

LIBERAL ARTS

Cosey and Cosby: Toni Morrison's Love and Patriarchy

Student researcher: Jessica Streeter, Senior

Toni Morrison's novel, *Love*, is a pop culture parable. The appellation of the central character, Bill Cosey, is a thinly veiled reference to a well-known father from television, Heathcliff Huxtable of *The Cosby Show*, played by Bill Cosby. Cosey and Cosby's Huxtable are paradigms of the patriarchy inherent in racial uplift ideology. Morrison uses the allusion between her central character, Bill Cosey, and pop culture's television dad, Bill Cosby, to criticize both the notion of racial uplift ideology and Cosey and Cosby as the patriarchal ideals of that movement.

All of the female characters in *Love* are positioned in relation to Cosey as if they are part of a constellation, with Cosey in the center as the sun. Bill Cosby's character, Dr. Huxtable, occupies a similar position in his New York City brownstone. The images of equality and success through hard work presented by Cosey and Cosby suggest that American society (and the American system) are implicitly fair, that people of all colors can achieve harmony and prosperity if they are simply willing to work hard for it, and the father bears the central responsibility for that upward mobility.

Cosey and Cosby are the central authorities of their patriarchal homes. Cosey, known to his very young wife as Papa, is a father figure to the entire community. Following the deaths of his first wife and son, Cosey decides that he wants to have another child. He chooses for his wife Heed the Night Johnson, the 11-year-old best friend of his own granddaughter, Christine. Rather than having another child with his wife, Heed, through procreation, Heed becomes Papa's child, a young one whom he can raise and mold into

the adult he wants her to be. As a poor child from the wrong side of the beach, Heed is vulnerable to Cosey's emotional and financial influence. This imbalance of power sets Heed firmly in a position of subservience, indebtedness, and perpetual childhood.

Cosey and Cosby function as the patriarchal pillars required by racial uplift ideology, which functions to protect and preserve sexual abuse and exploitation within the community. The elite black community portrayed in *Love* acts as a parallel to the modern entertainment industry, which is plagued by incidents of sexual assault, in that both are insulated communities dependent upon the illusion of success. The necessity of maintaining that illusion requires that any evidence of deviation from moral principles be silenced in order to preserve the status quo.

A society that champions patriarchy, including control by and submission to the father, implicitly condones domestic and sexual violence against women. The parallels between *Love*'s Bill Cosey and *The Cosby Show*'s Dr. Huxtable, as portrayed by Bill Cosby, demonstrate the falsehood of racial uplift ideology and the negative social and criminal implications of the patriarchy inherent in such an ideology. Morrison's pop culture parable is ultimately fulfilled by the actual crimes committed by Bill Cosby, the supposed alter ego of *Love*'s Bill Cosey.

Research advisor Jane E. Rose writes: "Jessica offers new insights regarding Morrison's critique of racial uplift ideology in Love. Linking the novel's main character Bill Cosey to Bill Cosby, Jessica argues compellingly how, as successful, wealthy black men, they both facilitate and corrupt racial progress. Her analysis leads to interesting connections between Morrison's novel and the entertainment industry."