination[...]" (Gates:1988:13).

The tradition of storytelling, thus, plays an important role in analyzing African American literary works. Since "oral narratives are an important means of maintaining the continuity and stability of traditional African cultures" (Bell:2004:73), it is just reasonable to put an emphasis on the tradition of "Talking Books or Texts". For anthropologists, this passing on of legends, myths, and folktales bears four fundamental functions: first, to transmit knowledge, experience and morals to the following generations; second, to pass on the adaptation to certain social norms; third, to come to terms with social institutions and religious beliefs; and fourth, to enforce the mental ability to recover from outside social pressures and bondages (as it was the case during slavery) (cf. Bell:73). Hence, orality can be

found in various African American literary works, beginning with the early slave-narratives and autobiographies of former slaves such as Frederick Douglas or James Weldon Johnson, continuing with authors such as Jean Toomer, W.E.B. DuBois, Rudolph Fisher and Zora Neale Hurston in the beginning of the 20th century and, finally, arriving at best-selling writers such as Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, Gloria Naylor or Toni Morrison in the second half of the twentieth and the very beginning of the twenty first century.

The oral tradition of the West African tribes, that were relocated from their homes to a new World was the "fertile soil and roots for an indigenous written literature" (74). There is, however, a fundamental difference between folktales narrated for entertainment or education and divine or "sacred narratives" (74), which were used by West African tribes, such as the Yoruba and Fon, to explain given realities of power relations and existential questions. Esu-Elegbara, the divine interpreter, for one, played an important role in those sacred narratives. He counts as the most important divine figure the Africans took with them on their forced journey over the Atlantic to the New World. He survived the hardships of the Middle Passage, slavery, various wars, Reconstruction, Harlem Renaissance and postmodernism to emerge continuously in African American literature as a signpost for the dual roads African Americans are forced to walk on. Based on two hundred years of suppression, slavery and the struggle for independence and humanity, this dual road is still the starting point for every American of African descent to question the given situation of inequality, double-consciousness and up-rootedness. It was not folklore in the meaning of European or American fairy tales or folkloristic mythologies that led to the development of a written art form in the African American culture, but "the dialectic influence of the oral and literary traditions in society struggling for independence and industrialization that probably inspired them [West Africans] to draw on their traditional narratives, proverbs, songs, and rituals for themes, structure, and style" (ibid). This, basically, assumes that African American storytelling consists not only of traditional African ways of storytelling (which functioned mostly as psychological relief and retreat in times of slavery), but were also mixed profoundly with existing American narrative traditions, such as the short story or the novel. This mixture provides a feeling of dichotomy, of a duality of influences. Furthermore, it can be seen as the basis for DuBoisian "double-consciousness". This simply means that intertextuality is the fundamental issue in African American literature, not only during the last two centuries but from the very beginning of blacks writing texts for blacks. Furthermore, it has to be added that black authors do not only signify on or relate to texts of fellow black authors. Instead, they incorporate ideas and themes from all the literature every written in order to draw

connections to their own perspectives on the life they lead in the United States. This explains, for instance, why Gloria Naylor used Shakespearean plots and characters in her literature to signify upon the tragedies her protagonists have to come to terms with (i.e. Ophelia in *Mama Day*).

To understand the oral dominance in African cultures better, it is helpful to take a quick look at Ifa, the sign-system forming the main source of reference for numerous African cultural tribes, such as the Yoruba and Fon. Ifa, which is comparable to the Christian Bible, contains all the 'texts' concerning the Yoruba; their creational myths, their Gods and sacrifices, the relationship between heaven and earth and eternal life. Ifa, however, consists more of symbols than actual letters and words, which makes the 'texts' collected in it oral, rather than textual. This, furthermore, is the main distinctive feature between Ifa and the Holy Bible. As a system, Ifa works on a basis of esoteric fortune telling, called geomancy, and exegesis (i.e. the critical explanation or interpretation of a religious text). The system itself consists of sixteen palm nuts that are tossed on the ground and the thus created images are read and translated by Esu - for Ifa cannot speak to anyone else but the Gods. For the communication with mortals, it can only use a divination tray on which he inscribes the image conveying the message of the Gods. These images symbolize the word of the gods and they are translated and interpreted by Esu.

Among the numerous myths concerning the importance of orality in African cultures, Henry Luis Gates picked out one of the numerous existing creational tales as an illustrating example for the importance of the "Talking Book or Text":

God created the races of man but created the African first. Because of his priority, the African had first election between knowledge of the arts and sciences, or writing, and all the gold in the earth. The African, because of his avarice, chose the gold; precisely because of his avarice, the African was punished by a curse: never would Africans master the fine art of reading and writing. (Gates:1988:13)

This passage does not only convey an understanding for the development of an oral tradition. Read against the context of slavery, this myth presents another possible point of view. Since the white plantation owner saw the African slaves as inferior, savage and uneducated, and consequently, inhuman, this myth could be interpreted as a justification for suppression and slavery. This, in turn, justified the suppressive behavior against the black population and led to black scholars urging for admission to higher education for the black population as a means to overcome racism, injustice and inequality. W.E.B. DuBois propagated such an access to

higher education in his manifesto *The Souls of Black Folks*, urging for the "talented tenth" to be in charge of the development of the African American race from a status of an animalistic being to the acknowledgement of the black's humanity.

For innate Africans, however, orality is not inferior to the Euro-American system of white storytelling, since they conceive the oral transmission of history and tradition equal to the Western academic custom of conveying history in written form. This standpoint existed for centuries and, hence, still plays an important role in African American communal life.

Additionally, the significance of storytelling can be traced in almost every biography of African American writers. Toni Morrison and Gloria Naylor both come from families with a rich story-telling background. For analyzing the novels of both authors it is important to remember the familiar traditions of passing on myths orally as both have worked this into their respective literary works. Naylor, as well as Morrison, is the child of Southern African Americans who moved to the economically promising North and took their families' stories with them. In Morrison's case, her father's ghost stories influenced her writing the most. Naylor's family retold the stories of the Sea Islands off the coast of Georgia and South Carolina, which influenced her in writing *Mama Day*.

The incorporation of different stories into the respective novels shows the strong tendency of African American authors to use intertextual references to signify upon various stories, themes and ideas. The following section will focus on the processes of integrating external textual sources in the literary works of African American authors.

2.2 Intertextuality and its importance for African American literature

In the beginnings of black narrative literature, the wish to establish a picture of black literary characters apart from the "white visions of black characters" (Bell:84) played an important role. This can be observed in stories such as Melville's "Benito Cereno", or in Beecher Stowe's famous *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Black characters in white literature were either God-fearing, humble and loyal to their master, or they were uneducated, simple-minded and superstitious child-like beings. In order to create black characters distinctive from this white perspective and to establish a positive, human picture of the black American, early black novelists such as Pauline Hopkins, drew on contemporary literature, white and black, "mainly abolitionist literature, the Bible, and popular fiction" (Bell:2004:85), to enhance a more correspondent picture of the African American population as human and intelligent beings. Faculties, that have been denied them by their white owners during slavery.

Concerning abolitionist fiction as a source, it is important to stress the original oral development of escape tales that developed into a written form gradually. Abolitionist literature, in the beginning mainly written by whites, comprised fundamental stylistic guidelines for black writers concerning "formal diction, rhythmic cadences, balanced syntax, stark metaphors, and elevated tone" and those provided, sequently, "the stylistic blend of matter-of-factness and sentimentality" (ibid). Thus, the developing African-American slave- and emancipatory narrative was used as a tool to blend over oral and written traditions of both worlds and to establish a basic understanding of the African mind in the white readership. Consequently, the dominating picture of the savage, uneducated, black beast was to be replaced by the image of the African American as capable of the same academic accomplishments as the white ruling classes.

In addition to Abolitionist literature, Christian humility and virtue played an important role in the autobiographies of freed slaves and formed the fundamental themes for all following narrative forms, including an "indomitable will to be free, unshakeable faith in the justice of their cause, extraordinary genius, and irrepressible bravery" (87). Since African slaves were taught Christian faith by white missionaries, they integrated the prevalent religious tradition into their own belief system in order to be able to take part in the academic exchange in the United States. The following chapter will discuss the influence of Christianity on the African American mind set in more detail.

African American literary tradition, moreover, uses the white literary topoi of parody, sarcasm, pastiche and melodrama to establish an independent literary form (cf. Gates). 19th century Northern American satirical commenting on politics was used to point out the blacks' own ironic comments on American politics of segregation, religion and racism (cf. Bell). The most frequently used forms were "caricature and burlesque [...] emphasiz[ing] the common man, oral tale, colloquial speech, local mores, and regional character types" (89). Besides parody, African American novelists also used melodrama as a vehicle for illustrating the problems of the black population concerning their status as intelligent human beings. Melodrama, as it was used in white literary tradition, was basically concerned with problematics, such as. love affairs and the struggle of legalizing them, interracial connections and piety. This made it possible for black authors to voice such problems as white men having affairs with black women, or light-skinned blacks passing for white. The aim was to achieve an open discussion of these topics. Furthermore, the influences of white literary instruments was used by African American authors to show optimism for the future in times where the

"bleakness of today" (90) was overwhelming and to establish the image of the intelligent black in the minds of the white readership.

2.3 The influence of Christianity on African American literature

Not only white literary instruments, such as melodrama, are a source of inspiration for many African American authors. Another frequently used topic in the respective literary genre is the Judeo-Christian religion and its belief system, which influenced the African slaves from the very beginning of their suffering in the New World. The black slaves saw similarities of their suffering in the hardships of the Jewish people being cast out of their homeland and trying to find a new place to stay. Since African slaves were surrounded by an over-dominant white culture, they began to weave Christianity into their own spiritual beliefs and recreated Christian theology in their own understanding.

The first encounter of Africans with white Christianity took place in the early years of slavery. It became intensified, however, by plantation owners deciding to have their heathen slaves religiously educated. They sent for missionaries to teach the Christian faith in redemption, humility, justice and, ironically, freedom to the field workers. The basic idea behind this attempt of religiously educating the heathen black man was the Puritan belief in being God's chosen people and, thus, being responsible for restoring the enlightened realm of God's paradisiac world to the devilish pageanism. The Africans were, however, quite surprised by the Puritan way of splitting the world into two spheres. They were astonished by the mode of dividing the world into heaven and hell because they saw the world quite differently compared to the Puritans. Tuire Valkeakari states in her book *Religious Idiom and the African American Novel, 1952-1998* that

traditional African cosmologies, rather, viewed the world as a single sphere, inhabited by a complex hierarchy of beings, things, and forces - visible and invisible, benevolent and harmful, powerless and powerful. In interpreting the relationship between the secular and the sacred, today's African Americans are heirs to two hermeneutic legacies - the European-derived, modern separation of the two spheres [...] and the Africanist tradition of holistic perception [...]. (2007:6)

This white way of seeing the world divided into two spheres caused a doubleness in the mind of the African slave, by which African Americans are still highly influenced. Since slaves were seen as heathens and animalistic, they were denied the status of human beings. This act of denying them their humanity and degrading them to animals was the fundamental white justification for black slavery. According to the Bible, pagans had to be educated religiously

to be allowed to enter the heavenly kingdom. Otherwise, these people were seen as inhuman, wild and ruled by their animalistic instincts (cf. the people of Egypt prayed to a golden lamb while Moses was handed the ten commandments on Mount Sinai). Basically, this explanation would have been irrevocable, had not some of the Puritan plantation owners decided to Christianize their slaves. The continuing education of the slaves led to them questioning the morals of the master and of the missionaries. Beginning to understand what Christianity really meant, the black population realized that the Puritan slave holders operated on the basis of two separated truths - they applied one truth to themselves, preaching piety, humbleness and equality before God, and the other truth they applied to their slaves, treating them without pity, respect or equality, but as if they were animals. This dichotomy led to the splitting of the African mind into two spheres, which, inevitably, led to their belief in the rightfulness of this separation and left the African slaves with the wish to become white in order to end this dichotomy and unite as one people equal before God. In the following decades, the African Americans incorporated the anti-black racist view and longed to be white or at least equal to the white suppressors in the assumption they would finally achieve equality then. As W.E.B. DuBois called it in his doctrinal work *The Souls of Black Folk* in the early twentieth century, the African American lived behind a veil, he lived a life of double-consciousness. Through assimilation, slaves tried to achieve equality and freedom. Nevertheless, generations after this dark chapter in American history, the African American community is still struggling with the same dichotomy their forefathers had to fight with. They are still trying to achieve an identity of their own, to combine their African self with their new American self. It is exactly this struggle that forms the major topic of African American literature and it is the wish for ending the doubleness that black authors are trying to lay open through their works.

In the early literature of slave narratives, numerous black authors realized, and explicitly mentioned as well, the dichotomy of their way of comprehending the Christian religion. They clearly separated the "real Christian faith" they practiced from the wicked, twisted and deprived form of Christianity the white population exercised. This revelation can be witnessed in Frederick Douglass' "The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass", where he asserted that there was a profound difference between "the pure, peaceable, and impartial Christianity of Christ [and] the corrupt, slaveholding, women-whipping, cradle-plundering, partial and hypocritical Christianity of this land" (in Valkeakari:2007:22). In their attempt to create an assimilated cultural sphere within the new surroundings, African slaves selected the tragic history of the Jews as equivalent to their own sufferings, and as a beacon of hope, since the Jews were able to find their way back to the Promised Land under the leadership of the

Messianic figure of Moses. Based on the Jewish experience, African American authors frequently used the image of a Messiah coming to Earth to rescue the suppressed. Bell calls this the "messianic Leitmotif" (2004:87), and it occurs in the three works chosen for this paper, as well. In *The Conjure-Man Dies* it is Frimbo himself, returning from the Dead but nonetheless having to die in the end, in Morrison's *Tar Baby*, it is Son, who comes to the Isle des Chevaliers to rescue Jadine from her odyssey in the white man's world, but fails, and in Naylor's *Mama Day*, it is George, who sacrifices himself in order to save Ophelia from an almost certain death.

Additionally, Christianity was a means to bear slavery and bondage, and, moreover, provided the black community with a "language to articulate this religious sentiment and [...] to express their human agency and subjectivity, their secular experience of exile and captivity, and this longing for political freedom" (Valkeakari:2007:20).

African American literary tradition is mainly based on the cultural transfer of African tribal traditions, such as the culture of the Fon or Yoruba, to the Western world. The few natives that survived the transition from Africa to the New World, reconstructed their belief systems in the United States, trying to hold up the roots of their ancestors in their new home country as an anchor of faith in the dominating white world. The slaves not only recalled their music, they remembered their religious festivities and gods, as well as their cultural storytelling, and mixed them up with the new Western culture they were surrounded by. Thus, they developed a collective cultural mind, a blend of old traditions and new influences. Although the external forces exercised on the slaves' traditions were immense, the African Americans managed to keep up the connections to their forefathers and the culture they bore. This contributed to the survival of traditional African customs, belief systems and concepts of time, (hi)story and spirituality.

2.4 Who is Esu-Elegbara?

One major figure of the African spiritual world managed to survive the cultural transfer from the mother land to the New World and has continued to play an important role in the heads and hearts of the black population in the United States. It is the main figure of all the oral stories that were put into literary works by numerous African American authors and which is going to play an important role in the following chapters as well. This particular trope survived not only the Middle Passage, but it also merged itself into the new cultural surroundings to reappear as an essential part of the newly blended culture of African

Americanism. It is Esu-Elegbara, the divine mediator of the Yoruba culture. He is, as Henry Louis Gates claims in his work *The Signifying Monkey*, a figure that

recurs with startling frequency in black mythology in Africa, the Caribbean and South America. This figure appears in black cultures with such frequency that we can think of it as a repeated theme or topos. Indeed, this trickster topos not only seems to have survived the bumpy passage to the New World, but it appears even today in Nigeria, Benin, Brazil, Cuba, Haiti and the United States. (Gates:1988:4)

As this passage indicates, Esu underwent various acculturational processes before he arrived at the United States, where he, again, took on new forms, depending on the context he got used in. Therefore, it is remarkable that Esu, as a mythological idea, has survived so persistently through all these cultural blending processes. In one moment, he is depicted as a two-legged, monkey-ish statue in Latin America, where he is called Legba. In another, he becomes Papa LaBas, who lives in New Orleans and is the ur-father of all hoodoo priests and their mysteries in the South of the United States. This consistent process of handing down one particular topos shows the strong influence of the oral tradition of Africa. Gates defines the oral passing-on of the myth of Esu as "a sign of the disrupted wholeness of an African system of meaning and belief that black slaves recreated from memory, preserved by oral narration and improvised upon in ritual - especially in the rituals of the repeated oral narrative - and willed to their own subsequent generations, as hermetically sealed and encoded charts of cultural descent" (5).

Esu, naturally, did not remain unchanged. He took on, as already mentioned, various new forms, ideas, morals and features, which he borrowed from the respective cultures he emerged in. This exemplifies Esu's ability of changing his appearance into whatever is needed in order to enable the bearers of the African culture to survive the new environment. This is the reason why Esu became a hoodoo priest in New Orleans, a clever slave in Mississippi and the sly B'rer Rabbit on the Sea Islands of Georgia and South Carolina. (cf. Dorson and Hurston). Esu remained the symbol of hope in times where there was only despair and suffering.

Esu-Elegbara has his origin, however, in the spiritual world of the Fon and Yoruba, where he functions as a semi-god, a messenger comparable to Hermes or Cupid in the Greek and Roman mythology. Similar to his European brothers, Esu transfers messages from the Gods to the human priests and, sometimes, he transmits also requests from the mortals to the Gods. Esu is able to understand not only the language of the Gods, he can also communicate with the mortals who are seeking help. This makes him a link between two worlds and, as the

divine interpreter and translator, he wanders between the realm of the Gods and Earth. Thus, he is able to direct and re-direct the lost and the seekers. Gates describes him as "the guardian of the crossroads [...] master of that elusive, mystical barrier that separates the divine world from the profane [...]" (Gates:1988:6). Being this "guardian of the crossroads" (ibid) is exactly what remained in the stories of B'rer Rabbit or the mysteries of the hoodoo priests of New Orleans. Both give advice and directions to the seeker and the lost. The hoodoo priest wants to make the hardships of life a little easier to bear. B'rer Rabbit, however, never helps without a hidden agenda.

Concerning Esu's function as an agent between the realm of the Gods and the mortal world, there exist specific features by which he can be identified, even in the new forms he has taken on. In his appearance Esu is manifold. Various different statues present him differently. What remains unchanged, however, is the fact that Esu is depicted with either two faces or two mouths and with legs of different length or shape, which force him to limp quite heavily. This explains his need for a walking stick, which is, in some Latin American displays, covered with snakes winding around the shaft of a cane. The reason for him having legs of different length is his transitional function between two worlds. In addition to this, his two mouths or faces can be seen as a supplement of this transitional function, which represents the interpretative work he does as a messengers between the Gods and the mortals.

Furthermore, Esu already implies a tendency towards dualism in the native African mentality by his ability to connect two spheres with each other. He can let his discourse be "double-voiced" (7), which can be seen as an indicator for leading a double-conscious life in the United States, which was to become an omnipresent topic in African American literature and culture.

Since Esu seems to be the foundation for all African mythology that survived the hardships of Middle Passage and slavery, he can be seen as the black metaphor underlying all African American literary works. This makes the assumption of him being the ur-father of B'rer Rabbit and the hoodoo priests viable and leads to scholars giving him various names. Henry Louis Gates calls him "Signifying Monkey", others simply the divine interpreter. African American folktale tradition knows him by numerous other names. I will continue to refer to him as B'rer Rabbit, root doctor or conjure-man.

2.5 *Esu becomes B'rer Rabbit and a hoodoo priest*

Since the Middle Passage - the shipment of African slaves to the Americas - the surviving Africans gradually have renamed Esu by mixing their existing concepts of spirituality with the new cultures they were surrounded by. The monkey inherited Esu's role of the divine interpreter first, when the first slaves landed on the coasts of South America. There, he gained the attribute of the tree that bears life and turned into a life-bringing fertility-god-like figure. Hence, the monkey becomes the most important figure in the African community of South America. This process of replacement gets corroborated by accounts of Cuban African mythology that shows Esu bringing the Monkey and the Tree with him from Africa. Both are the bearers of African culture. Thus, Esu becomes the monkey, a South American trickster figure bearing life within him. This would pave his way to become the Signifying Monkey, once he reached the United States.

Since the slave ships halted primarily at the South American Islands to unload their human freight, it was there where the first significant change in Esu was stimulated. He gradually turned into the jigou, the monkey who bears life and who was born in the waves of the Atlantic ocean. Naturally, South America was not the final destination for Esu, and as the slave ships commenced their voyage, Esu followed them and landed with the remaining enslaved Africans on the Sea Islands off the coast of the United States. From the Sea Islands, Esu, or the monkey, made his way through the southern, slaveholding states until he re-emerged as hoodoo priest Papa LaBas in New Orleans. Although Esu took on numerous different names on his journey from Africa to the United States, all the variants of him are "tropes that serve as transferences in a system aware of the nature of language and its interpretation" (20). Hence he received the various different names on his journey through the United States. At every stop, he adopted a new set of character traits, and exchanged others with them.

Papa LaBas was not the last renaming Esu underwent. Based on the numerous different regions in which Esu settled down, he was named differently. African American folktale anthologies, such as Zora Neale Hurston's *Mules and Men* or Richard M. Dorson's *American Negro Folktales*, contain numerous different names for Esu, all of which are synonyms of Esu: the sly slave John, various hoodoo priests in New Orleans and the Southern States, the Monkey and, above all, B'rer Rabbit. He was first mentioned in the pseudo-folktales of Joel Chandler Harris' *Uncle Remus* - stories. It makes no difference, whether one looks at B'rer Rabbit, slave John or any of the hoodoo priests. They all have inherited one or

the other feature of Esu. Concerning the hoodoo priests, the ability to build a bridge between two worlds was given to them. B'rer Rabbit, however, has inherited Esu's sense of irony and sarcasm and is the most important trickster figure in the African American literary genre. The rabbit uses his slyness to gain advantage over others and to play nasty tricks on innocent people. Esu, as the ur-father, did such things as well, but not out of pure malice. Instead, he tricked people to remind them of his existence and his importance for their being able to depend on his benevolence before the Gods. The myth of the two farming friends who almost ended their friendship because of a disagreement, exemplifies his character trait excellently.

The two friends once vowed eternal friendship to one another, but they did not think about the godly interpreter. Esu decided to teach them a lesson and sewed a cap - one side white, one side black- and rode through the friends' fields. Since both of them were working on different sides, they both saw different sides of Esu's cap. Over the difference in their stories they started to quarrel and got into a severe fight. When Esu came by again and asked what was going on, the bystanders told him the story. He revealed himself as the mysterious rider and he asked them: "Do you know that he who does not put Esu first in all his doings has himself to blame if things misfire?" (Gates:1988:35). This myth strongly supports Esu's indeterminacy of interpretation and it shows that interpretation is always dependent on what the recipient is wanted to see and believe. The two friends quarreling about who is right and who is wrong are "simultaneously right and wrong. Esu's hat is neither black nor white, it is both black and white. The folly depicted here is to insist - to the point of rupture of the always fragile bond of a human institution - on one determinate meaning, itself determined by vantage point and the mode one employs to see" (ibid).

How the trope of the Signifying Monkey made its way to the United States is not clearly explicable to the modern critic. Historically, there cannot be found any real trace of Esu's passage, but culturally and literally, there are the afore mentioned variants that occur wherever African slaves were brought to. Through the tradition of storytelling, Esu, the Monkey and all his other variants were handed down from one generation to the next and thus, found their way into modern-day African American literature.

3 B'rer Rabbit and the hoodoo priests

From the late 19th century onwards, the white American public became increasingly interested in the 'Negros' stories. There used to be white anthropologists or, simply, white patrons, who collected the stories circulating in the various black communities. The most well-known example of such a black folktale collection are the stories of Uncle Remus, collected by the white journalist Joel Chandler Harris during the late 19th century. Those stories, however, remained at the surface of folk-tradition and either showed a very romantic depiction of the African as being God-fearing, superstitious and simple-minded or it supported the predominant suppressive view of the black as wild, uneducated and made to serve.

With Zora Neale Hurston's anthropological book *Mules and Men*, first published in 1936, a new dimension of African American folk stories was added. Hurston's book allowed a deeper insight into the "true inner life of the Negro", as Franz Boas, in the Preface to Hurston's work, described the book's achievement for anthropology. Hurston herself was only able to achieve this deep insight into the real tale-teller-society because she travelled alone and pretended to be a bootlegger's wife running from the law. This made her -sometimes at least - the same outcast as the tale-tellers were. On her journey through the rural South of the United States she encountered various stories about God, the sly slave John tricking his master, the stories of B'rer Rabbit and his animal friends and the hoodoo cults of New Orleans. She presented these mostly new contents in a particular un-scientific way, which won her not only laurels but also brought her rather harsh criticism by fellow anthropologists and literary critics. She narrated the stories told to her as if the reader was right in the middle of the tale-teller's audience, instead of using the academic display of scientific analysis of the folktales. *Mules and Men* was the first book about African American folklore written by an African American and published for a broad black audience. For Hurston, the book was a mission. She wanted to bring back the almost forgotten tradition of tale-telling and folklore into the focus of the African American public, since "practically nothing had been done in Negro folklore when the greatest cultural wealth of the continent was disappearing without the world ever realizing that it had ever been" (Hurston:1978:xix). The storytellers represented for Hurston the personified survival of the African culture in a time when it was more popular to deny one's African roots. Not only white supremacists intensified the popular picture of the black beast. Black authors echoed this dominant view of the world as well and

propagated a system of blending in, in order to achieve equality. Zora Neale Hurston wanted to show that African American folk tales had nothing in common with this childish, simple black slave pictured in the *Uncle Remus* stories. Rather, these stories were a complex medium of communication. Robert E. Hemenway described the myths in his 1978 added introduction to *Mules and Men* as "their school lessons, their heroic biographies, their psychic savings banks, their children's legacies. Black folk tales illustrate how an entire people adapted and survived in the new world experience" (xxii). Folk tales are used as an educational instrument for future generations. They can be compared widely to European fairy tales, having an almost equally dark background as the stories written by the Brothers Grimm. African American folktales endlessly repeat the horrors of slavery, including lynching and other methods of punishment. This constant repetition of cruelties was meant to achieve a redundancy in the shared memory of every African American, so that the cultural wealth of their forefathers, as well as their sufferings, would never be forgotten. Zora Neale Hurston herself once told a Chicago reporter that "it would be a tremendous loss to the Negro race and to America if we should lose the folklore and folk music, for the unlettered Negro has given the Negro's best contribution to America's culture" (xxvii).

On the following pages, I will establish a basic idea of the folktales used in Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby*, Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* and Rudolph Fisher's *A Conjure-Man Dies*. Furthermore, I want to produce a general knowledge of the underlying mythological figures of B'rer Rabbit and the hoodoo priests as they are used in the folktales of Zora Neale Hurston and Richard M. Dorson. In addition, I intend to show how they really correlate to Esu-Elegbara, the ur-trope whose successors are B'rer Rabbit and the hoodoo priests.

3.1 B'rer Rabbit

The rabbit is the clever fellow in African American folktales. He tricks his friends into doing things they usually would not do under any circumstances. The rabbit usually achieves his goal by playing charade. To be able to paint a full picture of this trickster figure, I am going to combine Zora Neale Hurston's collection of Rabbit-tales with Richard M. Dorson's collections of the same genre. While Hurston focuses more on the originating myth of the rabbit being a cautious animal, Dorson depicts several varieties of rabbit tales, including the tale of the tar baby. On this I will base my analysis of Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby*.

Hurston describes the rabbit as a vicious but clever animal that teases everybody who happens to cross his path. *Mules and Men* describes the origins of B'rer Rabbit's cautiousness.

Once, B'rer Rabbit flattered B'rer Dog for his singing abilities. " 'Gawan, Brer Rabbit, you makin' great 'miration at nothin'. Ah can whoop a little, but Ah really do wish ah could sing enough to suit Miss Fronie.' "Well, dat's de very point Ah' comin' out on. Ah know a way to make yo' voice sweeter." "How? Brer Rabbit, how?' [...]Ah got to see inside yo' throat first. Lemme see dat and Ah can tell you exactly what to do so you can sing more better." (118). When the dog did as he was told, the rabbit cut his tongue in two halves with a razor, not only ruining the dogs tongue, but also his chances with Miss Fronie.

Consequently, the dogs were chasing the rabbits all over the woods, until B'rer Rabbit announced "dat they want peace. So they had a convention. De rabbit took de floor and said they was tired of runnin', and dodgin' all the time, and they asted de dogs to please leave rabbits alone [...]. So the dogs put it to a vote and 'greed to leave off runnin' rabbits" (Hurstons:1978:118). To celebrate the positive outcome of the convention, B'rer Rabbit was invited to B'rer Dog's home for a feast. On the way over, however, B'rer Rabbit heard dogs howl in the distance and, being still a suspicious animal, finally did not believe in the just established truce. Therefore, the rabbit had just one thing left to do - "run every time de bush shake" (ibid:119). This is the reason why the rabbit is, first of all, always on the run and, second of all, suspicious of everything unfamiliar. Which makes it quite hard to catch him and leaves the hunter with the need for developing creative schemes in order to catch the rabbit.

To catch the cunning rabbit is a difficult task and it leads to a scheme thought up by a white farmer, to trap the sly animal. Corresponding to the multitude of tales existing for one trickster figure, the tar-baby-story has different versions as well. One version is of the white farmer building a rabbit-like puppet covered with tar, on which he hopes the cabbage-stealing rabbit will get stuck. The way of how B'rer Rabbit gets stuck to the tar baby, however, remains the same in every version. He, who never can pass by a woman without hollering at her, wants to start up a conversation with the puppet

So, Rabbit, he come down there an' seed him sitting there, say, "What you doing here?" Tar baby didn't say nothin' to him. "Speak du'n ye, I'll knock you over." Tar baby just sit there, didn't say a word. He hauled off and slapped him with one foot. When he slapped him that foot stuck to him. He says, "Better turn me loose, I got another un here," say, "I'll kick you with this, I'll kick you over." So he kicked him with that foot and that un stuck. He says, "You better turn me loose, [...] I'll hit ye, kick ye with hit, [...] I'll kick ye clear over", He kicked him with that un, and that un stuck. [...] "I got a head here, if I'll butt ye, I'll butt ye to pieces." So he butted him, and his head stuck. There he was, couldn't get loose. (Dorson:1967:76).

This is how the farmer is able to catch the rabbit and throw him into the briar patch, where the rabbit always ends up. Dorson has collected another, almost similar version of the tar baby tale. In this story, the topic repeats itself between B'rer Fox and B'rer Rabbit.

There was a rabbit and a fox. So they was having what they call a house-raisin'. An' the Rabbit was s'posed to be a doctor. And they had milk in the spring. An'd this here Rabbit, every once in a while, he'd work a little bit, and he'd holler "Whoooooooooooo." Fox said, "who is that?" "Somebody callin' me." Says, "What they want?" "Oh, I don't know, I ain't goin' to see." "Oh yes," says , "youse a doctor, you'd better go and see." So he went on down to the spring, and got in this milk, and drink some of it, come on back. And when he got back the Fox says, "who is it, what was it?" Says, "Just Started." All right, went on, worked a little bit, and directly he says, "Whoooooooooooo." "Who is it, who is that now?" "Somebody else callin' me.[...]" [...] He went on down the spring, and drink up this milk, part of it, 'bout half of it, come back. Fox says, "*What his name?*" "Half Gone." [...] So he went on down the spring [for the third time] and drink it all up, filled the jug with water. Kept on doing that till the Fox 'cided he would see what, who it was. He put him a tar baby down there. [...]Fox he come down the spring, "Mhm, I knowed I'd get ye, I knowed you was the one drinkin' up my milk." [...] After a while he took the Rabbit you know, and th'owed him over in the briar patch, and the old Rabbit kicked up his heels, said, "Ohh ho, here's where I want to be, here's where I was bred and bo'n anyhow." (ibid)

Although, there are so many different stories of B'rer Rabbit, one can easily detect an underlying motif in all of them. Not only is the rabbit a clever fellow, but his wickedness is mostly induced by finding something to eat or to drink without paying for it. His tricking people in order to acquire this, almost always brings him into trouble and ends with him being punished for it. His wickedness, the rabbit has in common with the ur-trope Esu-Elegbara, to which he adds a dash of egoism.

3.2 Mother Nature and the tradition of root doctoring

In *Mules and Men*, Zora Neale Hurston gives testimony to various cults of hoodoo which are practiced in New Orleans, the hoodoo capital of the South. Nowhere else are there more hoodoo priests, conjure-men and root doctors to be found than here. Hurston, already quite familiar with hoodoo practitioners all around the South, listened around for one of the most powerful hoodoo priestesses that have ever lived - at least people claimed her to be the most powerful of all.

I found women reading cards and doing mail order business in names and insinuations of well known factors in conjure. Nothing worth putting on paper. But they all claimed some knowledge and link with Marie Leveau. From so much of hearing the name I asked everywhere for this Leveau and everybody told me differently. [...] I carried me back across the river into the Vieux Carré. All agreed that she had lived and died in the French quarter of New Orleans. So I went there to ask. I found an oil painting of the

queen of conjure [...] and mention of her in the guide books of New Orleans[...].
(Hurstons:1978:202)

Marie Leveau was said to be a combination of root doctor and conjure woman. She was quite young when the spirits found her and told her to become a doctor. She was, in fact, the youngest in a row of hoodoo priestesses in her family and, other than her mother and grandmother before her, she became the most powerful of all. She was master of the four winds and used natural phenomena for her spells. Additionally, she was quite talented in reading people, as many hoodoo priests proved to be in Hurston's collection.

In addition to the traditional hoodoo, Marie Leveau also practiced Catholic rites and mixed her ancestral spirituality with the Judeo-Christian faith, to give full honor to Nature. Leveau, as a hoodoo priestess, was said to be able to master natural phenomena as storms, thunder and lightning and also water, which played an important role in her workings.

It is Midsummer Eve, and the Sun give special benefits then and need great honor. The special drum be played then. [...] She hold the feast of St. John's partly because she is a Catholic and partly because of hoodoo. [...] "Nobody see Marie Leveau for *nine* days before the feast. But when the great crowd of people at the feast call upon her, she would rise out of the waters of the lake with a great communion candle burning upon her head and another in each one of her hands. She walked upon the waters to the shore. [...] When the feast was over, she went back into the lake, and nobody saw her for *nine* days again. (1978:202) [emphasize added]

From her worshippers she got called Good Mother, united with Nature and the Great Spirit. She was one of those women who knew all and who could do all. She was able to perform benevolent rituals, but she was also able to put diabolic curses on people, who had harmed the innocent. In *Mules and Men*, there is recollected the story of a woman coming to Marie Leveau asking her to right a wrong done by people that ruined her reputation. To do so, Leveau cursed those people, but not only them. Also their unborn children and all their possessions, be it things dead or alive, should be afflicted. In order to do so, she addressed the Man God (similar to the God of War in the ancient Roman and Greek mythology) and the four winds to destroy those people.

" To the Man God: O great One, I have been sorely tried by my enemies and have been blasphemed and lied against. [...] O Man God, I beg that this that I ask for my enemies shall come to pass: That *the South wind* shall scorch their bodies and make them wither and shall not be tempered to them. That *the North wind* shall freeze their blood and numb their muscles and that it shall not be tempered to them. That *the West wind* shall blow away their life's breath and will not leave their hair grow, and that their finger nails shall fall off and their bones shall crumble. That *the East wind* shall make their minds grow dark, their sight shall fail and their seed dry up so that they shall not

multiply. [...] I pray that disease and death shall be forever with them and that their worldly goods shall not prosper, and that their crops shall not multiply [...] I pray that their house shall be unroofed and that the rain, the thunder and lightning shall find the innermost recesses of their home and the foundation shall crumble and the floods tear it asunder [...]. (206-207). [emphasize added]

This passage elaborates the destructive force in the universe to be male. The executing entity, however, is Nature herself, thus female. But not only can Nature conduct malevolent acts of destruction, but she also can create life and beauty through her powers and is, additionally, able to light up what has been in the dark before.

The four directions, natural phenomena, such as thunder storms, combined with the numeric cult, comparable to the Christian numeric symbolism, combined play an important role in hoodoo rituals, and Zora Neale Hurston, quite redundantly, illustrates this in her book when she describes the various initiation rituals she went through with the various root doctors and hoodoo priests, to whom she became apprentice. One of the most outstanding hoodoo priestesses was Kitty Brown. She was a root doctor and had a herbal garden of her own. She was famous for her abilities in love matters. She "liked to make marriages and put lovers together" (245). As all the other important hoodoo priestesses, Kitty Brown as well, was addressed as great Mother by her customers. A specialty of female root doctors was to be of assistance when the natural course of things proved to be too slow for some people. Fertility rites and love potions were highly valued by all hoodoo priestesses and root doctors. Hurston, for instance, learned from Kitty Brown the rituals for bringing men and women back together. She, thus, was willingly interfering with Nature in order to help people - especially women - out of their miseries. Minnie Foster is such an example. In Hurston's narration she was one of Kitty Brown's best customers, and quite anxious about losing her beloved. Therefore, she was willing to exercise every hoodoo ritual Kitty knew, to hold on to her man. But however strong the working was Kitty told her to conduct, she always returned, asking for a mightier one.

Her search for Marie Leveau, however, brought Hurston to Luke Turner, who claimed to be Leveau's nephew. He took Hurston in and initiated her to the world of hoodoo. She was such a promising apprentice, that Turner wanted her to become his successor. He told her she was his most promising student and that she would become one of the most powerful hoodoo priestess in history. Naturally, Hurston had to decline Turner's request, but the reputation she had earned while staying with him opened her up numerous doors. This led her to Father Watson, the "Frizzly Rooster". As a hoodoo priest, he mixed African traditions with Catholic

faith. He was quite powerful in cursing people and "reading" their minds and he was the most powerful conjure-man Zora Neale Hurston met on her journey through the South.

3.3 *The Conjure Man*

In the variety of hoodoo priests, there are not only those who work with nature, but there are also some who use various paraphernalia to put curses on people or to undo curses put on someone. In Zora Neale Hurston's *Mules and Men* Father Watson is such a so-called conjure-man.

Father Watson, as numerous other conjure-men and hoodoo priests, mixed traditional African spiritualism with Catholic faith. Being a former Protestant explains his having two different names: 'Reverend Father Joe Watson' alludes to his past Protestantism and the 'Frizzly Rooster' is his hoodoo name. He claimed to be chosen by God and that his powers were bestowed on him by the Almighty himself. God handed him over the keys to the heavenly kingdom, which unlock every door on Earth. Furthermore, Watson claimed to know his exact dying hour and to be in constant connection with God and the spirits.

The merging of African spiritualism and Catholic faith becomes an important feature in Southern hoodoo practices. There exist two possible reasons for this accumulation of cultural blending within the hoodoo community. For one, hoodoo priests have an innate belief in the existence of higher beings than themselves. Thus they worship the Christian God as well as their own deities. The other reason for the merging may be a purely economical one: alluding to the Christian God may attract not only the black community to seek the hoodoo priest's help and advice, but also white people may be interested in influencing their fate positively. Father Watson, definitely, had traces of both arguments united in his workings and he combined paraphernalia, such as love powders or the heavenly keys, with faith in the God(s) and his hoodoo art.

Another important feature of every successful and influential conjure-man is his appearance. The way they dress is used either to impress their customers, or to distract the attention of the help-seeking from the deception. In the case of the Frizzly Rooster, he used the way he dressed to impress as well as to inflict fear and admiration at once.

[...]Father Watson appeared in a satin garment of royal purple, belted by a gold chord. He had the figure for wearing that sort of thing and he probably knew it. [...]Before my first interview with the Frizzly Rooster was fairly begun, I could understand his great following. He had the physique of Paul Robeson with the sex appeal and hypnotic what-

ever-you-might-call-it of Rasputin. I could see that women would rise to flee from him but in mid-flight would whirl and end shivering at his feet. (Hurstons:1978:221-222)

According to Hurston's accounts, Father Watson was quite aware of his appearance and wore those garments with the confidence of an African king. His physique substantiated his composure: tall, broad-shouldered and of a dark-black skin tone. His wife, Mary, knew perfectly well what an effect her husband had on other women and she constantly planned to leave him. Yet, she never went through with her plan, since she would have needed a piece of her husband's coral stone, in which his powers resided. In order to really leave, Mary would have needed this piece to make sure he would not come after her, since he was too powerful to be challenged. Numerous conjure-men were dreaded because of their immense powers. This dread, however, was the conjure-man's main ally in his hoodoo workings. When Father Watson preached at his weekly meetings, he constantly reminded his worshippers of his great powers.

[...] Between prayers and songs he talked, setting forth his powers. He could curse anybody he wished - and make the curse stick. He could remove curses, not matter who had laid them on whom. [...] He could "read" anybody at sight. He could "read" anyone who remained out of his sight if they but stuck two fingers inside the door. He could "read" anyone, no matter how far away, if he were given their height and color. He begged to be challenged. (221)

This ensured him of a constant flow of God-fearing, believing and desperate people coming to him for help. Therefore, he always prepared certain rituals in which he could curse people, help them in matters of love or, another specialty of his, to exercise justice where the stately jurisdiction failed to work.

This latter ritual he conducted when a distressed widow came to him to help her achieve justice in the case of her husband's murder. The man who had committed the crime was, though in jail, not in real danger of ending locked up in jail. The people at the court told her that nothing would happen to her husband's murderer because he had "good white folks back of him" (226) and that he would come free within no time. Father Watson calmed the agitated woman down and told her exactly what she should do in order to make justice work on the right side of the color line.

When you want a person punished who is already indicted, write his name on a slip of paper and put it in a sugar bowl or some other deep something like that. Now get your paper and pencil and write the name; [...] you got it in the bowl. Now put in some red pepper, some black pepper, [...]. Put in one eightpenny nail, fifteen cents worth of ammonia and two door keys. You drop one key down in the bowl and you leave the

other one against the side of the bowl. Now you got your bowl set. Go to your bowl every day at twelve o'clock and turn the key that is standing against the side of the bowl. That is to keep the man locked in jail. And every time you turn the key, add a little vinegar. [...] *All it needs is for you to do it in faith.* (1978:226) [emphasize added]

This ritual illustrates how the Frizzly Rooster blended together black hoodoo and white religion. Not only did he use certain paraphernalia, such as keys or nails and spices, but he also emphasized the numeric symbolism of Christianity, mentioning twelve o'clock midday as a good hour for laying curses. Jesus Christ did rise from the dead at noon and the wrong done to him by the Jews was righted at this very hour. Above all this, he also laid an emphasis on faith and the power lying in the belief in a positive outcome.

The conjure-man, as well as the root doctor, is a bridge between two realms. He connects the realm of the powerful God, as benevolent as revengeful, and the world of the mortals needing the guidance and support of the spirits. Although the methods vary, both conjure-man and root doctor have inherited from their African forefather, Esu-Elegbara the ability to communicate, transmit and translate between these two realms. He reincarnated in these figures and entailed them with his mediating powers. This makes hoodoo priests, conjure-men, root doctors and all the other variants so important for African American communities. During the times of slavery, those specialists represented a beacon of hope in dark times and the slaves' opportunity to find justice where, otherwise, only prejudice waited for them.

Additionally to the mediating abilities, the hoodoo practitioners of the Southern United States also took on certain attributes of Esu and incorporated them into their appearance or their symbols of power. Marie Leveau, for instance, had a snake symbolizing her power bestowed by the Gods lying on her altar, whose dried skin was handed down to her nephew as a symbol of his powers. Father Watson, although he did not use the symbol of the snake to represent his powers, included the symbol of the moving serpent into the initiation ritual he performed with Zora Neale Hurston. In order to prepare the altar for the spirit, he lit eight candles from the altar and "set them in a pattern of a moving serpent" (226). This is how Esu survived throughout the centuries and can still be found in the lives of his African American children and their literature.

4 Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby*

Toni Morrison's novel, written in 1981, about a Caribbean island that is too beautiful to be true and about black people, as well as whites, who struggle with their ancestry and their future in one way or the other, is probably the most independent and the whitest novel of Morrison's ten already published works. The fact that her protagonist is a black female is not surprising, since she put an emphasis on the female struggle in the African American society in the majority of her work. What differentiates *Tar Baby* from Morrison's previous works, however, is the fact that besides the black characters struggling with the dichotomy of the inherited black and white worldviews, the white world does not only marginally touch the black, but it moves into the focus of the plot and functions as a symbol of the double-consciousness of the black protagonists.

4.1 *Plot summary*

The novel is set on the tropical island Isle des Chevaliers, which was made habitable for its white owners by African-descended Haitian labourers. The island is, partially, in the possession of Valerian Street, a white economical mogul, who sees himself as a sort of lord-protector of his employees. In his point of view, he is a benevolent philanthropist. This is the main reason for him to take the education of his butler's and cook's niece in his own hands and to provide her with a good foundation for a successful life. This intervention in Jadine Child's life builds the basis for a future tragedy, which ultimately leads to the collapse of the existing power balances in the book.

The reader gets introduced to the Isle des Chevaliers by Son Green, a vagabond, who tried to find his luck on the road. After eight years of running from the law prosecuting him for the cold-blooded murder of his cheating wife, Son ends up on a ship off the coast of the Haitian island Queen of France. Being a stowaway, he has to leave the ship in an unconventional way: he jumps off board in the middle of the night and tries to swim ashore. However, he gets caught by a current, that brings him right towards a yacht anchoring off-shore the neighboring Isle des Chevaliers. Being exhausted, he climbs aboard and hides in a cabin, where he almost meets Jadine Childs for the first time. Being on board of that yacht, Son reaches the island and, trying to find some way off it, he stumbles onto the property of Valerian Street, where he hides for several weeks. Since Son cannot simply walk into the gigantic villa, he rummages the grounds at night, when the inhabitants of L'Arbe de la Croix

are sound asleep. He empties Ondine's storage room, and steals a few bottles of the expensive Evian water. Ondine puzzles about the amounts of chocolate and water disappearing and believes that Yardman, the islander who is helping Valerian in the garden, is taking the chocolate.

Meanwhile, the story focuses on its black, female protagonist, Jadine Childs. She is a successful fashion model in Paris and the niece of Valerian's butler and cook, Sidney and Ondine. Jadine became an orphan when she was a little girl and her aunt and uncle took on the responsibility for their niece's education. Since Sydney had quite a good relationship to his employer, he asked Valerian to help them out financially in order to send Jadine to the best schools. Valerian, who always had liked Jadine, did not hesitate and, without much ado, paid for her schools.

As a grown up, Jadine enjoys the independence and the success she has achieved in Europe and she relishes the attention she receives from the white European men. In Europe, she represents the exotic black woman and she delves in the feeling of undivided attention. Her life seems to develop perfectly, until, shortly before Christmas, she encounters a tall, tar-black African woman in a yellow dress, shopping in a Parisian supermarket for eggs. Jadine, herself, wants to prepare a fancy, exotic dinner she read about in the European Vogue for her white admirers and her white fiancé. The strong and unrelenting attitude of the woman in yellow, however, shakes Jadine's fundamental attitudes towards life deeply and she flees from her engagement with Ryk to the Caribbean island where her aunt and uncle live.

After her flight to the Edenic Isle des Chevaliers, Jadine begins to relax a little and even looks forward to the fancy Christmas Dinner with Valerian, his wife Margaret and their son Michael. Just some days before Christmas Eve, Margaret, a former beauty queen, finds Son hiding at the back of her closet and she resolves into a hysterical fit. The intruder's discovery upsets the whole household. Valerian's inviting Son to stay for Christmas Dinner is just the quintessence triggering an avalanche of events, that are going to uproot not only Valerian's world but will also turn Jadine's world upside down.

Jadine, as does Valerian, sees in Son's emergence a welcome diversion in the stressful days before the holidays. It will, however, prove to be rather the quiet before the storm, because Son, partly unknowingly and partly on purpose, triggers several serious revelations during the Christmas Dinner, which break open the carefully manufactured facade of the Streetian household.

The following calamities lead to Jadine's and Son's sudden departure to New York, where they are going to stay for some months as lovers. This love affair has already started at the beach of the tropic island, with Son announcing to be in love with Jadine. First, she is annoyed, but Son's eyes "that have a lot of space around them" (Morrison:1981:80) catches her attention and interest, and she finally gives in to him. Soon after they arrive at New York, Son commences persuading Jadine to come with him to visit his home town in South Florida. At first, she always finds a new excuse for not going to Eloe. After some time, however, she finally acquiesces to the journey to the South. A bad outcome, however, hovers over the trip from the very beginning. Instead of taking the train, because Jadine does not want to sit for hours in an overloaded compartment, they come by plane and, thus, have to tramp through half the country to get to Eloe. Arriving there, Jadine encounters an old-fashioned way of living she despises and, feeling discomforted, she finds herself alone in the midst of 'her' people.

Based on the strong faith in God within the community, an unmarried couple is not allowed to sleep under the same roof. This leaves Jadine at Son's aunt Rosa's house and her rebuilt patio, which the old woman has turned into an extra room all by herself. Sleeping there, Jadine experiences a disturbing encounter with the "night women"(262), including the woman in the yellow dress, Ondine, her mother, and the women of Eloe, standing around her bed, staring at her and showing their breasts in order to emphasize her missing femaleness. This nightmare makes her run away from Son, from Eloe and from her Africanness and leaves her alone and upset in New York. When Son finally comes back, Jadine tries to get him into a college and make something out of him - to save him and herself from the night women. Her attempts, however, fail and, after Son has raped her, she leaves for Isle des Chevaliers to get her sealskin coat and return to Paris, where she will resume her life of a black woman, cut off from her roots and disappear behind the very veil she wants to escape from.

After some cooling-off period, Son decides to sacrifice his dream of independence and freedom for the woman who has turned his life upside down and follows Jadine to the Isle des Chevaliers. Instead of going there straight away, he makes a short stop at Thérèse's at Queen of France to find out whether Jadine is still on the island. Gideon tells him that Jadine has already left for Paris, accompanied by a white man, and urges Son to "*let her leave, man. Let her go*" (298). But how could he

let go the woman you had been looking for everywhere just because she was difficult?
Because she had a temper, energy, ideas of her own and fought back? Let go a woman

whose eyebrows were a study, whose face was enough to engage your attention all your life? Let go a woman who was not only a woman but a sound, all the music he had ever wanted to play, a world and a way of being in it? Let *that* go? I can't," he said, "I can't" . (298-299).

After arguing about who should row Son over to the Island, the blind Thérèse volunteers and he, in his impatience and desperation, agrees to her proposal. The trip over, though, seems longer than Son remembers it to be and he begins to feel uncomfortable sitting with the blind Thérèse in a small boat, with her "head turned landward intent on a horizon she could not possibly see even if she were not as blind as justice. Her hands on the lever were nimble, steady. The upper part of her body leaned forward straining as if to hear fish calling from the sea" (304). When she finally drops Son ashore, he finds himself at the back of the island, in the middle of the rain forest covering the hills. Thérèse leaves him behind with the blind horsemen to ride over the hilltops, becoming a part of the stories he believed in all his life. "The mist lifted and the trees stepped back a bit as if to make the way easier for a certain kind of man. Then he ran. Lickety-split. Lickety-split. Looking neither to the left nor to the right. Lickety-split. Lickety-split. Lickety-lickety-lickety-split" (306).

4.2 *The main characters in Tar Baby*

To analyze Morrison's novel with regard to the African folktales she used, the following chapter will focus on three of the main characters that are important for the tar-baby myth to work out. These three characters of importance are, first of all, Jadine Childs, who proves to be the tar baby; secondly, Son Green, the very person who embodies the traits of B'rer Rabbit; and thirdly, Valerian Street, who personifies the white farmer who created Jadine's success and thus, traps B'rer Rabbit in his white world.

4.2.1 *Jadine Childs*

She is the female protagonist in *Tar Baby*, a young, energetic and beautiful black woman on the top of her modeling career. Jadine was not always this successful and independent. Growing up as an orphan, she spent her summers with her aunt and uncle, Ondine and Sydney. Both relatives are the long-term servants of Valerian Street. This long-term employment was the main reason for Jadine being able to attend the best boarding schools. Valerian paid for everything and indebted his servants to life-long gratitude. Jadine, instead of being thankful for the sacrifices her last remaining relatives made for her, despises her aunt's and uncle's way of living. She dreams of wealth and success and freedom - everything her white patron Valerian has already achieved in his life. Walter Pereira calls

Jadine's self "a white one, constructed in part by the fear and repression of blackness" (527). This very whiteness pervades the whole novel and forms the central theme of tragedy in the story line. Not only does it influence Jadine's and Son's relationship to each other, but it also touches her aunt's and uncle's relationship to Valerian and his wife. Moreover it strengthens the Streets' view of their black subordinates as being in need of the white man's help in order to survive.

For Jadine, adapting to the white world's standards means independence, freedom and success. Three ideals she would not have achieved in a black world, she reassures herself constantly. She asserts having no other choice but to leave for Europe or she would have ended up as a teenaged mother married to "a dope king" (225). This is why she enjoys her life in Europe so much and why she loves the attention she gets from Europeans, especially from white men. To them, all Jadine represents is their dream of the exotic and the Other. She is the personified difference from everything the European knows. In white literature, the trope of the 'Other' always played an important role and was a theme constantly elaborated in various genres. With the emergence of African American Literature, the viewpoint changed from the outsider's position to the insider's experience. The protagonists, now, were directly involved in being the 'Other'. While Jadine experiences this exoticism as positive, there are other literary figures who got broken by the same. Nella Larson's tragic heroine Helga Crane, light-skinned African American and orphan, is such an example. She enjoyed the European reactions towards her too, in the beginning. After some time, however, she realized that her 'Otherness' triggers another form of anti-black racism and that exoticism is just a synonym for being the animal in the zoo. The white Europeans put Helga into the same pigeonhole as did the white Americans. For her, Europe brings nothing but pain. Jadine, as well, experiences doubts. Thus she questions her white fiancé's real intentions in wanting to marry her:

I wonder if the person he [her fiancé Ryk] wants to marry is me or a black girl? And if it isn't me he wants, but any black girl who looks like me, talks and acts like me, what will happen when he finds out that I hate ear hoops, that I don't have to straighten my hair, that Mingus puts me to sleep, that sometimes I want to get out of my skin and be only the person inside - not American - not black - just me? (48).

The critical voice within Jadine, however, is too thin to be heard and so she chooses the adopted whiteness over her innate blackness. Whether she was successful with her choice, the reader never learns.

Literary critics, as well as literature itself, give numerous different reasons for black American women turning to Europe in order to achieve either a status of equality or simply find freedom from the question of color and heritage. Ann Rayson, for instance, sustains the theme of the Other in her article "Foreign Exotic or Domestic Drudge?". She differentiates between "[...] control, power, coolness, perhaps the benevolence of the white master who treats the black woman as an exotic, as a child, a pet, and the embodiment of alluring, primitive sexuality" (1992:87). It turns out, however, that for women such as Jadine, neither America nor Europe seem to bring the fulfillment of the self she is looking for (cf. Ann Rayson). Although Jadine is intelligent, successful and beautiful, she is missing something deep inside of her. She cannot exactly extract what it is, but a yearning emerges from within her when she encounters the African woman in the yellow dress. Jadine is shopping for an exotic dinner she is cooking for all her white friends and devotees, when a tall, tar-black woman enters the supermarket, chooses three chalk-white eggs and leaves again. This woman is like a vision for Jadine, and reveals an inner loneliness inexplicable to her. "The woman had made her feel lonely in a way. Lonely and inauthentic" (48), because Jadine is searching for the only part she always tried to deny - her African ancestry. When the woman in the yellow dress spat out in front of Jadine, she realizes that she cannot find what is missing in Europe. For recovering her innate blackness, she has to travel back to where her ancestors are, she has to travel back to her aunt and uncle on the island in the Caribbean. There she shall meet her destiny.

Fleeing from an engagement she is not sure to be right, she visits Ondine and Sydney, her aunt and uncle, on the Isle des Chevaliers. There, she meets a black man deeply connected with his roots who simply will mystify her. Ann Rayson breaks the opposition of white and black men down to a simple formula: "white European men and black American men who represent respectively, wealth, position, power, and asexuality versus poverty, anti-intellectualism, and sexuality" (87). Not only the men Jadine meets in Europe fit into the first group, also Valerian, the personified whiteness in American society, is included in it. He has made a fortune with the candy factory he inherited from his uncles and, thus, was able to support the orphaned child of his long-time employees in order to establish a benevolent sign in a racist society. He allowed Jadine access to higher education and the possibility of living the white American dream and having opportunities which are usually denied to members of her race. His benevolence, however, not only costs Valerian his son Michael, but also the sensuality in his marriage.

The man Jadine meets on the Isle des Chevaliers, however, is the exact opposite of Valerian. Son Green, the vagabond who killed his wife and lives from whatever he can manage to find, is neither well-educated, or rich; nor does he have any ambitions to accomplish either. Being neither rich nor educated is nothing Son worries about. His only source of strength seems to be his connection to his roots. The idea of his small, rural, southern hometown "sustained him during his eight years of running" (94). He is the reason for Jadine to question her life goals. Simultaneously, Son turns Jadine into the tar baby, luring B'rer Rabbit into the sticky white ideals of education, wealth and freedom. She brings him into a dependency she uses as a means to turn him into something he cannot and does not ever want to become. "Stop loving your ignorance - it isn't lovable," (Morrison:1981:264) Jadine orders him. Although Son resists all her attempts of trying to change him, he, in turn, is not able to make Jadine acknowledge her color and her heritage. While he constantly shows her how little she really knows about her innate blackness and how little her high, white education really means in the world she lives in, he, ultimately, is doomed to fail in his attempts because, against all obstacle and reason, he is in love with the tar baby and is not able to free himself from her sticky grip.

The truth is that whatever you learned in those colleges that didn't include me ain't shit. What did they teach you about me? [...] because until you know about me, you don't know nothing about yourself. And you don't know anything, anything at all about your children and anything at all about your mama and your papa. You find out about *me*, you educated nitwit! (265). (Italics in the source)

As Pereira continually repeats throughout his article "Be(e)ing and Truth", Jadine thinks of herself as being white, simply because this is what she has learned all her life. Assimilate and you win. There is no need for fighting against windmills. In her opinion, she would have had three possibilities for her life to turn out, if she had remained in the United States: "[...]marry a dope king or a doctor, model, or teach art at Jackson High" (225). Europe, however, promised a fourth possibility. There would be no double-consciousness, no veil to live behind. In Europe, she envisioned a life for life's sake. Her white education paved her the way. Son, however, tries to hold her back and entangle herself in the slow, almost non-moving pace of African heritage, she is convinced. In Europe, however, her dream becomes cracks. Instead of being just black, as she imagined, in Paris she is black and, additionally, foreign. Hence, far away from being equal. Not only her choice of an exotic dinner makes the perversion of her dream of equality visible. Morrison, very cleverly, confronts her protagonist with the personified Africa. The tar-black woman in the yellow dress represents all character-traits an

black, African woman should have in Morrison's opinion. Dignity, self-awareness and pride. With the episode of the woman in the yellow dress, Morrison begins to paint a picture of black American womanhood and brings this topic into the focus of Jadine's struggle for self-fulfillment. In addition to the woman in yellow, Morrison establishes a nightmarish situation in which Jadine becomes de-feminized, hence, de-Africanized.

Although her aunt Ondine tries hard to re-establish what seems to be lost within her niece, Jadine does not want to become one of the women Ondine refers to. Although her aunt just wants her to understand her responsibilities for her ancestors, for her past, Jadine does not and, simply, does not even want to understand it this way. Jadine does not see her aunt's concerns, because she listens with her American brain, instead of her African heart. Instead of taking care of her ancestors, she goes and has the white men's babies. A "job [Y]ou have been doing [...] for two hundred years " (270). The perspective of taking care of her aunt and uncle, Jadine sees as parenting and a repayment for the care she has received by her relatives. "Now it's my turn to do it for you, that's all you're saying" (281) Although Jadine turned out to be "a successful and self-sufficient young woman", she has never learned how to be "a daughter, [...] a caring, empathetic, generous woman" (Rayson:1992:94).

Finally, *Tar Baby* makes a statement on African American womanhood and shows how important it is to have someone to hand down the stories of the ancestors to the next generations. Furthermore, as Ann Rayson points out, Jadine "sacrifices passion, [...] gives up her sensuality, possibly her authenticity, but also a repressive female role in rural Florida for a prestigious career in Paris" (1992:96).

Jadine's struggle between education and tradition is a main topic in the novel and picks up a long-term discussion, which the younger Harlem Renaissance scholars already had argued about. Major questions in *Tar Baby* include how much education can tradition survive? With how much individualism can a group live? The manner in which Jadine copes with this dichotomies is unexpected and makes the reader himself struggle between sympathy and antipathy for Morrison's heroine. Trudier Harris summarizes these double feelings towards Jadine as a strong, individualist, female character as "African American folk culture has not prepared us well for a female outlaw [...] Women who dare to assert individualist values over communal ones are summarily put in their places" (Harris in Rayson:1992:95). Jadine definitely escapes the usual picture of a woman in literature. This, however, lets her appear even the more interesting and fascinating to Son, as well as to the reader. The fascination she exerts over him leads to his giving-up his own freedom, independence and

Africanness. Moreover, it is this being unusual that makes Jadine the tar baby, who overcomes the struggling B'rer Rabbit and emerges as a new and independent fashion puppet in Paris, without dreams and without the wish for security or family.

4.2.2 *Son Green*

Son is a vagabond and as such on the run, after he killed his cheating wife, eight years ago. He managed to survive working on occasional jobs and stealing food wherever he could.

When Son sets foot on the Isle des Chevaliers at the beginning of the novel, he brings forth certain events that herald his tragic end. On this island he meets Jadine, the tar baby, on whose sticky black skin he is to remain until the end of the book. First, Jadine is not interested in him as a man at all. Since she is engaged to a rich, handsome European who can afford to make her fancy presents, she only sees Son's desolate looks. He is smelly, dirty and unshaven when he is discovered in Margaret Street's closet. Moreover, he represents everything, Jadine despises. He is uneducated, a vagabond, poor and, above all, black. Her antipathy melts away, however, when he emerges showered, combed and clean-shaved. For the first time, she notices his eyes having "a lot of space around" (80) them and his hair seems to be alive because of his curls. (cf. 81). Although her interest was awakened, she still pretends not to be interested. This makes Son want her even more and this is the first, slight, allusion to the myth of the tar baby. Son contemplates about her being on his mind but him not being on hers. "What must it be like to be on her mind, and he guessed the only way to know was to find out" (168). Thus, , he accompanies Jadine to the beach, where he confides his story and his ideals to her.

Son grew up in Eloë, a small, rural town in Florida, where, as he tells Jadine, the world seems to be upside down. In Eloë, the "white folks do that [pumping the water, hooking up the telephones]" (172). There, he was simply known as "Old Man's son until the second child was born and the first became simply Son" (247). In Eloë, nothing has changed since he was a little boy and this almost timeless state of existence has "sustained him during his eight years of running" (Rayson:1992:94). Son's hometown is his ideal of a perfect world. The inhabitants of Eloë know who they are, what they have to do to survive and, on top of all, know their color. This is the main reason for Son to bring Jadine back home with him. Rayson claims that "Son wants her [Jadine] to acknowledge her color and her folk roots in the rural South" (ibid), thus shows her how African Americans *really* live in the United States. Bringing Jadine to Eloë is Son's attempt to reconnect her to her roots and to demonstrate another way of living, without hunting for the white ideals of success and wealth. It becomes more and more

obvious throughout the novel that Jadine has moved too far away from her roots already. "She is too educated, assimilated, deracinated, or physically weak to survive black life in the rural South" (92). Her internalized whiteness and dependence on everything white becomes obvious at the failed Christmas Dinner Son was surprisingly invited to. When Son, casually, mentions the missing island workers Gideon and Thérèse, he taps at Valerian's benevolent facade and reveals an inner anti-black racism that he has hidden carefully behind his so-called principles. Thérèse and Gideon stole from 'his' apples, thus they have to be punished. The punishment was the dismissal from their employment. Instead of defending 'her people', as Son does, Jadine behaves like a nurse, helping Valerian to feel comfortable in an uncomfortable situation.

And Jadine had defended him. Poured his wine, offered him a helping of this, a dab of that and smiled when she did not have to. Soothed down any disturbance that might fluster him; quieted even the mild objections her own aunt raised, and sat next to him more alive and responsive and attentive than even his own wife was, basking in the cold light that come from one of the killers of the world. Jadine who should know better, who had been to schools and seen some of the world and who ought to know better than any of them because she had been made by them, coached by them and should know by heart the smell of their huge civilized latrines. (204)

This is the moment, when Son realizes that Jadine is a trap, set out by the white farmer to catch the rabbit stealing his valued food. However, he decides to ignore his inner voice warning him of Jadine and continues to think of himself as indestructible and strong enough to save her from the white farmer using her.

Son intends to use Eloë as a means to make Jadine realize her wrongs and experience the same source of strength that he feels in his hometown. For him, Eloë represents everything he believes in. There, he can do whatever he wants to do without the approval of a white world's educational system or society. This he wants to share with Jadine. Yet, for her, education is the key to freedom and she tries as hard as she can to convince him of her ideals. "He should go enroll in business school. [...] can go to law school. [...]". He, however, is not inclined to become a lawyer or take on anything resembling a 'white-collar-job'. "I don't want to know *their* laws; I want to know mine. [...] You think I won't do all that company shit because I don't know how? I can do anything! Anything! But I'll be goddamn if I'll do that!" (262-263,270). He believes in belonging to Eloë and in his African roots and he wants to bring Jadine back to her roots, as well. In his opinion, she belongs to Eloë, not to Paris.

Both their attempts, however, have to fail because of their contrasting standpoints. While Jadine wants to educate Son and tangles him in her net of covered suppression, Son does not

decline in pointing out her weaknesses and her missing Africanness. This struggle culminates in his raping Jadine because she is the tar baby, and as such terminating his once strong roots to his ancestry. He feels trapped by her and, alluding to the tar baby myth, he accuses her of being created by the white farmer to catch him and throw him into the briar's patch of education and uniformity. Son realizes in their last, fierce argument, that Jadine has changed him slowly but irrevocably from the very beginning. She made him unfold his inner self and, when he did so, she trampled his ideologies to pieces.

He had a special approach to everything materialistic, especially money. When he and Jadine were sitting on the beach of the Isle des Chevaliers, he explained to her his search for the "original dime" (169), the first money he had earned in Eloë. He illustrated the feelings he still connected with this first self-earned money to Jadine. To him, money was necessary to buy food and shelter, but "there's no magic in it " (170). The original dime incorporated freedom and independence. Jadine, however, could not understand his standpoint. The more money one possesses, the more freedom one can buy with it, she believed. Money, she thought, can do so much "for you, yourself and your future" (171). Son, on the other hand, did not want to be dictated by money where to go to and what to do. He wanted just "something nice and simple and personal" (170), since this was the way life had always been. Greed, however, had driven people away from their original dime and made them hunt for ideas that could not be reached. Jadine interpreted this way of seeing the world as a sign of weakness, poverty and laziness.

Stop making excuses about having anything. [...] It's not romantic. And it's not being free. It's dumb. You think you're above it, above money, the rat race and all that. But you're not above it, you're just without it. It's a prison, poverty is. Look at what its absence made you do: run, hide, steal, lie.

After spending some time with Jadine, Son is not able to clearly differentiate between his way of life and Jadine's any longer. He entangles himself ever deeper into Jadine's upside-down-way of seeing the world and he becomes more and more fascinated by her fear of life and, simultaneously, by the power she exerts over him. For a brief moment, Son himself believes in the need of being educated and successful. Thus, the tar-baby-trap, once again, does not fail to work on the clever B'r'er Rabbit. His yearning for Jadine drives him away from his original dime and this is why he has to return to the Isle des Chevaliers to realize his mistake and to become, once again, the free and independent rabbit he has been before he got stuck to the white farmer's tar baby. Thérèse, who is as blind as a person can be, is the only one who sees

behind Son's outer appearance and recognizes his true nature as a part of the mythological and spiritual world he dreamed of for so long. In the end, Son himself becomes a myth and has, finally, managed to escape the tar baby and the white farmer.

4.2.3 *Valerian Street*

Valerian is the very center around which the storyline gradually develops. He is a unique character, not only because he is the first elaborated white character in one of Toni Morrison's novels, but he, additionally, plays an important role in the lives of every single black character existing in the book. He is, for one, the employer of Sydney and Ondine, and is, thus, the safe anchor in their retirement plans. Additionally, he has paid for Jadine's education without hesitating. Moreover, Valerian lets Son invade the family's private Christmas Dinner and, in consequence, enables this unexpected guest to ruin his perfectly mended facade.

As the only boy in a line of women he was meant to inherit the family's candy company, whether he liked it or not. His uncles, leading the company when Valerian was born, even named a candy after their long awaited nephew, simply out of sentimentality. His life as a candy magnate was quite exhausting, Valerian thinks. Hence, he short-handedly buys a Caribbean island as his retirement domicile. Not only had he to live with a red-white-striped candy named Valerian's, he also had to live through a love- and childless marriage for nine years, before he went through a hateful divorce. It seemed just a turn of his luck that he met the "principle beauty of Maine", dressed in red and white to whom he ends up married. Although not accepted first by Valerian's picky family, Margaret gave birth to a son and an heir to his company's throne. However, life never turns out as planned and the alleged heir had no interest in his father's business. Instead he becomes the savior of the world, of the poor and helpless and his father had to find some strangers to take over his family's empire.

Finally, after having settled everything, Valerian allows himself to enjoy the pleasures of retirement on his Caribbean island, which has been made habitable by the hands of hundreds of African Haitian laborers.

The direction in which his life developed made Valerian the man he now is: firm, unfaltering (even stubborn at times) and uncaring of what other people think of him. His character, though, is faultless (in his opinion). "His claims to decency were human: he had never cheated anybody. Had done the better thing whenever he had a choice and sometimes when he did not. He had never been miserly or a spendthrift, and his politics were always

rational and often humane" (54). This explains his financing Jadine's academic education without hesitating. He found much more similarities with him in her than he ever could find in his own son, as he once confided in Jadine.

Not only does Valerian become the tar baby's creator because of his support, but also his interest in breeding and growing things suggests his being the white farmer in the tar baby myth. Later in the book, when things start to go out of hand, Son clearly and overtly refers to Valerian as Jadine's creator and the one to be held responsible directly for her losing her connection to the rich ancestral background of her people.

Although Valerian tries really hard to fulfill his expectations of life, in the end, he remains alone, separated from his wife and son, sleeping the "deep brandy sleep he deserved" (55), thinking just the best of himself and leading a life of ignorance, while being the neighbor of a culture so rich of spirituality and idealism that he could easily participate in.

4.3 *The Tar Baby and intertextual references*

As already mentioned in chapter two, intertextuality plays an important role in African American literature and, thus, can be found in Morrison's *Tar Baby* as well as in every other novel written by a black author. Among the most obvious intertextual references are Morrison's allusions to her own previously written novels. An outstanding connection exists between *Song of Solomon* and *Tar Baby*.

In both novels, a mythological tale, retold for centuries, forms the basic foundation of the book. While *Tar Baby* already comprises the respective folktale in its title, *Song of Solomon* develops the fundamental tale gradually throughout the book. The tale of the flying African is another highly important myth besides the story of B'rer Rabbit and his tar baby, and plays on the magical and spiritual richness of the African-descended people. According to Toni Morrison's own words, she laid an emphasis on the magical belief of the African because it "is part of [their] heritage. [...] Black people believe in magic" (quoted from Wilentz:1992:63). *Tar Baby*, as well as *Song of Solomon*, both play on the magical, especially when Jadine has her nightmarish encounter with her bare-breasted foremothers, or when Son rides with the blind horsemen over the hills of the Isle des Chevaliers.

Additionally, Morrison uses *Tar Baby* as a negative foil to *Song of Solomon*, concerning womanhood and femaleness in both novels. While in the latter there exists a woman familiar with all the important songs, sayings and tales concerning her family's history

and African ancestry, this source of history and guidance is missing completely in the former. This indicates a loss of tradition and a loss of knowledge due to an over-dominant influence of the mainstream white culture and no strong human, or other, entity to hold up the traditions. In *Song of Solomon*, this pillar of traditional African behavior is personified in Pilate, the keeper of her family's treasure and (hi)story. Son tries to be such a guiding figure in *Tar Baby*, but he is destined to fail because it should be a woman teaching women how to be an African daughter and mother. It should be Jadine, who should have inherited this wisdom. As an orphan, however, she did not have anybody to teach her the ways of the ancestors. Her aunt Ondine realizes her failure too late, thus Jadine chooses Valerian and Margaret Street as her guiding lights. Since she grew up among white people, she enjoyed an education being paid for by whites and worked as a successful model in a white world, it seems just logical to her to rather become a part of that white world than being poor and black and without any knowledge. But the chosen alienation from womanhood and ancestry reveals itself in full strength not only in her encounter with the African woman in yellow, who incorporates all the features an African should have, "stature, strength, presence" (Wilentz:1992:65), but also in the episode of the night women exposing their breasts to show their femaleness to Jadine. Although Son steps into her life, personifying B'r'er Rabbit and a strong African ancestry, he, finally, is too weak as a signpost, to redirect Jadine onto the right path of African femaleness and thus has to return to his own mythical realm.

With this, Morrison criticizes the strong racial mixing of the late twentieth century and propagates an increased return to the African roots and the tradition of storytelling as means of heritage transmission, which Morrison has experienced herself. "Morrison's writings are deeply entrenched in her own Black folk roots and the community in which she grew up. Moreover, her text is informed by her mother's stories, her tribe, and her ancestors - African and African American" (1992:61), Gay Wilentz accounts in his article "Civilizations Underneath: African Heritage as Cultural Discourse in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*".

Jadine's lack of femaleness leads to her nightmarish encounter with the bare-breasted night women. They are a group of women who play a more or less important role in Jadine's life: the woman in yellow, aunt Ondine, Rosa and even her own mother. It is a nightmare Jadine has when she stays at Eloë with Son and is faced with an old-fashioned and traditional image of womanhood and honor. She does not understand why unmarried women have to stay with women in Eloë. Since Jadine does not recognize herself as a traditional woman, she is unwilling to accept the ways of Eloë. It seems no coincidence, therefore, that the night women

appear right in that moment when Jadine and Son violate the traditions of Eloe. The women expose their breasts in order to enhance their femaleness and undermine Jadine's lack of the same. Although Jadine is asserting repeatedly that she "has breasts too" (Morrison:1981:258), the night women do not believe her.

The episodes of the woman in the yellow dress and the night women of Eloe bring about a decision, Jadine is enforcing vigorously the moment she and Son reunite in New York. She wants Son to attend a school, to learn something he can live on properly, to get a proper paid job in the adult world of New York City, and cease doing "teenager's work on occasion and pieces of a grown man's work" (227). She imagines rescuing Son from a future of poverty and a life in a "rotten and more boring [...] burnt-out place" (259) as Eloe. "All that Southern small-town country romanticism was a lie, a joke, kept secret by people who could not function elsewhere" (ibid). Jadine is, however, absolutely sure that she and Son can function perfectly together everywhere else, but in Eloe.

Above all this, she believes that Son, as well as the night women, "want[ed] her to settle for wifely competence when she could be almighty, to settle for fertility rather than originality, nurturing instead of building" (269). This feeling of being almighty and able to reach for the stars already shows her de-centeredness from her African roots and her convergence to the white American dream of the self-made-[wo]man. Additionally, this point of view paves the way for Jadine ending her innate struggle between the traditional image of being a woman and the modern way of emancipatory female self-determination by becoming a woman without "dreams of safety. No More. Perhaps that was the thing - the thing Ondine was saying. A grown woman did not need safety or its dreams. She *was* the safety she longed for" (290).

Yet, is a woman a woman when she is all by herself? What defines femaleness and womanhood? Toni Morrison employs an interesting allegory to sustain her view on this matter. She selects a specific episode of Sylvia Plath's second book of poetry, *Ariel* (1965), namely the "Bee poems", to underline her view on womanhood and "female selfhood" (Pereira:2006:527). Plath, though, uses the image of the bee hive as an illustration for anti-black racism and white supremacy, whereas Morrison establishes a maternalistic state of soldier ants in which women are superior to their male conspecifics, who are reduced to solely recreational purposes.

The queen of ants corresponds to Jadine's "quest for self", as Malin Pereira states in her critical essay on the correlation of Plath's poems and Morrison's novel. (cf. 1996:527). Jadine commences to scrutinize the self-image of her womanhood after she encountered the woman in the yellow dress. Primarily, she moved to Paris to become a woman apart from her blackness. Instead, though, she exchanged her blackness with an exoticism that did not make her more female than black. Not even her passionate love affair with Son or her financially secure engagement to Ryk lead to a more female self.

Ominously, the soldier-ants-sequence emerged right after her break-up with Son and her return to the white materialistic Ryk and, thus, enhances Jadine's struggle for femaleness even more. The ant-sequence itself is basically explaining the life- and recreational cycle of the animals in question. The fact that the whole tribe consists solely of female ants is of interest. The queen only incubates male eggs when the mating season begins and the tribe needs men in order to survive.

[...]she (the ant queen) urges a sperm from the private womb where they were placed when she had her one, first and last copulation. Once in life, this little Amazon trembled in the air waiting for a male to mount her. And when he did [...] he knew at last what his wings were for. Frenzied, he flies into the humming cloud to fight gravity and time in order to do, just once, the single thing he was born for. Then he drops dead, having emptied his sperm into his lady-love. Sperm which she keeps in a special place to use at her own discretion when there is need for another dark and singing cloud of ant folk mating in the air. Once the lady has collected the sperm, she too falls to the ground [...] she staggers to her legs and looks for a stone to rub on, cracking and shredding the wings she will never need again. [...] Bearing, eating, hunting, fighting, burying. No time for dreaming. [...] They are women and have much to do. Still it would be hard. So very hard to forget the man who fucked like a star. (291-292)

The male ants simply exist only during the mating season and they die right after the trivial act of inseminating the ant queen. This makes the social system of the ants a purely feministic one and, as Pereira points out, "a metaphor for a female escape from patriarchal colonization" (1996:528). Additionally, this means that the soldier ants are not depending on males who would turn a life upside down that "requires organization so tight and sacrifice so complete there is little need for males" (Morrison:1981:290). This leads to the assumption that Jadine, by deciding to depend on herself alone, becomes the queen of the soldier ants. She has experienced the one mating season of her life and now settles for producing female worker-ants with her white fiancé. Once in a while, however, she will think about this special experience in her life and remember that "man who fucked like a star" (292).

After all the searching for her female self, Jadine still decides to return to a purely male society and withdraw herself still further from her female ancestry, represented in Ondine's pleading with Jadine to take care of her aunt and uncle once they will be too old to work for the white farmer Valerian, and Jadine refusing her aunt this last appeal to her womanhood and female ancestry.

Another prominent intertextual reference in *Tar Baby* is the allusion to the biblical paradisiac garden Eden, represented in the *Isle des Chevaliers*. It is a paradise made by human hands - African hands - for the future white owner. The island, thus, is artificially created and every inch of habitable ground was hard-fought off Nature. This process forced nature out of the way and led to the creation of dangerous swamps and forests around the island. Jadine almost drowns in one of the tar-black mud holes in the swamps, literally becoming Son's tar-covered baby.

Creating one's own paradise is simply a matter of money, and Valerian possesses quite a fortune. He sees himself not as a conqueror of an island he has basically no right to be on. He sees himself rather as a God-like creator, who, benevolently, allows the poor native population to make some money out of minor, servants' work. Valerian's allowing the native people to come to 'his' island to work for him plays on the Edenic myth of Adam and Eve permitted by God to live in his paradisiac Garden until they steal the forbidden fruit and get expelled from paradise.

Even Valerian's residence is a reference to the Holy Bible and its tree of knowledge bearing wisdom but also certain death. *L'Arbe de la Croix* conveys an air of tragedy, as it alludes not only to the tree of knowledge and the banishment from paradise but also to the cross on which Jesus Christ died for the sins of mankind.

As pointed out already, Valerian Street functions as God-like creator and ruler of *Isle des Chevaliers*. Gideon and Thérèse embody positions similar to Adam and Eve's. Son Green features the role of the snake, luring Adam and Eve into committing the devastating sin of stealing Valerian's expensively imported apples, the fruit being another direct hint to the Edenic myth and incorporating not only the Christian belief but also Esu's devilish custom of tricking people into doing something obviously bad without considering the consequences.

4.4 *B'rer Rabbit and his quest for being free*

The story of the clever B'rer Rabbit getting caught by a straw puppet covered in tar is one of the most famous tales in African American mythology. B'rer Rabbit easily manipulates people and he manages to survive without too much of an effort to get to food and accommodation. Son corresponds to the trickster figure in his way of living and his carelessness about the fate of people crossing his path. He works when he needs to and only what he wants to do and he can easily manipulate strangers into helping him to survive.

When the reader first meets Son, he is intruding Valerian's retirement paradise, putting a fixed and calculable world upside down and, as Lauren Lepow argues in her article "Paradise Lost and Found: Dualism and Edenic Myth in Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby*" (1987), "brings out the intrinsic 'evil' in others" (370). Not only does his presence at L'Arbe de la Croix trigger various imagined plots, ranging from Margaret's fantasy of him wanting to rape her, to Ondine accusing him of thievery. He also brings on the revelation of Margaret's long hidden secret of abusing her son Michael when he was a little boy and, thus, destroys the last bit of sympathy Valerian may have had left for his wife Margaret. Son's similarity to B'rer Rabbit culminates in his relationship to Jadine and his attempt to reconnect her to her ancestral roots.

Although being a "temptation for her" (Lepow:1987:370), Jadine's deep alienation from her culture, color and womanhood is the much bigger temptation for Son. Jadine provokes Son to wish for saving her from the white suppressive men she surrounded herself with and to bring her back to her ancestral African roots. Son's memory of Eloë sustains him with a strength Jadine has never experienced and he strongly believes that, if he would bring Jadine just back to her roots, she would rediscover her innate blackness and self.

In bringing her to Eloë, however, Son destroyed his Edenic vision of his hometown. Jadine's taking photos of the people living in Eloë plainly and painfully shows Son their mediocrity and poverty and he, suddenly, becomes catapulted into Jadine's cold world of success, money and egoism, with no room for tradition or a home.

By trying to rescue his tar baby, B'rer Rabbit gets caught by the white farmer and, almost, thrown into the briar's patch. He is saved, however, right before he would sacrifice his freedom and traditional wealth for a cold and empty white man's dream. Thérèse, the only real mother-figure in the novel, is able to see right into Son's heart and knows his true self,

although she is blind,. Thérèse sets him free and thus saves him from a life with no wings to fly, just "hunting, eating, fighting, burying" (291).

4.5 How the mythological figures in Tar Baby work themselves into this world

Intertextual references, as already repeatedly mentioned in the previous chapters, play an important role in African American literature. White literary sources were mainly used to ascertain black people's humanity and mental abilities, whereas black literary sources, such as the ancestral stories retold in every family, are used to establish a sense of belonging to a community and to strengthen the African heritage of the black readership.

Authors, such as Toni Morrison, repeatedly use African-derived mythological tales to enhance the message of their works. Morrison is a true specialist when it comes to integrating and processing traditional stories into her books. She grew up in a family that passed on such stories continually and kept the African heritage alive over generations. Based on this storytelling tradition, Morrison merges the black and the white cultural world into an "inventive blend of realism and fantasy, unsparing social analysis and passionate philosophical concerns. [...] All of Morrison's characters exist in a world defined by its blackness and by the surrounding white society that both violates and denies it" (Davis:1982:323). Joyce Irene Middleton lays an emphasis on Morrison's repeated use of "oral memory and the oral culture of the African-American community and dramatiz[ation of] the cultural conflicts between oral and literate traditions" (1993:64) in her article about "Orality, Literacy, and Memory in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*". Barbara J. Wilcots asserts in her revision of Trudier Harris' *Fiction and Folklore: The Novels of Toni Morrison* that "Morrison uses inversion, subversion, and reversal as devices to decenter Euro-American world views only to replace them with African and African American folkloric paradigms. What becomes primary is the subsequent immersion in African/African American communal roots" (1992:691).

In the case of *Tar Baby*, Morrison not only picked up the white myth of Eden and transformed it into a parable on anti-black racism and white oppression, but she also converted the story of B'rer Rabbit getting caught by the tar baby into an allegory of the African American's struggle for freedom, equality and independence. Moreover, *Tar Baby* asserts a modern-day quest for female selfhood in a time when pillars of storytelling are missing in a modern family.

Additionally, Morrison sprinkles some parts of DuBoisian double-consciousness over her characters and lets them find their way beyond the veil of the white American dream

influencing uprooted African Americans, such as Jadine Childs. She struggles with being offered all the opportunities of a white world and still hearing a weak, but constant voice calling for her Africanness. Son, in contrast, seems to draw on an almost unlimited source of African myths, traditions and ideals. He, however, begins to falter the moment he encounters Jadine and he questions his unwillingness to participate in the white world surrounding him.

Both main black characters try to combine the clean, cold and manipulative white world with the rich, affectionate and welcoming black background of stories, myths and magic. Instead of merging the best features of every world together, Jadine, as well as Son, both try to eliminate the external influences within the other. This, however, inevitably leads to failure, disappointment and, ultimately, to the conclusion that the white world and the black world are not combinable. Although, both would have been perfect bearers of their culture, neither one of them is strong enough to find a balance between the past and the future. "One had a past, the other a future and each one bore the culture to save the race in his hands" (269), but neither one of them was able to achieve a consolidation of both worlds.

5 Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*

Gloria Naylor published the novel, about a small town on an off-shore island in the South of the United States in 1988 and it is the third major work of the National Book Award winning author of *The Women of Brewster Place*, *Linden Hills* and *Bailey's Café*.

In her third novel, Naylor focuses on the past and how it influences the present by means of spirituality and family history. In order to enhance the uniqueness of African Americans' comprehension of time, she sets her story on an island separated from the mainland by "the Sound" and that is neither a part of Georgia nor of South Carolina. The whole island is disconnected from mainland jurisdiction, policies and also from the mainland concept of time.

5.1 *Plot summary*

Willow Springs is a little town on an island off the coast of the United States. This in itself does not make it extraordinary. What does make it special, however, is the fact that the whole island belongs to the offspring of freed slaves. It does not understand the jurisdiction of the mainland United States and Willow Springs has remained more or less the same since 1823, when the enslaved conjure-woman Sapphira lured her owner Bascombe Wade into marrying her and freeing all his slaves and their offspring. Sapphira bore him seven sons before she left her family and the island for returning home to Africa. This was the beginning of the Day dynasty and the formation of a myth still tangible in all Willow Springs.

Over a hundred years after the tragedy of the Day family began, the whole town still knows the legend of Sapphira and Bascombe Wade. Although nobody talks about the myth of a conjure-woman able to handle lightning and thunder aloud, is it whispered though in private. The legend varies, depending on who is asked about it. One component, however, always remains the same. There is a direct descendant of the seven sons of the seven sons of Sapphira Wade living in their midst. Miranda - Mama- Day is the midwife, root doctor, psychologist and last instance of Willow Springs and she has lived on the island since she was born. Her life, however, was not quite as idyllic as one may believe. Her mother lost a child - Peace - from which she never fully recovered. After a long period of suffering, Miranda's mother committed suicide and drowned herself. This left her daughter responsible for her little sister Abigail and her father, John-Paul, who could not overcome his grief. Miranda thus had to grow up very early and became 'little Mama', who took care of her family. She was

said to be the stronger one of the two sisters and that she had "gifted hands" (Naylor:1988:88). She was needed to hold together what her father had not the strength to hold together by himself. This responsibility was to become Miranda's life companion and she did not allow herself the blessing of a family of her own.

Since she never had children of her own, Miranda takes great care of her grand niece Ophelia. Her mother, Grace, died right after she was born and thus her grandmother Abigail and her grand aunt Miranda raised the infant all alone. The two women took good care of the little, creamy skinned girl, who they first called Baby Girl, and later Cocoa.

For Ophelia Willow Springs grows too small when she is grown up and she leaves for the big city. She wanted 'to make it' on her own in New York City, without the help of her grandmother or grandaunt. Ophelia wants to achieve independence and anonymity in the metropolis, because, in Willow Springs, she would always remain Cocoa Day, Miranda's and Abigail's girl. In New York, however, she can be tough and strong and independent. Finally, though, she stays Cocoa even in the big city though, because she is "used to answering to [Cocoa]" (29). This supports Ophelia's strong sense of belonging to Willow Springs - whether she likes it or not - and of being connected to a past that allows her the knowledge "that as long as the old survives, you can keep changing as much as you want without the nightmare of waking up to a total stranger" (49).

The storyline is divided into two parts. The first part is the story of Ophelia and George. It consists of the description of their life in New York and their visit to Willow Springs as a married couple, when "Cocoa left, and he stayed" (9), after the last big storm. The second part consists of an omniscient, collective narrator recalling the events in the lives of Miranda and Abigail Day and the time of the big storm, when the old bridge connecting Willow Springs with the mainland collapsed and Cocoa almost died. It discloses the workings of Mama Day, her root doctoring, her sixth sense, and how she bridges the realm of the spiritual with the realm of reality. In addition, the story pictures Ophelia's development from ignorance to acknowledgement of her roots and to a supporting pillar of the African heritage handed down from Sapphira Wade to herself.

Mama Day also shows the development of George, from the city boy who was alienated from his (hi)story by his life's circumstances, to a believer in the spiritual world of Willow Springs. Moreover, the book illustrates how important a strong connection to one's ancestry is in order to be able to survive the hardships of modern life.

5.2 *Mama Day - a characterization*

Miranda Day is one of three main characters in the novel and represents the head of a family with a rich historical background. Miranda is the daughter of the seventh son of the seventh son of the Day family and, thus, establishes a direct connection to the founding myth of Willow Springs and the great Mother, Sapphira Wade.

Miranda took over the role of the mother in her family quite early, since her own mother was not able to take care of her children. She suffered from a severe depression after the death of her youngest child, Peace. In Miranda's memory, her mother was always sitting in a rocking chair on the verandah of the other place, rocking back and forth and twisting loose pieces of thread together, neglecting the children that were still alive. Miranda was "there for mama and child. For sister and child" (88). Adopting to the role of the care-taker, Miranda gradually became called "little Mama". As she grew older, the nickname grew with her, until she, finally, became "Mama Day" with "gifted hands" (ibid).

Taking on the responsibility for her family and all the other families in Willow Springs meant for her to abandon the wish for a family and children of her own. "Gave to everybody but myself. Caught babies till it was too late to have my own. Saw so much heartbreak, maybe I never wanted my own. Maybe I never thought about it" (89). She committed herself fully to helping people as a midwife, root doctor, psychologist and judge. Through her life long experience, Miranda became an expert in the knowledge of herbs and roots and how they function as natural medicine. She wandered through the woods of Willow Springs since she was able to walk, so that people started to believe, that "John-Paul's little girl became a spirit in the woods, [for] she'd walk through in a dry winter without snapping a single twig, disappear into a shadow of a summer cottonwood, flatten herself so close to the ground under a moss-covered rock shelf" (79) and she is still able, at the age of over eighty to "stand so quiet, she becomes a part of the tree" (81). Miranda knows, for instance, that the bark of the choke cherry tree helps against strong pain, and that ground raspberry affects the womb positively by strengthening the uterus and preparing it for pregnancy. Should Nature once fail to help, Miranda knows how to "disguise a little does of nothing but mother-wit with a lot of hocus-pocus" (97). Even the mainland physician, Dr. Smithfield, knows that Miranda is the best in what she is doing. He has learned quickly that Mama Day is the last instance in Willow Springs and that his patients go "straight to Miranda after seeing him for her yea or nay" to his prescriptions (84). Both, Dr. Smithfield and Mama Day, are working together like business partners, sometimes better, sometimes worse. "But each knew their limitations and

where to draw the line. [...] Being an outsider, he couldn't be expected to believe the other things Miranda could do. But being a good doctor, he knew another one when he saw her" (ibid). When it comes to Bernice Duvall suffering from ovarian cysts induced by fertility pills the young woman took. Miranda accuses herself of not having listened to the girl's worries and she feels jointly responsible for Bernice's illness. This is the main reason that Miranda decides to prepare the young woman for an old, traditional hoodoo fertility rite and, thus, demands Bernice's silence of what will happen at the other place.

Folks say I can do things most can't do. Whether that's true or not, I can help you if you willing to work with me as hard as your worked on that [baby's] room. [...] The hard work is just the beginning, And I ain't sure yet exactly how it will all end. But if it turns out that we gotta go to the other place together in the end, what happens there we gotta keep a secret. Not a secret for now or a secret for then - but a secret forever. Even from Ambush. (87)

As it was already stated in Hurston's *Mules and Men*, hoodoo is a private and secretive tradition and nothing to be done in public. Therefore, Miranda urges Bernice to keep the fertility rite a secret she will take to her grave. Although Mama Day claims not to know the outcome of the rite, she also mentions her profound abilities in the hoodoo tradition in order to establish a spark of hope in Bernice's mind, to prepare her for a year of hard work and secrecy.

5.3 *Mama Day's root doctoring - the case of Bernice Duvall*

Bernice Duvall is a nervous young woman, constantly fidgeting around and fumbling at her clothes and her hair. The nervousness is generated by her having problems to conceive. She feels pressed not only by her inner clock ticking loudly, but also by her bothersome mother in law, Pearl Duvall, who constantly talks down to Bernice and never ceases to mention how her son Ambush would have deserved a better woman than her.

After having saved Bernice from dying from ripped ovarian cysts, Mama Day decides to end this tragedy by helping the young woman to fulfill her biggest wish. First, she needs to make Bernice forget this constant urge of becoming pregnant and, thus, fills her time with homely duties, such as cooking, gardening or grinding coffee. Therefore, Miranda has fetched numerous old things from the other place, such as a churn to make her own butter, a coffee grinder, or a ceramic mortar and pestle. Just to "give her so much time to use that she won't have any left over at the end of the day to think about anything but a good night's sleep, nature's gonna do the rest" (96).

In order to help Bernice to cope with Pearl, Mama Day provides her with two different sets of pumpkin seeds. One set, she has colored with saffron to make them appear golden, and she tells Bernice to plant them to establish a connection between her life and her yet-to-be-born baby. The other set of seeds, Miranda has put into dewberry juice to color them black. Those, she tells Bernice, she has to plant every time Pearl comes up with something negative. It is a fake, of course, but Bernice does not need to know and she will believe in everything Mama Day will tell her. "For, the mind is a funny thing, Abigail - and a powerful thing at that. Bernice is gonna believe they are what I tell her they are - magic seeds. And the only magic is that what she believes they are, they're gonna become" (96). Miranda has her own understanding of hoodoo, as this passage illustrates. Although she knows the workings of hoodoo and she can apply them as well, Miranda understands quite well that the main basis for hoodoo is faith. Thus, the mind, Miranda tells her sister Abigail, plays a much more important role than any hoodoo ritual ever could exercise. What Father Watson has already told his clients, Miranda also propagates: have faith and good things will happen to you. It does not matter whether this faith is religiously motivated or just a deep trust in somebody's abilities. Without it, no hoodoo ritual or potion would work. Although Miranda does share numerous characteristics with hoodoo priests and root doctors mentioned in Zora Neale Hurston's collection, such as Kitty Brown or Marie Leveau, she does not see herself as a conjure-woman or a hoodoo doctor. Rather, she calls her doings giving Nature a hand wherever it is needed. Thus, she is not "changing the natural course of nothing, she couldn't if she tried. Just using what's there" (139). As an experienced midwife she knows exactly what to use to come to Nature's aid. In Bernice's case she prepares an old fertility ritual at the other place, which is meant to support Bernice becoming pregnant.

She ain't gotta be told why the dining table is covered in a white sheet and has padded boards nailed upright on one end. She strips down naked, rests her head on the embroidered pillow, and props her feet high up into the scooped top of each board. It'll be easier if she closes her eyes. [...] Nine openings. She breathes through two, hears through two, eats through one, the two below her waist and two for the life she longs to nurse. Nine openings melting into the uncountable, 'cause the touch is light, light. [...] She ain't flesh, she's a center between the thighs spreading wide to take in ... the touch of feathers. Space to space. Ancient fingers keeping each in line. The uncountable, the unthinkable, is one opening,.. Pulsing and alive - wet - the egg moves from one space to the other. A rhythm older than woman draws it in and holds it tight. (140)

Not only does the ritual incorporate the positively enhanced number nine, which plays an important role in almost every positive hoodoo ritual, it also contains old symbols of fertility, such as feathers of a hen or an egg. These symbols are as old as humanity and they are used in

heathen cultures, as the African, as well as in the allegedly higher culture of Western Christianity. The egg became a symbol of resurrection and life in the Christian Easter ritual. Naylor, therefore, not only incorporates African traditions but she also blends in Christian religion as well. This supports the assumption of African American's having incorporated Christian believe in their very own spiritual rituals.

However important Christianity has become in African American culture, in Gloria Naylor's novel, nature still plays the most important role in the lives of the people of Willow Springs. Thus, Nature can be seen as Mama Day's ally. She provides her with everything Mama Day needs for helping those who are desperate and in need. Moreover, Nature allows Miranda to defend her family against dangerous and mischievous attacks of other conjurers.

5.4 Mama Day's hoodoo - Ruby's case

Although Mama Day is a positive character, she becomes a fighter the moment someone threatens her family. This is the case when Ruby, an old, widowed woman working conjure, starts to follow Ophelia around the island out of jealousy. Mama Day becomes nervous when she observes Ruby appearing out of nowhere everywhere Junior Lee, her husband, has been. Ruby, herself, has stolen him from Francis, which led to the latter losing her sanity and trying to put a curse on her rival. In the end, Ruby, who knows the ways of black magic, put Francis into her grave and kept Junior Lee for herself.

Mama Day has followed these events and realizes that Ruby is dangerous. She becomes even more alert when Ophelia turns out to be Ruby's new object of jealousy.

One moment she wasn't there. One moment she was. The smoke clears on the silent figure, staring up at the porch from the gate. A mountain. Huge and still. But the voice could be a light breeze, whispering from its summit. "Junior Lee left with Ambush. The car stopped down here." Two small slits catch the fading light from the fire. Seems like a cat's eyes floating in the night. "They went on, Ruby." Miranda leans forward in the darkness. "Half an hour ago." [...] A whisper. "The car stopped down here." [...] Ain't no hoodoo anywhere as powerful as hate. Don't make me tangle with you, Ruby, she thinks deep into the smoke. I brought you into this world. (156-157)

This is the beginning of the climactic turn in the novel, when everything boils down to dark conjure and the faith in things mightier than man, and George becomes part of a spiritual world he did not believe in earlier.

The tragedy of Ophelia's illness commences with Ruby inviting Miranda's grand niece over to her place to apologize for Junior Lee's misbehavior at Abigail's dinner party. She

promises to braid Ophelia's hair, just like she did in the old days. The true reason for Ruby doing this, is, however, to poison Ophelia through her hair.

A straight part down the middle, north to south. The teeth of the comb dig in just short of hurting as she scratches the scalp showing through the parted hair before she dips her fingers into the round jar and massages the warm solution down its length. The second big part crosses the first, going east to west, and this time she dips her fingers into the square jar, massaging hard. North to south, east to west, round to square. [...] Ruby is still smiling as she watches Cocoa head back down the road. She caps her jars and presses the lids on tight. She then brushes a few strands from her lap into her hand and puts them in her pocket. (246-247)

It takes some time for the conjure to begin to work and the poison to set in its effect, but, finally, Ophelia gets seriously ill, without anybody realizing what has happened. Some days go by, before Miranda detects the poison in her grand niece's hair. Immediately, she knows that this was Ruby's doing and she walks up to the old lady's house and performs a hoodoo ritual similar to what Marie Leveau did in Zora Neale Hurston's account of her workings.

First she's to head north, Ruby sees her coming up the main road and goes inside and bolts her door shut. Yeah, run inside and lock your door, Miranda thinks, that's just where I want you. She stands at the gate and calls her name - Are you in there, Ruby? Well, maybe, she don't hear her. She'll get a little closer. She stands at the foot of the porch and calls her name. Are you in there, Ruby? She grips the top of that hickory stick as she gives her one more chance. Loud. Are you in there Ruby? Well, three times is all that she's required. That'll be her defense at Judgment: Lord, I called out three times. She don't say another word as she brings that cane shoulder level and slams it into the left side of the house. The wood on wood sounds like thunder. The silvery powder is thrown into the bushes. She strikes the house in the back. Powder. She strikes it on the left. Powder. She brings the cane of her head and strikes it so hard against the front door, the window panes rattle. [...] then she turns around to head south on the main road. [...] She's on her way east to Chevy's Pass [to look for Dr. Buzzard] [...] West is the last direction and Miranda feels as if she's not gonna make it [she is going to the other place]. [...Storm clouds had built up] The lightning is flashing in the clouds. She's asleep when the clouds get lower and the lightning nears the earth. It dances around that silver trailer, but it hits mostly along the edge of the forests, scarring a pine or two. It hits the bridge, though, taking out the new tarred boards and a day's worth of work. It his Ruby's twice, and the second time the house explodes. (269-273).

A major component of such a strong conjure is the use of the four directions, North, south, east and west, as a supportive power to enhance the hoodoo's force. Marie Leveau used a similar spell when righting a wrong done to the innocent (cf. chapter three). Additionally, Mama Day employs a numerical symbolism, similar to the Christian symbol of the Holy Trinity, to ensure herself a positive outcome at Judgment Day. She calls out for Ruby thrice to let her be sure of the conjure being meant for her, and finally disposes the deadly iron powder

responsible for the lightning striking thrice in Ruby's house, leading to her burning to death in her own house.

Again, Mama Day mixes traditional conjure with common knowledge of iron being a drawing power for lightning to hit earth. That makes Miranda a bridge between the sacred and the profane, the world of spirituality and the world of science.

5.5 Mama Day's sixth sense - bridging the time

The previous chapters 5.3 and 5.4 have illustrated Miranda's abilities as a hoodoo priestess and a root doctor. Another important characteristic of Mama Day is her ability to recognize what the future will bring, and Nature plays another important role in this character trait. As she tries to explain to Cocoa's husband, George, who has never had any contact with people such as Miranda, Nature can be read like a book - if the reader knows the language that is used. "Now, sea life, birds, and wood creatures, they got ways just like people. 'Cepting they live in the sky, the earth, the tides. So who better to ask about their home? You just gotta watch 'em long enough to find out what's going on" (207). This knowing the way of the animals reacting almost weeks before a change in weather is tangible for humans, enables Miranda to forecast a heavy storm before meteorologists even know about it.

They can storm-warn all they want, hurricane-watch till they're silly - she didn't have to stand by for no further bulletins. The only news that mattered started coming in a week ago; the final warnings she needed was in them snake trails she had to cross to get to the other place. Them diamondbacks and copperheads was always the last to smarten up. No, next to last; after the snakes came all them meters and graphs down at the hurricane Center. (243)

An even more mysterious illustration of Miranda's sixth sense is the instance taking place quite early in the book, when Bernice Duvall visits Mama Day to tell her about her problem to get pregnant. After the young woman has left, Miranda starts to bake a cake for her grand niece's arrival. While breaking the eggs for the dough, she looks closely at the yolk swimming in the broken egg shell:

Real careful, she breaks a fresh egg so that the yolk stays whole. Cupping the shell in her hand, she watches for a while as the bleated yellow swims in the thick mucous - not this month. She breaks another egg - nor the next. The third yolk is slipped into the sugar and butter - nor the next. She shakes her head. But she would still make up the ground raspberry for Bernice - tones the insides, strengthens the blood. (44).

It is not only the future, however, Nature is telling Mama Day. The way the wind moves the trees around the other place, where Miranda and Abigail grew up, and around Chevy's Pass, where the family's graveyard is located, discloses parts of her family's past. Mainly, Miranda receives fragments of Sapphira Wade's story in her dreams or in other subconscious ways. Although, Mama Day knows the most of her ancestor's history, the reader is the only one who knows the true story of Sapphira Wade and Willow Springs. Miranda and her fellow citizens know her as the great Mother, being

a great conjure-woman: satin black, biscuit cream, red as Georgia clay: depending upon which of us takes a mind to her. She could walk through a lightning storm without being touched; grab a bolt of lightning in the palm of her hand; us the heat of lightning to start the kindling going under her medicine pot: depending upon which of us takes a mind to her. She turned the moon into salve, the stars into a swaddling cloth, and healed the wounds of every creature walking up on tow or down on four. It ain't about right or wrong, truth or lies; it's about a slave woman who brought a whole new meaning to both them words. (3)

Miranda bears numerous traits of Sapphira in her own being. She, too, helps every wounded being and she, too, can handle lightning and thunder storms as she pleases. Miranda, however, is not the one to hand down all the wisdom and knowledge of a Day woman to the next generation. In order to make Cocoa ready for turning into what she is supposed to become, her grand aunt has to reveal the true meaning behind Sapphira's story and what the yearly ritual of Candle Walk really conveys.

Candle Walk is a special time of the year. It takes place on December, twenty second and is the Willow Springs version of Christmas. The motto of this social gathering is "Lead on with light" and the people of Willow Springs exchange homemade gifts with each other as a symbol of support. Leading back to Sapphira's flight from Willow Springs back to Africa, the motto reaches back to the nightly search of Bascombe for his missing wife. All the years prior to this, Miranda believed in the light being meant for Sapphira to find her way home. But on this December, twenty-second, she realizes the true meaning of Candle Walk.

She tries to listen under the wind. The sound of a long wool skirt passing. Then the tread of heavy leather boots, heading straight for the main road, heading on toward the east bluff over the ocean. It couldn't be Mother, she died in the Sound. Miranda's head feels like it's gonna burst. The candles, food, and slivers of ginger, lining the main road. A long wool skirt passing. Heavy leather boots. And the humming - humming of some lost and ancient song. [...] Oh, precious Jesus, the light wasn't for her - it was for him. The tombstone out by Chevy's Pass. How long did he search for her? Up and down this path. (118)

This revelation shows Miranda that all the Day women would need to overcome the sorrow of the past generations was a man who would establish an equilibrium between men and women in the Day family, between Sapphira and Bascombe, between Cocoa and George. Moreover, it shall be George to give his life for Ophelia to live and thus lead her back into the light of her African heritage. He will save the "new Day", as Missy Dehn Kubitschek calls it in her article about intertextual references between Shakespeare and Gloria Naylor (1994:80). His sacrifice brings Ophelia finally back to her roots and leads to her accepting to be the bearer of the past and the future in one person.

Miranda has worked for a long time on reconnecting her grand niece properly to the ancestral myths determining her life and subtly shown her what defines a Day woman. As it is a tradition in African /African American families, the women are the bearers of the culture, history and family knowledge and, thus, the ones' to hand the collected wisdom down to the next generations. Miranda, therefore, has taught her niece respect for Nature, her creatures and spirits. She showed Ophelia, how to silence her moves around the family plot with moss and makes Ophelia ready to receive the whispers of her ancestors "in the wind as it moved through the trees" (223) around Chevy's Pass. Miranda, in addition, advised Ophelia of how to prepare washing lotions and perfumes out of lavender and fresh balm leaves.

When Ophelia presents her grandmother and aunt with the news of her marriage, Miranda and Abigail begin to sew a double-ring quilt as a marriage present. A quilt represents the past, the present and the future and works as a symbol of luck and fertility. It is a lot of work, sewing every single circle of fabric as if they have grown around each other over time - just as a family history does. The history of the Day family, though, is quite extensive and it takes some time to weave every single bit into the quilt.

The overlapping circles start out as golds on the edge and melt into oranges, reds, blues, greens, and then back to golds for the middle of the quilt. A bit of her daddy's Sunday shirt is matched with Abigail's lace slip, the collar from Hope's graduation dress, the palm of Grace's baptismal gloves. Trunks and boxes from the other place gave up enough for twenty quilts: corduroy from her uncles, broadcloth from her great-uncles. Her needle fastens the satin rim of Peace's receiving blanket to Cocoa's baby jumper to a pocket from her own gardening apron. Gold into oranges into reds into blues ... She concentrates on the tiny stitches as the clock ticks away. The front of Mother's gingham shirtwaist - it would go right nice into the curve between these two little patches of apricot toweling, but Abigail would have a fit. Maybe she won't remember. And maybe the sun won't come up tomorrow either. I'll just use a sliver, no longer than the joint of my thumb. Put a little piece of her in here somewhere. (137)

The sisters have weaved into this quilt their complete family history, including the "front of Mother's gingham shirtwaist [...] Put a little piece of her in here somewhere" (ibid) and other tragic parts of the family's history. This quilt is not only a symbol of fertility, it is also a bridge between the times - past, present and future and, while Miranda is sewing it, she is fulfilling her function as the bridging element between the times. Similar to Esu, it is her duty to pass her knowledge on to the next generation and to connect the past, the present and the future with each other. "In place of the charts, photographs, and movies of the white world, [Gloria Naylor] posits, through the symbol of the quilt, another way of understanding reality and history that is more complex than [the white way of] simplistic reliance on empirical 'facts'" (1993:412), as Meisenhelder asserts in her article " 'The Whole Picture' in Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*".

6 Rudolph Fisher's *The Conjure-Man Dies. A Mystery Tale of Dark Harlem*

Rudolph Fisher did not only create the first African American detective novel with this book, but also demonstrated the African Americans' struggle between tradition and modernity and between faith and knowledge.

First published in 1932, *The Conjure-Man Dies* depicts life in black Harlem during the Harlem Renaissance, a cultural period in the 1920ies that reached not only intellectuals like Alain Locke, but also musicians, painters and authors. Jean Toomer, Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston and Claude McKay are just a few of the well-known literary representatives of this period.

Rudolph Fisher was the son of a clergyman and as such he had access to higher education. He enrolled at Brown University, where he earned a Bachelor degree in Arts, and continued his education at Harvard Medical School. As a physician, he practiced in Long Island and, as an intellectual and philosopher, he took part in the Harlem Renaissance, not only as an author but also as a musician. He died, much too early, at the age of 37.

The Conjure-Man Dies is not only the first African American detective novel to have a black detective, but it is also the first detective novel to have exclusively black characters in it.

6.1 Plot Summary

The novel starts with the alleged killing of the conjure-man N'Gana Frimbo. Dr. John Archer is introduced right away and it becomes clear at the beginning that he is going to play an important role in the novel. Bubber Brown calls him, who, himself, was sent by Jinx Jenkins to get a doctor. The latter being the one who had discovered the lifeless body of the conjure-man sitting in his consultation room.

Dr. Archer is a man of knowledge and intellect. Superstition has no room in his way of resolving a problem. He solves it by simply thinking it through logically, and he never loses his head or is led by superstitious 'whims', in contrast to Bubber Brown, who believes in various bad omens, such as a red moon bringing on three deaths in a row. Archer's declaring the patient's death leads to Detective Perry Dart's appearance. He is one of the first black officers of the Harlem Police to be promoted to the rank of detective.

As if the city administration had wished to leave no doubt in the public mind as to its intention in the matter, they had chosen, in him, a man who could not have been under any circumstances mistaken for aught but a Negro; or perhaps, [...] they had chosen him because his generously pigmented skin rendered him invisible in the dark [...]. (14)

Similar to Dr. Archer, Detective Dart is a man of facts. He has no illusions about the human race's ability to murder. He, consequently, does not believe in any kind of superstitious 'mumbo jumbo'. He and Dr. Archer make a perfect team that works together efficiently and smoothly. It seems to be no coincidence, therefore, that they are teaming up for a case as mysterious as the death of the conjure-man.

The group of witnesses consists of the same seven people who were the last customers of Frimbo on the night of the murder. Bubber Brown and Jinx Jenkins were mentioned already. Spider Webb, a number-runner, Doty Hicks, a drug-addict, Easley Jones, a railway porter, Martha Crouch, the landlord's wife and Mrs. Aramintha Snead, a God-fearing elderly woman wanting to stop her husband from drinking and turning to Frimbo for help complete the group of suspects. Dart and Archer interrogate every witness, resulting in the conclusion that almost everybody could be the murderer. The evidence collected by the police, however, leaves just one person to be guilty: Jinx Jenkins. His blue-rimmed handkerchief was found forced down the throat of the victim and his thumbprint was located at the shaft of the club with which Frimbo was knocked out. Right when Detective Dart intends to arrest Jenkins for possibly having committed a crime, the lights go out and come on again an instant later. There stands the corpse, in the middle of the startled suspects and the police, declaring to be Frimbo and announcing an attempted murder on his very person.

This is when the novel gets interesting. Frimbo immediately connects with Dr. Archer on an intellectual level. The physician makes it his personal goal to uncover the deceptive business practices the conjure-man applies and to convict N'Gana Frimbo of the assault on his assistant, N'Ogo. The main question, Archer tries to answer, is: If Frimbo is alive, and neither Dart nor Archer believe in a Messianic resurrection, who was killed then and why? While Frimbo and Archer are playing mental power games on each other, Bubber Brown is out in the streets of Harlem trying to figure out what really happened and how he could help his friend Jenkins out of his misery. After stumbling from one predicament into the other, he accidentally witnesses the decisive act: Frimbo burns a bundle of human parts in the furnace of the apartment building and Brown is able to retrieve a part of the skull before it falls to ashes.

Meanwhile, Dr. Archer and Frimbo are philosophizing about exchanging parts of medicine and spirituality with each other by mixing different cultures together. Frimbo relates his life story to the physician, who, in turn, tries to elaborate how the African managed to kill his assistant, retrieve the body from under the eyes of the police and hide it, just to reappear afterwards, claiming to have been in a psychic state of mind and thus not dead, but just unconscious. In his analytical mind, Archer puts together the theory of Frimbo being mentally ill. The doctor's assumption is that Frimbo has a split personality and that he executes some kind of ancient African cult, which includes the collecting of male sex glands to protect the past as well as the future. For Dr. Archer, however, there exists no higher entity than intellect and science. He is the personified enlightenment and the product of the development of the black man from emancipation, via reconstruction, towards modernism. He embodies the way from the "content slave" (black point of view after Reconstruction) and the "preindustrial man" (white point of view of the black people) up to W.E.B. DuBois and the old school of Harlem Renaissance philosophers, believing that adopting white education and intellect would bring the black race further up on the scale of social classes (cf. Gosslin:1998). The belief in intellectuality and logic is the main reason for Archer to believe in Frimbo's guilt, since this would be the logical solution to a mysterious problem.

In the end, however, it turns out that both, Archer and Dart, are completely misled by their factual and rational thinking. They have forgotten what it means to be of African descent and that there are things more important than rationality and logic. The detective and the doctor pave the way for Frimbo to lay out the true solution to the mystery and, thus, become the true detective of the story (cf. Gosslin:1998). Being in possession not only of a rational explanation of the crime, he also can support his line of thinking by his own tribe's rituals, concerning preserving the tribal history and saving the souls of the dead from purgatory by burning their remains seventy two hours after their death. The revelation of the truth, however, makes Frimbo the target of the true murderer once again. In the end, Frimbo has to die in order to reveal the true murderer, who turns out to be Stanley Crouch, alias Easley Jones. Crouch is the undertaker whose office takes up the first floor and who is Frimbo's landlord as well. His motif was simple jealousy (quite common in detective fiction) caused by the love affair of Martha, his young wife, and Frimbo. However cruel a crime such as murder is, in *The Conjure-Man Dies* it does not lead to an eternal condemnation of the delinquent. Rather, the crime is seen as a deed of common sense, of rationality and of self preservation, as Bubber Brown admits at the very end of the novel, "He jes' didn't mean to lose his wife and his life both. Couldn't blame him for that. Jes' ordinary common sense" (316).

6.2 *Exploring the conjure-man - who is he and how does he work?*

N'Gana Frimbo is a former African king who left his tribe in order to achieve a higher education at Harvard University and who works and lives as a conjure-man in black Harlem of the 1920ies. As a reader, one may believe that Frimbo is more a fraud than a real fortune teller or conjure-man, since his ways of operation are quite mysterious. He is never seen by his clients, they, in turn, only hear his voice. His "consultation room" is pitch black with only one light bulb hanging from the ceiling so that it shines directly into the client's face and leaves the rest of the room in total darkness.

The chamber was almost entirely in darkness. The walls appeared to be hung from ceiling to floor with black velvet drapes. Even the ceiling was covered, the heavy folds of cloth converging from the four corners to gather at a central point above, from which dropped a chain suspending the single strange source of light, a device which hung low over a chair behind a large desk-like table, yet left these things and indeed most of the room unlighted. [...] this mechanism focused a horizontal beam upon a second chair on the opposite side of the table. Clearly the person who used the chair beneath the odd spotlight could remain in relative darkness while the occupant of the other chair was brightly illuminated. (6)

This obvious emphasis of darkness implies not only a sense of privacy in which the act of conjure has to take place, as Zora Neale Hurston has already numerously mentioned in her book. Moreover, darkness suggests an act of hiding, of masking what is really happening behind the veil of obscurity. Hemenway, who wrote the introduction to the 1978 edition of *Mules and Men*, describes the obvious features of hoodoo as masking the true practices and meanings from the white oppressor.

The white man is always trying to know into somebody else's business. All right, I'll set something outside the door of my mind for him to play with and handle. He can read my writing but he sho' can't read my mind. I'll put this play toy in his hand, and he will seize it and go away. Then I'll say my say and sing my song. (1978:xxii)

It is quite clear that hoodoo means more than some evil-looking masks and jars, containing human specimen, put upon a mantelpiece to create an atmosphere of mysticism and terror. The practice of hoodoo implies a rich background of traditions and beliefs inherent in the descendents of the first Africans brought to the New World. A background of which N'Gana Frimbo, the African king who graduated from Harvard, seems to have plenty. Not only, as just mentioned, is Frimbo the heir to the throne of an African kingdom, he is also a living witness of tribal rituals performed on the African mother soil. His Africanistic spirituality plays an important part in *The Conjure-Man Dies*, insofar as understanding Frimbo's heritage means

understanding Frimbo's work. After the mysterious resurrection scene right after an alleged suspect is taken into custody, Frimbo confides in Dr. Archer, in whom he seems to have found an intellectual equal. "Easily and quickly they began to talk with that quick intellectual recognition which characterizes similarly reflective minds" (Gosslin:1992:214). This unfolds the personal history of Frimbo before the reader. He is the son of an African king, the ruler over "Buwango, an independent territory to the northeast of Liberia, with a population of approximately a million people" (215). Not only does this statement place Frimbo in an all-African context, it, moreover, establishes the truth of his claiming to be a king. Since Buwango seems to be a region with over a million inhabitants, Frimbo "cannot be reduced to 'tribal leader' [...]" (Gosslin:1998:613). This establishes the notion within the reader that African primitivism, as Adrienne Johnson Gosslin elaborates in her 1998 article "The World Would Do Better to Ask Why is Frimbo Sherlock Holmes?", cannot be easily applied on N'Gana Frimbo. The tension between education and being streetwise is a main theme in the book and is elaborated through the intellectual discussions between Archer and Frimbo. The alleged primitivism of Americans of African descent was also heavily discussed in the Harlem Renaissance and it was considered a mark to be erased by academic discourse and intellectual power struggle between white Americans and black Americans. Frimbo is the bridging literary figure of both worlds - he unites intellect with African tribal rituals and he stands in stark contrast to the assimilated Dr. Archer, who appears smart and logical, but who really is driven by the same intra-racial prejudices every alleged academic scholar is supposed to foster against the mysterious fellow African Americans practicing the traditional ways of Africa in modern America.

The mysteriousness of Frimbo becomes apparent when Dart and Archer search the upper story for possible evidence of the crime.

[...] But the larger of the two rear rooms was arresting enough. This was a study, fitted out in a fashion that would have warmed the heart and stirred the ambition of any student. There were two large brown-leather club chairs, each with its end table and reading lamp; a similarly upholstered divan in front of a fireplace [...] and over toward the windows at the rear, a flat-topped desk, upon which sat a bronze desk-lamp, and behind which sat a large swivel arm chair. Those parts of the wall not taken up by the fireplace and windows were solid masses of books, being fitted from the floor to the level of a tall man's head with crowded shelves. [...] The doctor was glancing along the rows of books. He noted such titles as Tankard's *Determinism and Fatalism, a Critical Contrast*, Bostwick's *The Concept of Inevitability*, Preem's *Cause and Effect*, Dessault's *The Science of History*, and Fairclough's *The Philosophical Basis of Destiny*. [...] 'This is queer. - A native African, a Harvard graduate, a student of philosophy - and a sorcerer. There's something wrong with that picture. (26-28)

For Archer, the mixture of being African, American, and well-educated is not only unusual but also unreasonable. Why should an alleged king leave his kingdom and a life of security, wealth and power, and, instead, emigrate to a country where anti-black racism is over dominant and enroll at one of the most influential universities of the country? On top of it all, he decides to live a life of a fortune teller and sorcerer in poor, black Harlem. "What is he - charlatan or prophet?" (223), Archer asks himself. To get an answer to this question, it is necessary to take a look at the whole picture.

Frimbo was born in Africa as a future king. All he could achieve there was to rule over Buwango. The perspective of being king bored Frimbo because he wanted to experience some adventure in his young life. He compares his situation of being an African with Archer being an American:

Excitement lies in the challenge of strange surroundings. To encounter life in the African brush would exhilarate you, certainly. But for the same reasons, life in a metropolis exhilarates me. The bush would be a challenge to all your resources. The city is a similar challenge to mine. (215)

This statement implies that Frimbo, while keeping his Africanness alive, adds the experience of Western culture and life to his being African and ends up with a perfect balance between both worlds. He is still in contact with the realm of spirituality important to Africans, and he is, simultaneously, enjoying the benefits of the Western world, including materialism, gambling and using education as a means of advancement over others. His luck in gambling enhances the advantage of higher education enabling Frimbo to calculate a positive outcome for the gambler.

As the perfect balance between Africa and America, spiritualism and Western enlightenment, past and present, Frimbo, however, cannot stay alive. He, finally, remains an exemplary vision of how independence for African Americans in the United States could and should look like. Thus, *The Conjure-Man Dies* becomes the basis of the subsequent literary experiments of establishing a functioning formula for reaching freedom, independence and equality

6.3 *The development of the conjure-man in the literature of the 20th century*

When reading collections of African American folk tales and mysteries, the conjure-man is one of the most frequently mentioned characters in such anthologies. Zora Neale Hurston's *Mules and Men*, as is demonstrated already in chapter three, is one of the most

substantiated anthology of folk tales existing in the canon of African American folktale collections. The book provides the reader with numerous different characters of hoodoo priests, root doctors and conjure-man. Earlier published works on this matter contain various accounts of conjure-men as well. Richard M. Dorson's *American Negro Folktales* is another interesting collection of folktales. Joel Chandler Harris' stories of Uncle Remus is the most famous and earliest collection of African American story telling.

Although Hurston's work was published a year before Fisher released his novel, the picture of the conjure-man was already a different one. While Hurston's hoodoo priests were all, more or less, rather uneducated, represented Fisher's image of the conjure-man represented the intellectual elite of African America. Hurston's display of the hoodoo priests in the Southern United States was dominated by a strong belief in the spiritual world and religion, rather than by taking part in the strife for higher education, as it was the case in the intellectual center of New York. The metropolis was in the leading position concerning the strife for higher education and the uprising of the African Americans during Harlem Renaissance. In these times, education meant a possibility to achieve equality in intellect and work. In contrast to the intellectual generation before them, including W.E.B DuBois and Booker T. Washington, the younger generation of philosophers did not want to immerse completely into American society. Rather, they tried to establish a black intellectual community based upon the African ancestry omnipresent in their lives. This is the main reason for the occurrence of this amalgamation of traditional beliefs and modern education. Fisher's *The Conjure-Man Dies* is, thus, one of the most outstanding examples of this project dominating the Harlem Renaissance. Not only is Frimbo an African king, but he has also earned a degree from one of the most influential universities of the country. He was able to mix his ancestral faith in spirituality with his knowledge of the human body, psyche and technology.

This contrasts heavily with Hurston's picture of the spiritual hoodoo priests who lead simple lives without being highly educated. Hurston's priests and doctors believe in their function as a bridge between two worlds and as connection between the past and the future. When examining Hurston's descriptions of hoodoo priests and conjure-men, it becomes obvious that the representatives of this 'trade' are strongly anchored in their position at the cross-roads of life, incorporating their ur-father Esu-Elegbara and the African roots he has handed down to his American children.

Although Fisher equipped his protagonist with the knowledge and education of an elitist academic background, he kept the fundamental bridging function of the conjure-man as the main point of contact with the African roots. This was to become a fixed point in all the African American literature of the same themes that should come after Fisher's *The Conjure-Man Dies* and leaves Frimbo as the prototypical combination of tradition and modernity, as the personified balance between Africa and America.

The mixture between old traditional beliefs and modern knowledge of the various sciences, however, has changed. Since organizations such as the NAACP or UNIA have tried to achieve equal rights for African Americans, access to universities and higher education is available without much difficulty for the majority of African Americans. This change in distinction between higher, white and lower, black education made it possible to either immerse fully into the Western culture and society altogether or to try to find a balance between those two worlds. The conjure-man as a spiritual being personifies this way, and Frimbo is the perfect symbol of it. He has found a way to intertwine the two worlds he lives in. With Frimbo as a literary figure, it has become easy to picture a way of advancement even in the oldest traditions of the African American people. No longer is hoodoo just herbs and animal paws mixed with graveyard dust and other mysterious paraphernalia, but it has become a craft of working the so-called common sense into the spiritual world surrounding the conjure-man or hoodoo priestess. Frimbo is the earliest example of this change in the hoodoo community, but it evolved until it finally fit into the character of Naylor's Miranda Day. As a root doctor she, too, stays in connection with the spirits of her ancestors, but Miranda knows about modern medicine and psychology as much as she needs to complement her natural medicine with modern academic medicine.

Therefore, it can be said that some change has taken place and, simultaneously, none at all. As Bernard Bell puts it in his book on the African American novel, "the more things change, the more they remain the same" (2004:7). For the hoodoo tradition it is important to keep a connection to the spiritual world, which seems to be out-of-date. Since its link with the past appears to be of utmost importance, its keeping up against the strong modern-day influences becomes the more actual for establishing an African American identity apart from the American majority. Therefore, it can be said that for African American people keeping their roots to Africa alive means having a future.

6.4 How does Fisher's *The Conjure-Man Dies* match the works of Naylor and Morrison?

Since Frimbo unifies tradition and modern life, he is the perfect role model for subsequent authors to refer back to. As I have already illustrated in chapters 4 and 5, the main topic in both novels, Morrison's *Tar Baby* as well as Naylor's *Mama Day*, is the question of how to find the right balance between African heritage and modern Western life. According to Gosslin, the source for this quest is to be found in the Harlem Renaissance and its young generation's urge to "convey positive images of Africa as a culture" (617). This younger generation of black intellectuals, among which Fisher is to be found, tries to brake open the strong belief in the Victorian sentimentalism of the "content slave" (cf. Gosslin:1998). It was the aim of the young black modernists to paint a new picture of the African American people. A picture that shows their rich cultural background (in contrast to the belief, prolonged during slavery, of the African slave being inferior in culture, intelligence and humanity) and their ability to create art and knowledge.

The Conjure-Man Dies can, therefore, be seen as the beginning of the struggle for black cultural and intellectual independence. Fisher, by killing Frimbo in the end of his novel, presses the reader to reconsider the prevailing picture of the African American as either superstitious and street-wise (Bubber Brown) or as rational, intelligent and Eurocentric (Dr. Archer)and, thus, destroys "the impulse toward authoritarianism and rational individualism embodied in racial uplift and black nationalism" (617).

Moreover, the basic connection between literature written many years apart from each other can be traced back to the character of Frimbo. In a way, one could argue, that Jadine/Son and Cocoa/George are all still searching for this perfect harmony between what their ancestors believed in and what the New World integrated. Not only Adrienne Gosslin, but many other authors such as Henry Louis Gates or Tuire Valkeakari, have already dwelled upon the question of how the influences of the New World were incorporated or declined by the African people brought over to the United States as slaves. Valkeakari, focusing on religious influences, claims that according to the African ability of creatively embedding new influences, the African slaves were able to establish their "human agency and subjectivity" (2007:20) through Christian religion. Since their being human was denied by the white slave owners in order to justify slavery, it was this struggle that made the African heathens convert to Christianity. They did this, according to Valkeakari, in order to regain their humanity and

they took on the white American's way of expression, "including that of speaking and writing back to white power" (ibid). This paved the way for the African Americans to fight for freedom and independence and to participate in the artistic and economic world of white America.

Although former slaves tried hard to incorporate themselves into white America, they remained divided between ancestry and modernity. As W.E.B. DuBois states in *The Souls of Black Folk* : "An American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body" (1994:2). African Americans were doomed, because of their heritage and their color, to live behind a veil, to lead two lives, to have "this double-consciousness" (ibid). In the very beginning, the slaves had nothing but their spirituality. After some time, missionaries came to convert the "black heathens" to Christianity. This conversion gave the slaves an instrument into their hands with which they were able to exchange their experiences of bondage and to communicate about them with each other without their masters knowing about it. As Valkeakari, DuBois and Gates have mentioned continuously, the slaves took over the messages of the Bible and embedded them into their music and oral story telling. They were a vehicle of protest, consolation and lamentation, one that the slave holders did not understand, apart from thinking of it as pretty and innocent. Until the first slave narratives and autobiographies emerged, such as Frederic Douglass' autobiographical masterpiece, the songs of the slaves "expressed contentment and happiness [for the white population]. He [Douglass] alerted white abolitionists to a new [...] 'ethnosympathetic' mode of listening and urged them to see that spirituals revealed glimpses of the inner worlds of the enslaved" (Valkeakari:2007:24) Not only were African Americans communicating through spirituals, they also used the literal meanings in order to converse with each other. As Henry Louis Gates states repeatedly in his work *The Signifying Monkey*, the African American writer has the ability to take a text already written and to 'signify' upon it. This means nothing less than that intertextual references can be traced in every African American literary work. For a long time only 'white' texts were signified upon. This was based on the belief to be able to show intellect and higher education when referring back to texts written by authors of Euro- and Americentric background. With the Harlem Renaissance it became more and more fashionable to take up ideas from fellow African American authors, to turn them around and look upon them from a new angle. Rudolph Fisher signifies with *The Conjure-Man Dies* on W.E.B. DuBois' theme of 'double-consciousness' when writing about Frimbo. Toni Morrison not only refers to the Christian Edenic myth, but also takes her own texts and signifies upon them in *Tar Baby*. Gloria Naylor not only uses intertextual references

on Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, but she also signifies upon Toni Morrison's literature, including *Tar Baby*. And both authors seem to find the same source in their quest for independence in Rudolph Fisher's *The Conjure-Man Dies*. The book serves as the symbolization of the balancing between two cultures and its seemingly inevitable failure. Toni Morrison takes on the topic of failure and presents Jadine as a woman not willing to accept her African roots but depending instead on the Western profane glorification of money and wealth. Gloria Naylor, however, finds in *Mama Day* the perfect symbol of bridging the gaps between the past and the future, between tradition and modernity, between the sacred and the profane. She is, after Frimbo, the second strongly rooted black character in an African American literary work that is able to incorporate her African ancestry into American modern life.

7 Conclusion

The underlying motif of all three novels chosen is the attempt of bridging the African past with the American presence and to overcome the historically infused image of the content, simple-minded black. Having its starting point during slavery, when the white slave holders denied their African slaves' humanity, it meandered through the various centuries in order to reach its peak of discussion during the Harlem Renaissance. The scholars living in Harlem in the 1920ies not only voted for free access to education and work, but they fought for the incorporation of the African tradition in the blacks' American identity.

Esu-Elegbara, the divine interpreter, who came with the first slaves from Africa to the United States, functions as a vehicle for their message. As a connector between two worlds, Esu can close the gaps between the past and the present. Additionally, he is able to mediate between the sacred and the profane. Thus he is the perfect vessel for the African American's quest for independence and equality. Esu, however, did not simply remain the same godly messenger he was in his African home. On his journey from Africa to the New World, he took on numerous different forms and, thus, was also incorporated into the African American folktales of the nineteenth and twentieth century. In order to illustrate the above mentioned struggle between tradition and modernism, African American authors, such as Toni Morrison, Gloria Naylor and Rudolph Fisher, employed the mythical figures of B'rer Rabbit and the hoodoo priests as metaphors for their respective protagonists' quest for equality.

The main reason for the African American's struggle for equality does not only lie in the fundamental attempt to re-establish their humanity, but in the effort of bringing together their African heart and their American head. The used mythological figures are means of establishing a connection between the modern American way of striving for fame and fortune and the African way of living in accordance with Nature and the spiritual world of the ancestors. Rudolph Fisher established with his figure of the conjure-man Frimbo the prototype of the balanced African American. The heir to an African kingdom has achieved what numerous Americans of African descent have tried for decades. He has lifted the veil of the color line and stepped into the enlightened sphere of incorporating not only the modern American way of life but also the traditional African spirituality and the freedom of being whatever he wants to be. Although he represents a mystery hard to solve for the investigating characters, he finally turns out to be the solution to the problem numerous African American scholars have tried to solve for decades. Frimbo has managed to incorporate both worlds into one being and so he personifies the DuBoisian double-consciousness in an outstanding and

positive manner. Even though Frimbo is the perfect role model for all the following generations, Fisher still has to kill him in the end to enhance his outstanding achievement in the ongoing discussion about assimilation or complete separation even more. Fisher's use of Frimbo as a bridging figure between Africa and America illustrates how it would be able to put an end to the age-long struggle in every American of African descent. His conjure-man is the beacon of hope for all the following generations of African American authors, the hope that it is possible to unite two minds in one soul and that DuBoisian double-consciousness is not the limiting power its inventor thought it to be.

Toni Morrison and Gloria Naylor, both have taken up Fisher's conjure-man and used it to establish their own picture of the ongoing struggle for identity and equality. Morrison replaces the conjure-man with the trickster figure B'rer Rabbit, the sly and sarcastic descendent of Esu. B'rer Rabbit represents the deep African roots alive in every African American. He is the archenemy of the white farmer - not only because the rabbit steals the farmer's harvest, he also symbolizes what white America has always tried to deny: the intelligence and wit of the African. In order to get rid of his enemy, the farmer devises the tar baby. Son and Jadine represent the fundamental dichotomy between tradition and knowledge. While Jadine seeks her escape beyond the veil in higher education, Son relies on his deep connection to his African roots as a means of salvation. Instead of uniting their ideals, Son and Jadine keep working against each other. Morrison, thus, uses the myth of B'rer Rabbit and the tar baby to emphasize her standpoint on the merging tendencies of African Americans in order to unite their African and their American mind. Morrison accentuates the African traditions in order to show the importance of keeping them alive. She exemplifies this by using Jadine as the personified white educational system and Son as her counterpart, getting into the predicament of having to choose between his tradition and her knowledge. Shortly before Son would come to the wrong decision, he got saved by a blind, old woman who was the only one to see Son's true nature. In Morrison's book, therefore, the concept of amalgamation of the two cultures has clearly failed and will always fail if a balance between the African influence and the American influence cannot be established properly.

Naylor, in contrast, has created a character in which she, similar to Fisher's conjure-man Frimbo, united the best traits of both traditions, with a slight predominance of the African heritage. Mama Day accomplishes to outbalance the ancient wisdom of her people with the modern knowledge of the intellectual elite. She signifies with her novel on the figure of the hoodoo priest in order to establish the basic idea of a single person uniting the past, the

present and the future within one human being and to pass on this knowledge by means of tradition and faith. After Fisher's conjure-man, Naylor's Mama Day is the only figure that has mastered the bridging ability inherited from Esu that well. Although Miranda is influenced by the American way of life as well as all the other literary characters depicted on the previous pages, Mama Day has managed the dualism in her environment the best and has established a balanced foundation for her grandniece Ophelia to build her life on. Naylor is, therefore, more optimistic than Morrison that the blending of both cultures is possible, even with both parts being equally weighted in the head and heart of the African American people.

Although African Americans lead a divided life - one half African, the other half American, they have achieved an almost equal status in modern society. The process of combining both in the right proportion is still not finished. African American literature, such as written by Morrison, Naylor and Fisher, can be used as a guidance through this balancing process in order to establish the best possible mixture of both cultures.

Bibliography

Primary Literature:

Fischer, Rudolph (2005). *The Conjure-Man Dies: A Mystery Tale of Dark Harlem* [1932]. Michigan: Ann Arbor Paperbacks.

Morrison, Toni (1982). *Tar Baby* [1981]. New York: Plume/Penguin Books.

Naylor, Gloria (1989). *Mama Day* [1988]. New York: Random House, Inc.

Secondary Literature:

Bell, Bernard W. (1987). *The Afro-American Novel and Its Traditions*. Massachusetts: UP of Massachusetts.

Bell, Bernard W. (2004). *The Contemporary African American Novel : Its Folk Roots and Modern Literary Branches*. Massachusetts: UP of Massachusetts.

Davis, Cynthia A. (1982, Summer). "Self, Society, and Myth in Toni Morrison's Fiction". *Contemporary Literature*. 23.3: 323-342.

Dorson, Richard Mercer (1967). *American Negro Folktales*. Indiana: UP of Indiana.

Gates, Henry Louis, Jr. (1989). *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* [1988]. New York: OUP.

Gosslin, Adrienne Johnson (1998, Winter). "The World Would Do Better to Ask Why is Frimbo Sherlock Holmes?: Investigating Liminality in Rudolph Fisher's *The Conjure-Man Dies*". *African American Review*. 32:4:607-619.

Gosslin, Adrienne (1999, January). "The Psychology of Uncertainty :(Re)Inscribing Indeterminacy in Rudolph Fisher's *The Conjure-Man Dies*". *Other Voices - The (e)Journal of Cultural Criticism*. 1:3:1-18.

Hurston, Zora Neale (1935). *Mules & Men*. Bloomington: UP of Indiana.

Kubitschek, Missy Dehn (1994, Autumn). "Toward a New Order. Shakespeare, Morrison, and Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*". *Melus*. 19:3:75-90.

- Lepow, Lauren (1987, Autumn). "Paradise Lost and Found: Dualism and Edenic Myth in Toni Morrison's 'Tar Baby'". *Contemporary Literature*. 28.3:363-377.
- Meisenhelder, Susan (2000, Autumn). "False Gods and Black Goddesses in Naylor's 'Mama Day' and Hurston's 'Their Eyes Were Watching God'". *Callaloo*. 23.4: 1440-1448.
- Middleton, Joyce Irene (1993, Jan) "Orality, Literacy, and Memory in Toni Morrison's 'Song of Solomon'". *College English*. 55.1: 64-75.
- Pereira, Malin Walther (1996, Winter). "Be(e)ing and "Truth": Tar Baby's Signifying on Sylvia Plath's Bee Poems". *Twentieth Century Literature* 42.4: 526-534.
- Rayson, Ann (1998, Summer). "Foreign Exotic or Domestic Drudge? The African American Woman in Quicksand and Tar Baby". *MELUS*. 23.2: 87-100.
- Wilcots, Barbara J. (1994, Winter). "Toni Morrison's Folk Roots". *African American Review* 26.4: 691-694.
- Wilentz, Gay (1992, Spring). "Civilizations Underneath: African Heritage as Cultural Discourses in Toni Morrison's 'Song of Solomon'". *African American Review*. 26.1: 61-76.