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## Why George Has to Die: Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* and the Myth of the Goddess

Thomas R. Frosch

Whenever we reach the end of *Mama Day*, most of my students are outraged, just as I was when I first read the novel, that Naylor kills off the likable George. The question of why George has to die has haunted criticism. Most answers emphasize his flaws. As Elizabeth Hayes writes, when Miranda, or Mama, Day gives him the instructions she says will save Cocoa, his wife and her grandniece, from a seemingly fatal illness, he follows the first part, to enter the chicken coop and search the nest of the fierce red hen, but not the second part, to bring back to Miranda whatever he finds, instead “venting his fury” by killing all the hens, bringing on his heart attack (679). “He is unable,” Lindsey Tucker puts it, “to make a genuine surrender of belief to Miranda, and hence loses his life” (183). Margaret Earley Whitt sees “his resistance to surrender logical thought to the ways of Willow Springs” as responsible for his death: “George lives in a world that must and can be tested, measured, proven; he values empirical data above all. And this position is his undoing” (144). She adds that “He refused the help of those who could have made the difference” (152). He refused to give himself to the power of community and tradition. For Daphne Lamothe, his death “signifies,” among other things, “the defeat of his Western, masculinized rationality to the African-derived matriarchy that rules over the island” (167).

Yet George is not a rigidly conceived representation of scientific rationality or masculine stereotypes.<sup>1</sup> His passion is football, but what compels him most about the game is the influence a crowd can exercise over the results on the field through the sheer emotional force of their communal will and belief. And while Cocoa sees the people of New York in superficially conceived and mocking ethnic categories, he sees them with a novelist's eye as varied and interesting individuals in richly distinct neighborhoods; his descriptions of New York are even lyrical. As for his death, it is directly caused by his heart condition, which Miranda herself, unlike some critics,<sup>2</sup> does not identify with a flawed emotional nature, calling him "a good-hearted boy with a bad heart" (170). Indeed, that Miranda is immediately fond of him and thinks he is the right man for Cocoa makes it difficult for us to see him as the symbolic villain in a clash of binaries. She repeatedly approves of his reactions to things, and in fact "It scares her sometimes how much she likes this boy" (229). If he doesn't follow Miranda's instructions to make the trek back to her after the coop it is because he is dying of a heart attack. It is difficult to judge him badly in wanting in the agonizing last moments of his life to be with Cocoa rather than to follow instructions and return

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<sup>1</sup> Carol Howard is among several critics who have argued against the tendency "to overlook the complexities of George's character and to see him as an unflagging agent of Western patriarchal culture" (Stave 138). Gary Storhoff, pointing out, together with George's faults, "his fascination with the folklore on Willow Springs" and sensitivity to "the aesthetic planes of experience," writes that he has an "intuitive connection to the mysterious and wondrous" and calls him a "good man with the potential to become whole" (39). For Susan Meisenfelder, in her parallel study of "False Gods and Black Goddesses" in *Mama Day* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, George is a partly sympathetic figure, in accord with Naylor's wish to avoid a "bitter" portrayal of black men, and in his good qualities the novel ultimately sees the possibility of "the positive role black men...can play in black women's lives"; but he becomes a "god" for Cocoa, threatening her "female independence and self-fulfillment," and he has to die because his "rigid" masculinity has "no place in the purified new [world]" in which "egalitarian heterosexual relationships" can exist (1440, 1443, 1446).

<sup>2</sup> Virginia Fowler, for example, writes that "George's congenital heart defect works symbolically on a number of different levels" and that he "seems to have determined to protect himself from any future emotional vulnerability as compulsively as he monitors his heart" (105-6).

to *Mama Day*.<sup>3</sup> But if he is primarily a positive character, what exactly is his thematic function in the novel?

As many critics have pointed out, *Mama Day* engages the myth of the goddess, but what I would stress is that George dies because that is the role of the male in the myth of the goddess. His limitations contribute to the thematic richness of the novel, but he would have had to die had he not had them. David Cowart has given us the most comprehensive study of the novel's use of the goddess, but even he says that Karla F. C. Holloway "surely errs in saying that [Miranda] must sacrifice George" to save Cocoa. He explains that although George is sacrificed, *Mama Day* does not intentionally kill him or desire his death; rather, in her human fallibility, she "errs to think this death avoidable" (Cowart 459, 454; Holloway 139). But Miranda sent him into a situation in which his pain was virtually a certainty and his destruction a possibility. She herself "wouldn't go near a brooder's nest for nothing in the world" (229). Afterwards, when she surveys the wrecked coop, "she has the time to cry" (302). One assumes she is crying for George more than for the coop and chickens. But there is no indication that she is crying in guilt or that she ever regrets her plan. Consciously or not, she did what she had to do. It is part of the traditional function of the goddess to be associated with the death of a good male figure—a male figure whom, it is exactly the point, we don't want to see die—and furthermore that character's death is part of a traditional story that has an ultimately happy ending, including the male figure's return. Northrop Frye distinguished between "the refined writer too finicky for popular formulas and the major one who exploits them ruthlessly" (168-69). In this essay I will argue that for Naylor to kill George, after making him such a positive character that she herself "cried for a whole year, knowing that [he] was going to die" (Perry 93), was absolutely right. I will also study what needs to be emphasized together with his death, Naylor's representation of his return. That return is not a literal one, as in the traditional myth. Cowart calls George "the usurping son or con-

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<sup>3</sup> Johnny Lorenz suggests that "we should not adopt a condescending attitude towards George's fit of anger and his failure in the chicken coop," that "he lives in the same world most of us do," and that his "disbelief, worry, and rage" are "understandable" (Stave 160-61).

sort of the goddess (the mythographers' 'solar hero')," who "must accept the immolation of his rationality and return to his divinely subordinate role" (439-40). I would suggest that George's full function in the novel is, rather than to be defeated, to be transformed and to contribute to a transformation of Cocoa and her community of Willow Springs.

The original goddess, the "great, great, grand Mother," of Willow Springs, was a "true conjure woman" originally brought to the island as an African slave (218, 3), bought by Bascombe Wade, a descendant of the Vikings who were the island's European discoverers. Her original African name and even her slave name, Sapphira Wade, are unknown to the current islanders,<sup>4</sup> that mystery adding to her mythic status; like the Old Testament God, she is, in effect, "I Am that I Am." She could "grab a bolt of lightning in the palm of her hand; use the heat of the lightning to start the kindling going under her medicine pot...and healed the wounds of every creature" (3). It is said, even more, that "the island got spit out from the mouth of God, and when it fell to the earth it brought along an army of stars. He tried to reach down and scoop them back up, and found Himself shaking hands with the greatest conjure woman on earth. 'Leave 'em here, Lord,' she said. 'I ain't got nothing but these poor black hands to guide my people, but I can lead on with light'" (110). That creation is celebrated, in place of Christmas, every December 22, the longest night of the year, when the people walk through the island with candles, telling each other to "lead on with light," and exchanging gifts. She was also a figure of rage, who refused all slave work. But Bascombe fell in love with her, and she conjured him into deeding the island to his slaves. After bearing seven sons, she was responsible for Bascombe's death and then flew across the ocean in a ball of flame home to Africa. This angry mother of supernatural power is a figure of both terror and reverence for the people of the island, again like Yahweh.

Miranda is, in effect, a priestess of the goddess and also her incarnation three generations later; called "Little Mama" from her child-

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<sup>4</sup> Sapphira is named in the parts of the narration spoken by the voice of the island, a communal voice which is not heard by the living islanders but to which their own memories, experiences, and reactions contribute.

hood, she is "Everybody's mama now" (89). *Mama Day* possesses characteristics of divinities and their representatives in African myth and folklore, as scholars have noted, and the novel also, as Cowart has suggested, contains patterns of goddess myths from around the world.<sup>5</sup> Naylor uses such material as more than backdrop. I would like to add to the previous work on the goddess in the novel to show how thoroughly the details of the narrative and the characterization of *Mama Day* are permeated with the transcultural mythology of the goddess and how vividly Naylor adapts that mythology to the contemporary setting of Willow Springs.

Goddesses have often been associated with knowledge or wisdom, perhaps because the mother is typically the first teacher of early childhood and the first source to whom the child goes with questions; perhaps because in early culture women, as foragers, developed knowledge about food plants and herbs; and perhaps because the goddess was the original, total divinity and when gods eventually took over some of her functions, like warfare, power, and the more violent manifestations of nature, wisdom, including the secrets of magic, was often among the functions left in her charge. Goddesses of knowledge include the original earth goddess of Delphi, source of oracles; Sarasvati, whose knowledge enabled Brahma to create the universe; Seshat, the divine scribe of the Egyptians; female personifications like the Jewish and Christian Wisdom; and Athena, in whose myth we see the god Jupiter assimilating to his own power, by swallowing, the earlier female source of wisdom, Metis. So it is that in another modern novel based on the myth of the goddess, Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon*, the priestesses of the goddess learn secret skills of healing and kill-

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<sup>5</sup> Excellent work has been done by Tucker and others on African American, Gullah, and West African traditions and beliefs in the novel, and Cowart contributes to these efforts as well, but he also suggests that "Naylor's vision, however clearly rooted in African American experience, values, and history, engages the entire cultural spectrum" and that "the wider the range of anthropologists, mythographers, and classical scholars brought to bear on her texts, the more they seem to expand and exfoliate" (450). I follow his lead in considering the characteristics of the goddess across many cultures, and I find a useful source for those characteristics to be the historical compendium of Anne Baring and Jules Cashford, *The Myth of the Goddess*.

ing, and the most talented of them have “second sight” and prophetic capacities. Mama Day has understanding that is virtually visionary, and it is sometimes manifested in ways that would have astonished Athena and Sarasvati. She can, for example, watch the Phil Donahue Show and, by observing “the number of times a throat swallows, the curve of the lips, the thrust of the neck, the slump of the shoulders,” learn “which ladies in the audience have secretly given up their babies for adoption, which fathers have daughters making pornographic movies, exactly which homes been shattered by Vietnam, drugs, [or] divorce” (38). In her case, the “sight” is psychological insight, rooted in careful perception.

Like the traditional goddess she has an identification with nature: when Miranda was a child, “the whole island was her playground; she’d walk through in a dry winter without snapping a single twig, disappear into the shadow of a summer cottonwood... folks started believing [the] little girl became a spirit in the woods” (78-79). She is like an archaic goddess of the forest. Her knowledge of nature makes her the island’s medical advisor of first resort: she tells George “what part of that forest she uses in the fall, summer, or spring. Differences in leaves of trees, barks of trees, roots. The tonics she makes up, the poultices, the healing teas. There’s something in here for everything” (207). The goddess, as particularly an earth goddess, traditionally has associations with the dead buried within her realm. At the end of the novel Miranda senses her dead sister's presence in “the rustling of the trees”: “There's never a day so still that at least one leaf ain't moving” (312). The graveyard of her family is in the woods, and there she listens to the voices of her ancestors; when she enters the graveyard, the spirit of her father, John-Paul, guides her as she remembers the stories he told about his family. Her identification with the forest becomes disturbingly manifest when “she runs her hands along [a] fallen trunk,” the wood, “knotted and hard,” reminding her of her father’s hands and her own: “Under the grayish light her skin seems to dissolve into the fallen tree, her palm spreading out wide as the trunk, her fingers twisting out in a dozen directions, branching off into green and rippling fingernails. She tries to

pull her hand away, only to send the huge fingers and nails rippling and moving in the air" (255).

The graveyard is within a circle of oaks. Tucker writes of oaks in BaKongo beliefs about the dead (180). Oaks also make a famous appearance in Frazer's study of the early European belief in the divine power that descended upon these trees in the form of lightning, source of fire and, it was thought, of the mistletoe, the golden bough, possession of which marked out a priest as king of the wood and servant and lover of the goddess of the grove, or her priestess, until a younger, stronger priest replaced him.<sup>6</sup> Lightning too is a part of Mama Day's forest, as it was of Frazer's and of Sapphira's. Mama Day has the intuitive scientific knowledge to call it down to strike the house of the sinister conjure woman, Ruby.

The goddess often appears as a double divinity, representing life and death, summer and winter, creation and destruction, young and old, the good and bad mother. In discussing Miranda's identification with trees, Susan Meisenhelder points out that Ruby too is associated with trees (1441), her "arms and legs almost thick around as small tree trunks and spreading out from a middle that is as wide as the old oak down by Chevy's Pass" (134). In Miranda and Ruby we see the good goddess and the bad, or the good shamaness and the bad witch. The motifs of combing hair and weaving, traditionally associated with women, commonly appear in stories of the goddess and her derivatives.<sup>7</sup> Ruby combs poison into the hair of Cocoa, initiating her terrible illness, while Miranda weaves for Cocoa's wedding a quilt that combines scraps of cloth belonging to members of the family and so tells its history, a quilt made to conceive a baby under and thus continue that history. Ruby, using roots, herbs, and conjuring devices to hurt, is the goddess of the hate that Mama Day says "can destroy more people

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<sup>6</sup> On tree-spirits, oaks, lightning, and mistletoe, see, for example, Frazer 2.45, 349-75; 4.205-14; 11.76-84, 279-303.

<sup>7</sup> Morgaine, priestess of the goddess in Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon*, weaves on her loom a spell to kill an enemy. Heine's Lorelei combs her golden hair with a golden comb. A comb and a loom are objects used to entice the Grimms' Nixie of the Mill Pond. On combing hair and weaving in *Mama Day*, see, respectively, Monica A. Coleman and Linda Wagner-Martin.



quicker than anything else” (267). Ruby is the goddess of the underworld, like the Sumerian Erishkigal, who traps in her dark realm the good goddess, Inanna—in this case, Cocoa, who shares with Mama Day the role of good goddess. Inanna and Erishkigal are two parts of the same figure, the goddess when the earth is fertile and the goddess when it is not, the goddess when the moon is visible and the goddess when it is not, the goddess when the plants appear and the goddess when the seeds are growing in the ground.

Miranda and her younger sister, Abigail, are also a double goddess, both good but in different ways. Abigail recedes into the background: she is mild-mannered, conventional, and conservative, while Mama Day is dominating and outrageous, and we get far more of Mama Day’s point of view. But that they have a dual identity is clear when, after their mother’s death in their childhood, they huddle in bed: “Nestled together under the quilt, they are four arms and legs, two heads, one heartbeat” (36). To the also motherless Cocoa, her grandmother and great-aunt were together “the perfect mother”: one gave her affection, the other discipline and correction (38). Abigail too plays a part in healing: during the illness that almost kills Cocoa, Miranda battles the demons, while Abigail nurses the patient, giving Cocoa chicken broth and traditional remedies, together with loving attention. Although Abigail is apparently without magical capacities, at one point she does appear as a powerful life-giver. When Cocoa also almost died in childhood, Abigail gave her the crib name that was thought to keep a baby in the real world; she chose Baby Girl (the child was born Ophelia and later nicknamed Cocoa in the hope of darkening her light color). Abigail was the one who repeated the divine function of naming, associated with creating and preserving life.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Hayes writes that naming in West African cultures is “a sacred act because it brings into being or makes real and actual what was considered only figurative or inanimate prior to its naming; a naming ritual transforms a baby from a ‘living object’ into a person.” She cites the Yoruban proverb “whatever we have a name for, that is” (675). Gerda Lerner points out the same concept in the Babylonian *Enuma Elish*, where “Nothing exists unless it has a name. The name means existence” (150).

Forming a third kind of dual goddess, Mama Day and Cocoa are old and young, priestess and neophyte, symbolic mother and daughter, Demeter and Persephone. As Whitt puts it, at the end of the novel *Mama Day*'s "conjuring powers from the great, grand Mother, Sapphira Wade, also now reside in Cocoa. So Mama Day is free to go" (127). My students sometimes find it difficult to accept Cocoa as a replacement for Sapphira and Mama Day, thinking her inadequate for such a role. But in her youth she shows signs of the goddess in distorted form. For example, her constant habit of referring to people as zucchinis, bagels, spareribs, kumquats, and tacos prompts George to call her "shallow and a bigot" (63), but goddesses are indeed concerned with food, its production and abundance, and Miranda and her sister spend considerable time in the novel in producing, discussing, and preparing it. Cocoa at this point in her development does not fully understand why she sees food walking in the streets around her, but her fear of the unaccustomed differences that confront her in New York City is deforming an intuition that comes from her inner nature. Further, if Ruby is a double of Mama Day, she is also a double of Cocoa; Ruby plays upon elements of hatred and anger that already exist within Cocoa, who, as George puts it, turns people into "Stuff you chew up in your mouth until it's slimy and then leave behind as shit the next day" (62).

The traditional goddess sometimes appears in groupings of three, like the Fates and the Graces; or goddesses of the earth, moon, and underworld; or maiden, mother, and crone, once associated with the crescent, full, and waning moon, with sometimes the dark moon as a fourth phase. Cocoa is the maiden; Mama Day and Abigail together appear partly as the mother and partly as the wise aspect of the crone, with Ruby as the destructive aspect. But the destructive crone shades into the fourth, underworld phase, and both Ruby and Mama Day take on that function of death goddess. The difference is that in Mama Day's case death is not pure annihilation but the invisible or underground or dark-moon gestation phase of new life. Sapphira appears as all the phases of the goddess, first as a young slave, then as a mother and creator, and finally as a death goddess, embodying vengeance against slav-

ery, destroying Bascombe Wade and, like the goddess of the dark moon, vanishing.

The goddess often appears with a guardian snake, a pairing with positive value in Mesopotamian and other cultures, even as it threatens the male-centered religion of Genesis. Indeed, in early times the snake is not the companion of the goddess but the goddess herself.<sup>9</sup> The snake appears in *Mama Day* on Miranda's father's walking stick, which she now uses, "the long, sleek bodies of them snakes carved so finely down its length that when he turned it they seemed to come alive." When she twirls the stick between her knees, it seems that "the carved snakes wind themselves down into the floor and up into her hands" (266). As she walks, the stick "becomes a thing of wonder.... A wave over a patch of zinnias and the scarlet petals take flight.... A thump of the stick: morning glories start to sing" (152). When Mama Day calls down the lightning on Ruby's house, she strikes the house three times with the walking stick.

As the source of all life, the goddess is associated not only with snakes but with animals in general. Particular goddesses had special relationships with particular animals, like Artemis with deer, Aphrodite with boar, the Egyptian Hathor with cows, and the Egyptian Tawaret with the hippopotamus, known for its fierceness and suggesting, with its giant belly, the pregnant mother. Mama Day's special animal is the chicken. An omen of George's future comes in a message in a fortune cookie he reads in New York even before he begins his relationship with Cocoa: "All chickens come home to roost" (56). Mama Day's chickens are often around her or in her thoughts. Their behavior can forecast weather: Mama Day is angry with herself for not noticing that the chickens have been "standing with their backs to the wind for days," indicating a major storm is coming (227). Soon, even though the

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<sup>9</sup> Baring and Cashford print a photograph of the wonderful statue of Athena on the Acropolis wearing a crown and robe of snakes, showing her ancestry (333). Their *Myth of the Goddess* is filled with examples of the association of goddess and snake. See also Marija Gimbutas, *The Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe, 6500—3500 BC: Myths and Cult Images*, rev. ed. (Berkeley: U of California P, 1982.) As Tucker points out (184), Cocoa's given name, Ophelia, is etymologically related to "snake" [Greek *Ophis*].

sky is clear, the caged chickens make such a racket that she is afraid “they’ll start eating each other alive” (229). Chickens serve as defenses against bad magic. Whitt points out that “Convictions about magic brought over from West Africa included the belief that a ‘frizzled hen kept in the yard would scratch up and destroy all conjures.’”<sup>10</sup> So one of Mama Day’s hens scratches up under her trailer a hex packet planted by Ruby. But primarily chickens are relevant to the main charge of the goddess, the continuation of life. The egg is an archaic symbol of the creative power of the mother goddess. Early in the novel we see Mama Day in her coop, knowing “not to go anywhere near” two setting hens, but picking up eggs from abandoned nests and examining them with a candle to look “for clear, firm yolks” and for new life. Mama Day is the consultant on Willow Springs on all matters to do with love and reproduction; she is the midwife of the island, and her fertility magic includes an intricate knowledge of and skill with the female reproductive system.

Her magic is rooted in her sense that “the mind is everything” (90); she sounds here like a literary child of Milton’s Satan, prototype in his early, partly heroic phase of the modern confidence in the powers of the human mind: “The mind is its own place, and in itself / Can make a Heav’n of Hell, a Hell of Heav’n” (*Paradise Lost* 1.254-55). She practices this magic on her young friend Bernice, whose frenzied desire to get pregnant, Miranda intuitively, is impeding her ability to do so. She gives her chores to do, like planting pumpkin seeds, that are symbolically related to pregnancy, and Bernice believes that the pumpkin seeds are magic because Mama Day tells her they are. Bernice becomes a small child under the powerful influence of the mother’s “mother wit” disguised, as Mama Day says, “with a lot of hocus-pocus” (97). In Bernice’s recalcitrant case Mama Day’s work must lead up to an elaborate ritual that includes Bernice’s eating a raw egg and then culminates astonishingly with a hen laying an egg into Bernice’s vagina: “A rhythm older than woman draws it in and holds it tight”—a rhythm of

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<sup>10</sup> Whitt (143) is quoting from James Haskins, *Witchcraft, Mysticism and Magic in the Black World* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1974) 78.

nature infused by a sense of the supernatural (140). And Bernice does become pregnant.

Is this really how Bernice conceives? Did her husband, Ambush, plant the seed after Mama Day's adroit use of "hocus-pocus" had its effect on her? Or, as Whitt puts it, was he ambushed by the two women, eliminated from a process of procreation which was purely female and in which two eggs were "swallowed through separate openings on a woman's body" (141)? The text does not tell us. It does tell us that, as in the archaic days of the goddess and as in early childhood, the man's role in procreation was not clearly known, that procreation seemed a purely female process, and that Bernice would not have gotten pregnant without Mama Day's psychological intervention. To Bernice's extreme annoyance, the boy she bears is given by Willow Springs the nickname "Chick": "that's what he looked like: little pecan head sitting on a scrawny neck, two bright buttons for eyes, and a feathery mess of hair" (161). This being the world of the goddess, it is not surprising that this boy, whom his mother yearned for desperately before he was conceived and whom she pampered with equal passion once he was born, dies at the age of four.

If chickens embody fertility, they also embody the destructiveness of which the goddess is capable. The wild viciousness of chickens is a reiterated theme in the novel: Mama Day "don't know why folks believe chickens are cowardly. She's seen two of 'em stand toe to toe and peck each other to death" (229). Several passages in the novel have prepared us for George's fear of chickens—he has never been on a farm in his life—and for the special violence of hens guarding their nest; disturbing one, Mama Day thinks, could cost her "an eye or a plug out of her hand. She even had an old hen once that would attack...a young rooster, spurs and all" (229). She herself understands that "that boy had the right idea being a little wary" of the chickens. If you don't know their ways, it's best to give "em their distance" (229). When George is killed in the coop, he is killed, in effect, by the animal of the goddess and also her stand-in. He is killed by an old hen, and he is the young rooster. He is like Adonis killed by the boar of Aphrodite, or Actaeon killed by his own dogs when they take him for a stag of Arte-

mis. The old red hen that kills George and that he kills is another form of the goddess in her destructive phase. That the hen is both a producer of eggs and a brooder, on the one hand, and, on the other, a source of fatal violence makes her a comprehensive symbol of the dual creative and destructive goddess.

In *Mama Day* George dies not to punish and expunge his rationalism, his scientific skepticism, his individualism, his masculine values, or any of his flaws and limitations but to bring about new and better life, just as in the myth of the goddess the destruction in which the goddess participates is a way to new birth; the underworld is her womb. In the novel's first two sentences after his death Miranda realizes that he's not coming back and thinks that he did things his way, not hers. She then prepares herbs and a sedative, for "Now that Baby Girl was going to live, she had to be nursed back to health" (302). It is a seamless and unexplained transition from George's death to the certainty of Cocoa's survival. Her survival seems to follow naturally from his death. His not coming back to *Mama Day* and his doing it his way were not the main issue. Just as in the myth of Inanna, the goddess is released from the underworld only when her lover Dumuzi takes her place there, so Cocoa emerges from the process of dying when George takes her place. Inanna chooses Dumuzi to be sacrificed; here *Mama Day*, the older form of the goddess, effectively makes that choice.

In *Mama Day* the new life that springs from the death of the hero takes several forms. Cocoa's physical recovery is the most immediate, but she then needs an emotional recovery. With the death of George she feels "her world had come to an end" and thinks of suicide; but *Mama Day* in fury tells her, "There ain't no pain—no pain—that you could be having worse than what that boy went through for your life. And you would throw it back in his face?" (302). She not only survives but also grows. Earlier, when Miranda and Abigail talk about the possibility of George saving Cocoa, Miranda says, "He'd do anything in the world for her," but Abigail says, "I know that. But we ain't talking about this world, are we?" and Miranda agrees: "No...we ain't talking about this world at all" (267-68). The world in which he can save her is one of belief, the past, memory, and the dead, a world to which the mind, in

Miranda's concentrated use of its powers, has access. Later, visiting the rise from which George's ashes were scattered into The Sound, she meditates that Cocoa is "grieving for herself too much now to hear" George's voice from that other world: "So she's gotta get past the grieving for what she lost, to go on to the grieving for what was lost, before the child of Grace [the mother who abandoned her] lives up to her name." When she does, she will do things that Mama Day couldn't do; she will learn the secrets of the origins, "the beginning of the Days." Mama Day still doesn't know the name of the great, grand Mother, "'cause it was never opened to me. That's a door for the child of Grace to walk through." And George will play a role in her quest. Talking to George himself, Miranda says, "One day she'll hear you, like you're hearing me" (307-8).

Cocoa moves to Charleston and eventually marries, "A good second-best," Mama calls her new husband. She has two sons and names the second George. New love, new marriage, children: these also are forms of new life, the return of fertility, after George's death. When her son asks what the man he was named for was like, Cocoa, not being able to find a photo, is after eleven years brought to the point of grieving not for herself: "And to think of *what* was lost brought on the final tears." She tells her son that he was "named after a man who looked just like love" (309-10). As the novel ends, Cocoa is 47, and periodically she comes to Willow Springs to sit on the rise overlooking The Sound to talk to George and listen to him, and we realize that the parts of the novel narrated by the two have formed a dialogue between the mature Cocoa, who has the priestess-like power of communicating with the dead, and the spirit of George. Thus, another form of renewed life is the return of George not only symbolically in a child named for him but also and more directly in his spirit and as a voice in the inner mind of Cocoa and an audience for her own inner voice. As they recount their own experiences of the relationship they had, explaining to each other their own individualities, which in life had been mysterious and often irksome to each other, that relationship, between a goddess, figuratively, and a god of love, is remade.

Cocoa, in her final sentence, says, "There are just too many sides to the whole story" (311). Originally for both Cocoa and George there was only one side; now both have the chance to tell fully their sides and to understand the subjectivity of the other. Since the story of their relationship is embedded in the story of the community, the novel has a third narrative voice, that of Willow Springs itself, embodying the memories, perceptions, and traditions of the community. So George returns as part of a story that is more comprehensive than could be told from the inner perspective of any one individual or from the outer perspective of the society as a whole. In that form, George joins the traditions of the community, after all. In George's part of the storytelling he does not apologize for what he did or thought; he is who he was, simply recounting his actions, feelings, and thoughts, and the same is true for Cocoa. And that George, as we see him in his sections of the narrative, shows his limitations suggests that those limitations are not flaws punished by the novel's disapproval: they are elements of the man who, in the completeness of who he was, was finally loved by Cocoa—and who even looked to her like love itself.

But perhaps the ultimate form of the new life that is born from George's death is a peace that has never existed in Cocoa's life or in the life of her family, haunted by the madness and the suicide by drowning of Miranda's mother, Ophelia, and by the deaths of two children named Peace. Nor has it existed in Willow Springs, haunted by the rage and sorrow that began with Sapphira's forced separation from her African home and her enslavement and with her vanishing from the island. Her rage, still unslaked a century and a half later, culminates in the devastating hurricane that comes across the ocean from Africa during George's visit; that storm causes the death of Bernice's son and coincides with the illness that Ruby inflicts on Cocoa. In his heart attack, George grips the shoulder of the apparently dying Cocoa, and "As my bleeding hand slid gently down your arm, there was total peace" (302). Cocoa herself finds a living peace through her inner connection with George's spirit. The novel ends with Cocoa and Mama Day, on the rise above The Sound, the double goddess in the place where the presence of the son and lover is felt; and as the two women look at each



other “over the distance,” Mama Day observes that Cocoa’s face has “been given the meaning of peace.” Willow Springs has found peace as well: on the rise both women “can hear clearly that on the east side of the island and on the west side, the waters”—the waters where Sapphira and Ophelia had vanished and which had been torn by the hurricane—“were still” (312).

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