“Mama Day don’t look at her sister in the parlor door, she keeps staring into the fire. It’s a huge hearth, ’cause it’s an old house. She grew up seeing them rusted hooks empty over the mantel, but when the time came she knew what they were for. They hold her dried bundles of rosemary, thyme, woodruff, and linden flowers. Her chamomile and verbena. She makes her medicine from those and many others layered in clay jars inside the pantry. But Abigail wouldn’t set foot in the other place for that. So Miranda is staring past her dried herbs, past the birth of Hope and Grace, past the mother who ended her life in The Sound, on to the Mother who began the Days. She sees one woman leave by wind. Another leave by water. She smells the blood from the broken hearts of the men who they cursed for not letting them go. She reaches up and touches her own tears. Miranda lets them fall: she wouldn’t have the strength for them later. She finally turns her face to her sister, the weight on her soul reflected in the eyes that meet hers. “It’s gonna take a man to bring her peace” -- and all they had was that boy’” (Naylor, 262-263).

contextualization
This passage is narrated by Miranda in response to Abigail’s affirmation that “the Baby Girl is sick, Little Mama” (Naylor, 262). Previously, Cocoa’s (Baby Girl’s) sickness was acquired after attempting to seek comfort in Ruby’s touch while having her hair meticulously braided. Rocking back and forth in her rocking chair, Miranda recognizes the trail of tragedy the day family has acquired, and Cocoa’s unfortunate continuation of the seemingly endless adverse lineage. While indeed delving into the Day’s past tragedies, this passage also foreshadows and establishes the destructive culmination of the novel. Through Mama Day’s prophetic insight, “It’s gonna take a man to bring her peace,” George’s future seems already predetermined. Although first time readers may not understand the implication of the Day’s lineage and Miranda’s past, also prophesies the tumultuous conclusion of George perishing for Cocoa.

quotations

Critical Methodologies:

1

In Mama Day, one of the key elements is Gloria Naylor’s complex writing style that takes advantage of various genres and narrative forms, while also manipulating narrative time. As a result of these complexities, Reader-Response criticism can be of use in breaking down the work. According to Charters, “reading is as much a creative act as the writing of a text” (Literary Theory and Critical Perspectives, 1801). Certainly, this is true of Naylor’s work. In this passage from pages 262-263, Naylor’s manipulation of narrative time in particular becomes the source of this possibility for imaginative interpretation on the part of the reader. While Reader-Response criticism tends to allow for changing interpretations over long periods of time, as life experiences influence changes in the reader’s perspective, in this passage it can be applied slightly more immediately. From one reading of the passage to the next, there is undeniably a measure of “the play of imagination” at work (Literary Theory and Critical Perspectives, 1801). Due to the manipulation of tense that occurs throughout the passage, the reader’s interpretation is subject to immediate change as a result of the final sentences, which set up an alternate position within narrative time to that presented by the beginning of the passage. Upon first reading, the entirety of the passage aside from the concluding two sentences could be read with the understanding that the narrated events are occurring in the present. Yet, after this initial reading, the passage attains an entirely different meaning than it had earlier. Once the reader arrives at the “She finally turns,” an entirely new meaning can be applied to the previous sentences (Naylor, 263). This, while operating within a very limited time frame, displays the basic tenant of Reader-Response criticism, that “the reader can, at different periods, … find the experience of reading a book changes” (Literary Theory and Critical Perspectives, 1801).

2

Mama Day is, in many ways, a story of the collision of cultures: the mass culture of George and New York City, and the geographically isolated and unique, quasi-Creole culture of Mama Day and Willow Springs. By this logic, Mama Day could be explained by a postmodern reading. On top of the typical imbalance between “high” and “low” culture demonstrated in postmodern works, Mama Day also contains elements of anarchy and subversion[1]. As noted by Susan Meisenhelder, “Throughout the novel, Naylor consistently (and satirically) reveals the futility of the white world’s attempts to control either nature or the decidedly black world of Willow Springs[2]. Again, elements of cultural incompatibility are seen to be crucial. Yet, where Meisenhelder views Willow Springs as a “decidedly black world,” one could even break this down further. Surely, there is no such thing as a unifying “black culture,” as evidenced by the distinct cultures of George and Cocoa, even Cocoa and Mama Day. Instead, what the reader sees in Mama Day is the very specific culture of an island that is seemingly intentionally outside the bounds of classical cultural designation. This can be seen in Miranda’s recollection, where her hanging herbal remedies the vivid pictures of her memory. It is American, but not really. It is African, but not really. It is, ultimately, its own culture, one that is inherently conflict with the “high” culture George brings to the island, demonstrated emphatically by the pejorative last sentence “and all they had was that boy” (263). Ultimately, in keeping with the postmodern idea, Mama Day in this passage denies the existence of that unifying characteristic of culture, preferring anti-authoritarian culture.