5-1-2011

The perfect mask: examining the diligence in masking in Daniel black's perfect peace and Obery Hendricks's living water

Lakeitha Shana Wilson
Clark Atlanta University

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.auctr.edu/dissertations

Part of the English Language and Literature Commons

Recommended Citation

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@Robert W. Woodruff Library, Atlanta University Center. It has been accepted for inclusion in ETD Collection for AUC Robert W. Woodruff Library by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Robert W. Woodruff Library, Atlanta University Center. For more information, please contact cwiseman@auctr.edu.
THE PERFECT MASK: EXAMINING THE DILIGENCE IN MASKING
DANIEL BLACK'S PERFECT PEACE AND OBERY HENDRICKS'S
LIVING WATER

A THESIS
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF CLARK ATLANTA UNIVERSITY
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR
THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS

BY
LAKEITHA S. WILSON

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

ATLANTA, GEORGIA
MAY 2011
ABSTRACT

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

WILSON, LAKEITHA S. B.A. UNIVERSITY OF MEMPHIS, 2005

THE PERFECT MASK: EXAMINING THE DILIGENCE IN MASKING IN DANIEL BLACK’S PERFECT PEACE AND OBERY HENDRICKS’S LIVING WATER

Committee Chair: Susan P. Wright, Ph. D.

Thesis Dated May 2011

This thesis examines the efforts necessary to mask and the aftermath in doing so as illustrated in Daniel Black’s Perfect Peace and Obery Hendricks’s Living Water. The focus of this study is to explore how Black and Hendricks demonstration of Dunbar’s concept of masking evolves from societal oppression. The environment and social constructions within the two novels centralizes the cause to wear the mask. The female characters discussed in this paper tacitly agree with their oppressors to at least pretend to submit to their own oppression. Black and Hendricks develop female characters that emerge from their oppression and achieve self-assertion. The female characters redefine and redeem themselves through unconventional concepts of heroism.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER I---INTRODUCTION.................................................................1
CHAPTER II---MASKING IN *PERFECT PEACE*.........................................4
CHAPTER III---MASKING IN *LIVING WATER*.........................................25
CHAPTER IV---CONCLUSION.................................................................42
REFERENCES.........................................................................................44
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

There is a danger of corrosion of the self in this pretense, and surely a rending of integrity. How and when does one call upon the real self to dispel the make-believe and claim humanity and dignity? ... It was just possible that the trick had been too perfect; legerdemain had undone itself in a disappearance act where the self had vanished, but also the incantation to call it back again.

-Nathan Irvin Huggins, Harlem Renaissance

Daniel Black’s novel, Perfect Peace, and Obery Hendricks’s novel, Living Water, illustrate the psychological and societal oppressions conveyed in Paul Laurence Dunbar’s poem, “We Wear the Mask.” In addition to white oppression, these two African American novels also reveal how the black community oppresses its own. Published in 1895, Dunbar’s poem portrays the psychological state of African American people who were forced to hide layers of emotions in an effort to conceal their emotional distress resulting from the prejudice and oppression they suffered from slavery onward in the United States. Concealing their real feelings was a means of self-preservation in the light of their ongoing trials and tribulations.

Black and Hendricks illuminate Dunbar’s concept of masking in their novels in that many of the characters tacitly agree with their oppressors to at least pretend to submit to their own oppression. The characters in the two novels demonstrate what Todd Lieber suggests in his article, “Ralph Ellison and the Metaphor of Invisibility in Black Literary Tradition”: they become a manifestation of invisibility “produced by a conscious adoption of a false identity which hides and may eventually usurp the ‘true’ identity
beneath” (87). One of the main characters in *Perfect Peace*, Emma Jean, illustrates just such masking as she is determined to negotiate life as if her mother’s, Mae Helen, abuse has not affected her. After a childhood of physical and verbal abuse from her mother, Emma Jean forges through motherhood the best way she knows how, appearing to succumb to a lifetime of unfulfilled aspirations. After the birth of six sons, she becomes disgruntled with God and His unwillingness to give her a daughter. However, she ultimately affirms that her blessing was to “make” a blessing out of having a son, and, thus, she raises her son, Perfect, as her daughter. In *Living Water*, the protagonist, Maryam, struggles to maneuver and overcome the harshness of her patriarchal environment while seeming to comply with the traditional codes and mores that require women and girls to stifle their spirits, “to walk through … life, not run…to be quiet, to lower [their] gaze and speak when …spoken to” (52). Although Maryam does not desire marriage under such confinements, she marries five times and struggles to hold on to each marriage.

Like African Americans described in Dunbar’s poem, female characters in the two novels are forced to hide their pains and paint on “grin[s] and smile[s]” in the face of adversity while the reader is driven to empathize with the women as the authors of the novels navigate readers through tales that reveal the protagonists’ pains and sorrows. While masking aids in the psychological and physical well being of the female characters, hiding behind masks does not heal their wounds. However, the two novels do give hope to the black female characters who, through trial and error, reach self-integration by the end of the novel.
Although Black’s *Perfect Peace* and Hendricks’s *Living Water* portray the hypocrisies within the black community, they also celebrate the black community and the strength of those individuals who prevail in spite of obstacles and various forms of oppression. Both Hendricks and Black mask their masculine voices and narrate from a feminine perspective to reveal the complexities of their female characters. Through the production of female agency, the two authors construct unconventional black heroines who emerge from the oppression that they face at the hands of individuals within their communities and families. After years of identity crises, the female characters attempt to redefine and redeem themselves.
CHAPTER II

MASKING IN DANIEL BLACK’S PERFECT PEACE

We’ve begun to raise our daughters more like our sons...but few have the courage to raise our sons more like our daughters

Gloria Steinem

In his novel, Perfect Peace, Black rethinks and reconstructs concepts of gender identity and motherhood. Black illustrates the unmistakable theft of a child’s identity as the child’s mother, Emma Jean, gives birth to her seventh son, Perfect, and “recreates” him into a girl: she hides his gender from everyone, including his father and his entire family, from the moment he is born and nurtures him as she would a girl child, including dressing him like a girl. Emma Jean, frustrated with having given birth to six sons and no daughters decides to have another child; she is not interested in the fact that her husband, Gus, wants no more children, in part, due to the family’s financial instability. Gus, however, commits to sleeping on the floor in an effort to avoid “touching her and creating another mouth to feed” (3). Gus’s decision to bring no more children into the world might be understood through Claudia Lawrence-Webb’s explanation concerning the welfare of the black family:

...the livelihood of African American men and women is dependent on the arbitrary access to resources...where access to resources necessary for healthy functioning becomes a high-stakes process where couples have to trade off aspects of their relationships for material/emotional comforts or
Still, Emma Jean remains focused on giving birth to a baby girl, and Gus’s commitment to sleeping on the floor ignites Emma Jean’s desperation. She realizes this will be her last chance to have a girl, for Gus refuses to lie with Emma Jean after discovering that she is pregnant with their seventh child.

When Emma Jean admires her new baby boy for the first time, she refuses to believe that God has not answered her prayer to fulfill her desire for a daughter. At this point, she bestows upon herself God’s power of creation and declares that although she gave birth to a boy, “it’s gon be a girl” (15). Emma Jean forces her mid-wife, Henrietta, to become complicit in her lie, and tell Gus and her sons “bout the new woman in the family” (18). While this is the first time Black introduces Emma Jean’s ability and willingness to alter her reality, Black does establish a possible origin of Emma Jean’s capacity to create a livable reality for herself by relating information about Emma’s abusive childhood.

In what appears to be a validation of Emma Jean’s masking (both herself and her son), Black recounts a specific event from Emma Jean’s eighth birthday in which he highlights the manifestation of her masking. As a result of asking her mother, Mae Helen, if she could have a birthday party, Mae Helen, “slammed the skillet against [Emma Jean’s] forehead” causing a bruise to appear (20). Whenever anyone inquired about the C-shaped, keloid bruise on her forehead, Emma Jean replied, “it’s my birthmark” (24). Years later, Emma Jean tries to cover her bruise with strands of her hair. “Not wishing to pry, [the townspeople] let Emma Jean construct whatever truth she
needed” (25). Thereby, Emma Jean is given authorization to “wear the mask that grins and lies” (918). Although her community wants to appear concerned, they actually only wish to ignore and neglect Emma Jean’s bruises, internal and external. As a result, Emma Jean navigates through life concealing her disappointments and distress.

In the article, “Ralph Ellison and the Metaphor of Invisibility,” Lieber discusses “two distinct modes of apprehending the dilemmas of invisibility” that appear in African American works. Lieber begins his discussion with the concept of “innate or inherent invisibility” in which one assumes an invisibility that is involuntary and results from the black people’s experience in America, an experience in which their humanity is refused or ignored. The second approach that Lieber refers to is mask-wearing; although it is not inherent, it is a “related aspect of the same problem” (86-87). This notation of mask wearing is seen as a voluntary invisibility, and it situates Emma Jean’s wearing of the mask as an acknowledgment of her own invisibility.

Like Emma Jean’s community who ignores her bruises, Gus, prior to his marriage to Emma Jean, disregards his future wife’s desire and voice when he decides to build their future home. Before Emma Jean marries Gus, Gus declares that his duty as a man is to provide a house for his wife. Whether his wife likes the house he builds or not is not Gus’s focus. He declares that she will “simply have to get use to [the house he builds]” (26). Recalling Lawrence-Webb’s examination of African Americans exchanging certain aspects of their relationship for their material well-being, the reader sees that Gus exchanges his desires to make his wife happy with his family’s need of shelter. Again, Black indicates another arena in which Emma Jean is neglected and her desires ignored.
While specific events establish Emma Jean’s role as “invisible woman,” Black utilizes Emma Jean and Mae Helen’s relationship as a device to illustrate the probable origin of Emma Jean’s invisibility and the extreme to which she takes the notion, making her son, Perfect, into her perfect “daughter.”

Lieber notes mask wearing as a “vehicle for an expression of anguish and despair” (87). Thus, the narrator’s recollection of Emma Jean’s eighth birthday portrays such anguish and despair. The narrator recounts multiple accounts of verbal and physical abuse that compel the reader to empathize with Emma Jean. As a child, Emma Jean never had a birthday party, and on the morning of her eighth birthday, she is overwhelmed with excitement and finally has the courage to ask her mother if she may “have one this time... nothin’ big ... just a li’l yellow cake ... and a scoop o’ ice cream ... ain’t even got to invite nobody” (20). Not only is Emma Jean struck across the forehead with a skillet by Mae Helen, but she is also called “a selfish li’l bitch... a nobody... [and] a po’, ugly, black ass nigga” for requesting a birthday party (20). Emma Jean is filled with sorrow, and “the image of the pretty lemon cake [she had hoped to have] dissolved in her head” (25). She abandons her aspirations of ever having a birthday party and of ever hearing her mother say, “That looks great, honey!” or “Momma’s so proud of you” and accepts her status as “nobody,” telling her mother “I know I ain’t nobody” (20). Emma Jean then attempts to live her life while deferring her dreams.

Furthermore, the title of Black’s novel, *Perfect Peace*, in its irony, draws attention to the idea of a search for “perfect peace.” Although many of the characters, including Emma Jean, reach their personal goal of finding perfect peace, their peace is always
interrupted. What is assumed is that a lifetime of perfect peace is inconceivable. The novel opens with Gus’s inability to find peace as he feels deceived by Emma Jean’s pregnancy. While he waits “to unleash with the spring rains instead of strangling her” (3), Gus cannot find his perfect peace at this point in the novel. In addition, Emma Jean represses her dreams of having a birthday party or a loving mother; therefore, she cannot attain perfect peace.

Mae Helen neglects Emma Jean and treats her as if she is inferior and inhuman. Similar to the fairy tale story of Cinderella in which Cinderella is hated and poorly treated by her stepmother, Emma Jean’s childhood parallels the trials and tribulations of a daughter whose mother hates her. Although Mae Helen is not Emma Jean’s stepmother, Mae Helen treats her daughters, Gracie and Pearlie, as if only they are her biological children, largely leaving Emma Jean out. Gracie acknowledges Mae Helen’s hatred and attests to Pearlie, “you know Momma don’t like her,” referring to Emma Jean (24). Mae Helen professes to Emma Jean, “I shoulda named you Nobody” (20). Every morning, including the morning of Emma Jean’s eighth birthday, Mae Helen instructs Emma Jean not to wake her sisters because they need their beauty sleep. Emma Jean recalls that her past disobedience in this matter has caused “the sting of Mae Helen’s backhand [to] linger across her cheek for days” (19). In the final analysis, Mae Helen could not love Emma Jean the way she loved Gracie and Pearlie because Mae Helen could not love herself.

In the article, “Black Naturalism and Toni Morrison: The Journey away from Self-Love in The Bluest Eye,” Patrice Cormier-Hamilton discusses naturalism as “the
idea that one’s social and physical environments drastically affect one’s nature and potential for surviving and succeeding in this world” (109). Applying this notion to the Emma Jean’s social environment, it is easier to draw connections between her mother-daughter relationship with Mae Helen, and her mother-daughter relationship with Perfect.

The childhood that Emma Jean did not have, she gives to Perfect. As a child, Emma Jean is neglected by her mother, she shares a bed and a room with Gracie and Pearlie, she never had a birthday party or cake, and she even has to share her single Christmas gift, a doll. In contrast Emma Jean gives Perfect a room of his own, a birthday party with a three-layer cake and guests, his own doll for Christmas, and her undivided attention.

As a result of the mask that Emma Jean wears, she is blind to how much she has in common with her mother, Mae Helen, as Emma Jean separates herself from her mother. While Emma Jean acknowledges and remembers the abuse that she suffered from her mother, she decides that she will have a different life with her “daughter,” Perfect. Emma Jean’s attempt to branch away from her mother’s destructive behavior can be explained by Cormier-Hamilton’s concept of self-preservation appearing in African American literature:

what is “at stake”?... in black fiction in general is a consistent emphasis on the need to resist forces stemming from society which may serve to destroy “continuity of black cultural heritage” by a conscious embracing of the past combined with a concurrent quest for identity. (111)

Black supports this idea through Emma Jean’s relationship with God as well. For Emma Jean, God continually resists her prayer to have a daughter. As a member in the
community church, Emma Jean keeps faith in God, as she refers to her pastor's teachings and writes each of her children’s names, the year, date, and month of their birth “in the huge white family Bible resting on the sofa end table” as a symbol of her faith in God (6). However, once Emma Jean grows weary of God’s apparent unwillingness to give her a daughter, she begins to curse Him and, thus, questions her faith arise in the sense that she questions God’s motives. Emma Jean is “disgusted and disappointed when another boy arrived” because Emma and Gus agreed that the birth of the fourth child had to be a girl. By their sixth child, Emma Jean’s desperation to have a daughter grows into rage. Although she had thanked God for the survival of her children, “with each birth she prayed the curse of the boys would end” (12). When Mister, her sixth son, is born, Emma Jean’s thoughts of God are that He “must think [giving her sons] is funny…why does He love to watch people suffer …what kind of God is He anyway…” (13). Emma Jean’s notion that God does not want to see her happy, aligns with Allen Alexander’s examination of God’s characteristics. He suggests that there is a “fourth face of God”:

God possesses a fourth face, one that is an explanation for all those things—existence of evil, the suffering of the innocent and just—that seem so inexplicable in the face of a religious tradition that preaches the omnipotence of a benevolent God. (293)

Mae Helen fosters this notion of “the fourth face of God.” Her own self-hatred is manifested through her abuse of Emma Jean. She only speaks negatively when referring to Emma Jean’s nappy hair and her “navy blue complexion,” features that Emma Jean inherits from Mae Helen. Unlike Emma Jean, Gracie and Pearlie, who look more like
their father, Sampson Hurt, whose “straight hair and golden skin tone were sufficient for black folks to think he was” handsome” and they were considered to be “pretty folks” (23). If “the fourth face of God” is evil, Mae Helen’s self-hatred represents this evilness. Mae Helen’s abhorrence at the sight of Emma Jean at birth is outrageous. Like Emma Jean who believes that God “loves to watch people suffer” (13), Mae Helen’s repulsion of Emma Jean’s complexion represents this same notion. When Emma Jean is born with dark skin, unlike her father’s, Claude Lovejoy, yellow complexion, the only reason Mae Helen sleeps with him, Mae Helen is offended and “swears she’d never sleep with [him] again”(23). Claude laughs at Mae Helen and tells her that, “[Emma Jean] looks jes’ like you” (23). Mae Helen gets angrier and tells Claude to “get the hell outta [her] house” (23). She refuses to see that she is the reason for what she considers to be Emma Jean’s ugliness.

Mae Helen’s preference of Sampson Hurt’s “golden skin tone,” along with Claude Lovejoy’s skin which was “a shade yellower than [Sampson’s], over her own dark skin drove Emma Jean to wear the “yellow” complexions in any way should could. For Emma Jean yellow is a “perfect” symbol of Emma Jean’s becoming that “perfect” yellow tint that her mother admired and at times worshipped. Unlike Mae Helen’s disappointment when Emma Jean is born with her dark skin tone, Mae Helen “celebrated the two daughters” (23) she bore who resembled their father. The color yellow frequently appears throughout the novel as Emma Jean wants a yellow cake for her eighth birthday. Emma Jean dresses Perfect in a yellow dress, puts yellow ribbons on her pigtails, paints her room yellow, and buys her a doll whose hair is blond and dress is
yellow. As well, the color yellow can be recognized as a symbol of hope. When Mae Helen makes love to the “yellow-skinned” Claude and Sampson, their “presence alone, especially inside her, allowed her to believe that someone at least could love her” (23).

For Emma Jean, her seventh child, Perfect Peace, is the “perfect” peace she longs for. Emma Jean creates her imaginary “perfect” self, the self that her mother would have loved, when she “makes” Perfect into a girl. Not only is Perfect the daughter she desperately prayed God to give her, he embodies the beauty that, perhaps, if she had had, Mae Helen would have loved her. When Perfect is born, Emma Jean is able to remove part of the tragedy from her childhood.

Margaret Mills examines the role of the female trickster in her article, “The Gender of the Trick: Female Tricksters and Male Narrators,” in which she quotes a Persian proverb: “women are considered to excel even the devil himself in trickery” (238). Applied to Emma Jean, this proverb suggests that there is a level of evil and, therefore, a compromising of integrity when she attempts to mask. Once Emma Jean has worn her mask of control, she covers her weakness with a mask of destructive power. Concurring with this notion, Mills also notes the essential elements of the female trickster:

in defense of her own virtue frequently makes such a switch from potential prize/victim to pseudo-ally, as her definitive strategic move in taking control of those who threaten her…she incarcerates them in a dark, close space…forbidding them the normal…male’s access to public…she
deftly annexes them to her own domestic female economy: she forces them to take up women’s work. (247)

When Emma Jean is pregnant with Perfect, she sees the birth of another son as a threat to her dream. Emma Jean asserts her idea of a daughter’s role as someone who wanted her and thought she was the greatest mother in the whole wide world ... someone who needed her like her sisters had needed their mother, Mae Helen, years ago ... someone who justified why she, Emma Jean, hadn’t murdered Mae Helen back when she had the nerve ... she needed a girl. (14)

Therefore, Emma Jean’s attempt to trick her family and community is a result of the mask and the nature of her selfhood that drives her to overthrow God’s authority and recreate His blessing as she attempts the impossible, making God’s gift of a child into whatever gender she pleases. In making Perfect into a girl, Emma Jean objectifies and victimizes him. While Perfect becomes Emma Jean’s mask, he is also forced to mask. Emma Jean creates an invisibility that she forces Perfect to inherit. It is as if Emma Jean pulls the mask off of herself and places it on Perfect. Now, the mother to her first daughter, Emma Jean is empowered with a false sense of blessing and tries to justify her trickery as “God’s the one Who made this possible. And I thank Him for it” (29). Before making this claim, Emma Jean had previously declared, “If God thought He was going to deny [me]” a daughter this time, “He had another thing coming” (14). Like the devil, Emma Jean challenges God.
Mills continues her examination of the concepts of trickery including “forms of deception … duplicitous persuasive techniques (seduction) … sleight-of-hand and conjuring … and of course, disguise” (240). Emma Jean’s mask functions as a disguise of seduction, and even Gus falls prey to Emma Jean’s deception. He believes only that he has been tricked by Emma Jean into having another child. She realized that he did not want any more children because he and his family were “barely eatin’ as it is” (37), but Emma Jean had sworn to him that she could no longer have children. Emma Jean blackmails her midwife, Henrietta, forcing her to betray Perfect, Gus, Emma Jean’s sons, and the community. Before Henrietta agrees to lie about Perfect’s gender, she tries expressing to Emma Jean the unease she is feeling in doing such a thing. However, Emma Jean refuses to accept no. The narrator captures a dialogue between Emma Jean and Henrietta which illustrates their disagreement as well as Emma Jean blackmailing Henrietta.

After hearing Emma Jean say that Perfect was going to be a girl, instead of the boy he is, Henrietta tells Emma Jean, “I know you wanted [a girl] and all, but…you must be done lost you’ mind…That baby ain’t no girl” (15). Emma Jean tells Henrietta, “keep your mouth shut and we’ll all be fine” (16). Henrietta insists that she “ain’t goin’ ‘long wit’ no mess like [passing a boy as a girl].” Emma Jean’s desperation to mask her son as her girl impels Emma Jean to blackmail Henrietta. Emma Jean states, “Oh, sure you will…unless you want folks to know ‘bout Louise’s baby” (16). Louise, Henrietta’s now dead sister, had been told she was unable to bear children. Although she told her husband, Preacher Man, that having children was a health risk for her, he demanded that
she become pregnant saying “that’s what a wife’s s’pose to do” (30). Louise gave her best effort in birthing a child, but she died during delivery; Henrietta delivered the baby. Henrietta was angry at her brother-in-law for insisting on Louise’s having a baby and, as a result, causing her death. Three days before the birth of Louise’s daughter, Henrietta had given birth to a child, but the child was stillborn. When Louise died, Henrietta did not feel Preacher Man wanted a daughter, so she told him that Louise and their baby had died. Henrietta raised her niece as her daughter, never knowing anyone except her husband, her sister Louise, and she knew about the deception. Emma Jean was not concerned about the specifics of Louise’s daughter becoming Henrietta’s daughter, but she suggested that her action of “creating” a daughter out of a son was no worse than Henrietta’s stealing another man’s daughter: “a woman does strange things sometimes...since you didn’t have no children of yo’ own...you thought you’d just take one” (29-30). Although Henrietta does not want to hurt Perfect or betray anyone’s trust, she also does not want to risk her daughter’s happiness or Preacher’s Man’s new marriage. So, Henrietta decides that jeopardizing her own daughter’s happiness to insure Perfect’s best chance at happiness is not worth the risk of divulging the secret. However, after that day Henrietta “took her medicine bag out behind the house and set it ablaze. She didn’t want to deliver babies anymore” (35). Clearly, Henrietta confirms the idea that Emma Jean’s alteration of God’s blessing is a living demonstration of Alexander’s notion of God’s evil side.

Emma Jean’s obstruction of God’s blessing also aligns with Alexander’s examination of Morrison’s novel *The Bluest Eye*: 
[Morrison’s] depiction of the deity is an attempt to humanize God, to demonstrate how God … is not the ethereal God of traditional Western religion but a God who, while retaining certain Western characteristics, has much in common with the deities of traditional African religion and legend. (293)

Alexander continues by informing the reader of the “African folklor[ic] God [who] is often depicted as having very human-like qualities … a sense of humor and a streak of fallibility…who consequently possesses many of the characteristics of his imperfect creation” (295-296). Black engages in this discussion when he creates Mae Helen’s victimization of Emma Jean which, it can be argued, has a direct correlation to Emma Jean victimizing Perfect.

After Emma Jean forces Perfect to wear a “gender mask,” Emma Jean becomes stressed and concerned that Perfect’s true gender will be discovered. At Perfect’s eighth birthday party, Emma Jean sees Perfect’s best friend, Eva Mae, whispering in another child’s ear. Emma Jean is paranoid that Eva Mae might know about Perfect and will tell others because Eva Mae and Perfect are always together and on several occasions both children have left Emma Jean’s sight when playing. Emma Jean’s mask of power instructs her to maintain control, for she is unwilling to “just watch her life disintegrate” (125). As a result, Emma Jean strips Perfect of his identity a second time. After Perfect’s birthday party, Emma Jean takes him to the woods, cuts his long ponytails, removes his yellow dress, and tells him that she, Perfect, was born a boy. These words serve as a blow to Perfect, one similar to the skillet-blow Mae Helen applied to Emma
Jean’s forehead. Emma Jean now forces her “daughter” to become her son. Without thought of consequences to Perfect, Emma Jean strips Perfect’s identity from him with a few words.

While African religion attempts to humanize God, Alexander also notes that “traditional African religions tend to understand tragedy as something that happens regardless of what humans have or have not done” (296). It can be assumed that Black agrees. As a result of Emma Jean’s power to “make” her son a girl and then to uncreate his female-self and recreate his male-self, Emma Jean masks herself as a god. Her mask is not only of human power, but a mask of God’s power. As well, Emma Jean acknowledges that she had been “an obedient daughter, even when her mother beat ... her” (13). Thus, Black uses Emma Jean to suggest that it is not what she has done or not done that determines her tragedy; she had no choice in her fate, just as Perfect has no control over his fate.

Black proceeds to demonstrate Alexander’s notion of inevitable tragedy. However, Black’s approach is to show the beauty in tragedy. This approach compels the reader to sympathize with Emma Jean, acknowledging that she finds beauty in her own tragedy. But before further discussing Emma Jean’s tragedy, it is important to note Gus’s ability to appreciate the tragedy of his son, Bartimaeus, being born blind, and, one could argue, of using Barimaeus’s blindness for his own needs. Black petitions on behalf of Emma Jean by recounting Gus’s childhood and the effects of his father’s, Chester Peace, Sr., teachings. Like Emma Jean, Gus grew up feeling that there were parts of him that could not be loved; hated by her mother for her nappy hair and dark skin, Emma Jean
grew up feeling unloved and alone. This feeling continues into her adulthood, for she is the only female in her household. Likewise, when Gus was a boy, his father forbade him to cry. Whenever Gus did cry, he felt “the indelible imprint of Chester Sr.’s inordinately large hand on [his] tender face” (1). Chester Sr. taught Gus that “tears didn’t speak well for one who would, one day, become a man” (1). So, as Gus grew older, he “never learned to control his tears,” but “learned instead to hide whenever he felt their approach” (1). Unaware of words like “injustice or inequity” because of his third-grade vocabulary, Gus expressed his hatred for both through tears. Forced to hide his passion and tears, Gus, “every spring since his tenth birthday, when the scent of moisture filled his nose he escaped to the Jordan River and stood amid the rain, wailing away pain like a woman in labor” (2). As a father, Gus “pray[s] that his sons [will not] inherit his oversized heart” (11). After decades of going to the river to hide his tears, Gus and Emma Jean’s fifth son, blind Bartimaeus, is born. Prior to Bartimaeus’s birth, Gus spends every spring and every spare moment at the river alone. There is no one to join him, no one who shares his “emotional fragility,” and he has no way to express his love and acceptance of his own tears; so, “he simply knew he’d have to teach the boy to hold his heart until he found a safe, obscure purging place” (11). “Gus further appreciated his son’s blindness now, for it allowed him to usher Bartimaeus through the cleansing without fear that the boy was gawking at him” (40-41). Not wanting any of his other sons to witness his vulnerability, Gus appreciates Bartimaeus’s blindness and companionship and enjoys having someone with whom to share his “invisible manhood.” Although Bartimaeus shares these moments at the Jordan River with his father, his blindness does not allow him to see what Chester
Sr. considers fallibility, Gus’s tears, which is a good thing to Gus. Black uses Gus’s childhood invisibility and his bond with Bartimaeus to remind the reader of the isolation and loneliness of masking and the salvation from it through friendship and love. Both Gus’s and Bartimaeus’s tragedies are celebrated, and they have discovered beauty.

Gus and Bartimaeus’s bond and friendship evolves throughout the novel, and the reader is reminded of this bond after Perfect is born and Emma Jean has stolen his identity, creating in Perfect a form of blindness. Emma Jean, isolated in childhood by her mother and now the only woman in her household, longs for a daughter. Although, Emma Jean’s decision to force her child to wear a mask is tragic and destructive, Black appeals to the very nature of humanity, expressing Emma Jean’s desire for friendship, and her need to for “someone who needed her like her sisters had needed their mother” (14). This need parallels Gus and Bartimaeus’s bond; Gus teaches Bartimaeus to conceal his tears and enjoys his companionship while masking. Emma Jean’s thoughts of making Perfect as a girl and her thought that “[Perfect’s] jes’ a little different from most other little girls, but she’ll never know that if don’t nobody tell her” (29), is her acceptance and approval of Perfect’s “blindness.” Emma Jean appreciates Perfect’s blindness; it allows Emma Jean to have a daughter with whom she can share womanhood. Before Perfect was born, Emma Jean cleaned the house alone, prepared family meals and the dinner table alone, and she had no daughter to love the way she wanted her mother to love her. Emma Jean creates a life in which she can survive. Perfect is unable to see Emma Jean’s misjudgment in stealing his identity, and Emma Jean remains pleased with Perfect’s blindness. Although Perfect’s “gender mask” does not change the fact that he was born
with a penis and not a vagina, Emma Jean is comforted with her own image of Perfect. She raises Perfect as her daughter; therefore, he is her daughter. Emma Jean reconstructs what she considers a blessing, no longer willing to accept another son. Instead of “seeing” the blessing of having another child, Emma Jean “makes” and reconstructs the blessing of the son that God gives her.

In an unlikely manner, Gus and Emma Jean begin to love themselves through their children’s masking and blindness. Black steers the reader away from hating Emma Jean to understanding her. Gus and Emma Jean see within their children their own desires for parental love. More importantly, Emma Jean’s creation of a daughter is a manifestation of self-love. Misguided by her mother’s, Mae Helen, self-hatred, Emma Jean recreates her definition of self-love. Although Emma Jean refuses to speak of her mother and rejects an invitation to visit her when she is ill, Emma Jean is deeply affected by her mother’s neglect. While she cannot relive her childhood as Mae Helen’s daughter, she can to some degree relive her childhood through Perfect.

Bartimaeus’s relationship with Gus represents the relationship that Gus wanted with his father, one that does not include violence or contempt of his “unmanly” tears. Likewise, Emma Jean had only wanted her mother to love her and acknowledge her as one of her daughters, along with Gracie and Pearlie. Emma Jean has Perfect, and the bond that they share makes up for the parental love that Emma Jean never felt—at least for a time. Unfortunately, for Emma Jean, Perfect’s awakening from “gender mask” creates a new despair for Emma Jean. No longer masking Perfect as her daughter, Emma
Jean struggles with her own childhood and her decision to make Perfect a girl. The narrator allows the reader to envision Emma Jean’s thoughts:

[Emma Jean] hadn’t meant to twist up the child’s mind, as Authorly had put it, until he didn’t know right from left. She had simply wanted a daughter, and she didn’t understand why she couldn’t have one. Since her days with Mae Helen, she had heard nothing but “no” and “you’re not good enough” and “you ain’t nothin’” and “you don’t deserve this or that.” so she promised herself that, when she got grown, she would have something she wanted and something she loved. And nobody would keep her from it. (303)

At a later point in the novel, after Emma Jean has told Perfect that he was born a boy and that she made him a girl, Perfect, now 18, is referred to as Paul. In Emma Jean’s desperate attempt to redeem herself from stealing Perfect’s identity, Emma Jean promises Henrietta, her midwife, that she will work for her if she makes Paul the perfect suit for his school dance. Once the suit is made and the dance has ended, Emma Jean begins working for Henrietta. Emma Jean is certain that because she had survived Mae Helen’s abuse, “it would take more than physical labor to break her down” (303). However, Emma Jean is unaware of the psychological labors that she will endure. Cormier-Hamilton refers to this notion of mental labor as “the psychological barriers African American must travel through before they can acknowledge the past and consequently achieve self-identity” (115). As Emma Jean proceeds to sew, she is forced into silence, having no one, not even Henrietta to talk to. “Endless hours passed with
Henrietta either quiet or absent, and, in that time, Emma Jean’s mind, without her heart’s permission, wandered back to moments and decisions she never thought she’d reconsider” (306). Silence is given a voice, and Emma Jean begins speaking with it frequently. And it is important to note here that, in the novel, the words attributed to “silence” are all italicized, affirming that the voice of silence be set apart from the thoughts of Emma Jean. But as in important as the character of silence, is the story is the act of sewing that correlates to the periods when Emma Jean is sewing and speaking with “silence.” In the article, “The Power of the Pin: Sewing as an Act of Rootedness in American Literature,” Ozzie Mayers examines the symbolic meaning of sewing in literature. Mayers suggests that sewing is a “symbolic act” in which the character participating in the act of sewing experiences bonding . . . bondings . . . nurturing . . . reconciliation . . . and most significant . . . sewing . . . represents a discovery of individuality, an awareness of a self worth preserving (672).

Despite Emma Jean’s inability to foresee how sewing “would torture her into believing she had not done the right thing for Perfect,” she is taken on a journey of self-discovery in which she first confronts her past. The silence that Emma Jean speaks to forces her to confront her past. Through sewing and the silence it creates, Emma Jean is visited by the ghosts of her past. Once in childhood, Emma Jean’s father, Claude Lovejoy, came to visit her, but Emma Jean, still struggling to receive Mae Helen’s love, rejects her father. Her father’s face appears before her, and asks Emma Jean, “Why did you reject me” (306). Although Emma Jean wanted to resist answering the voice of
silence, she responds, “I was a child” (306). Later silence forces Emma Jean to confront what she had done to Perfect:

You shouldn’t have done that to [Perfect]... You’re selfish... You should be ashamed. You have no idea what you’ve done. And all because you wanted something you couldn’t have... Even if others didn’t think about you, you didn’t have the right to mess up that boy’s life... You had everything. A husband, six boys, your.... (309).

The silence which engulfs Emma Jean insists upon her facing her past, and, as a result, Emma Jean’s “confident, self-assured” self is replaced by a “sullen, discomposed” self (308). Emma Jean addresses the hurt she suffered at the hands of Mae Helen when silence asks, “Mae Helen’s gone now. She can’t hurt you anymore. You can let it go” (311). Afterwards, Emma Jean exclaims that it was nothing to admit that Mae Helen hurt her. So, naturally there is something else that Emma Jean needs to confront, and the silence brought her back to Perfect. Tortured by the silence in sewing, Emma Jean confesses that she was wrong to make her son a girl.

Although the narrator tells the reader that “Emma Jean never recovered,” Black suggests that Emma Jean did achieve self-integration. Emma Jean is incapable of removing the new-found silence from her life or the “girl nature” from her son, Paul. Emma Jean does not want to “be tortured with the truth for the rest of her life” (324). Black supports Emma Jean and traces her thoughts and fears in the following passage:

Unable to foresee herself in the future, [Emma Jean], marched boldly to the edge of a jutting rock and, with the help of God’s heavy hands,
plunged headfirst into the chilly Jordan. It swallowed her whole and rocked her in its tumultuous bosom. It loved her and accepted her for who she was. And who she wasn’t. It embraced her with loving arms and never let her go...stripped [Emma Jean] of . . . clothes, memories, guilt, shame--as it prepared her for the land of everlasting love. (333)

Although Emma Jean kills herself, it is an act of self-love. She refuses to allow herself anymore suffering, and drowns herself at the Jordan. Emma Jean finds freedom and love in death. For her, the Jordan River is a place where she is able to live and escape the torturing confrontation of her past and the further destruction of herself. The Jordan River’s acceptance of “who she [is]...and who she [is not],” (33) gives her hope. Emma Jean believes that “she’d get a new body and a new spirit...and maybe, if she got the chance to live again, she’d come back as a pretty little black girl” (333). In this idea of death, Emma Jean receives hope, and her wounds heal. After Emma Jean confronts her true selfhood, she is resolved to die engulfed in love.
CHAPTER III

MASKING IN OBERY HENDRICKS’S *LIVING WATER*

“It seemed her hopes, her halting dreams, and in a real sense, her self-worth, too, had been snatched and pulled away before the dawn of their first morning together by the empty, grasping man-child with whom she had been sentenced to share her life. That is how her marriage began.” *Living Water*

In his novel, *Living Water*, Hendricks gives an extended and detailed version of the biblical story of the woman at the well. Hendricks maintains the biblical setting and time; however, the dialogue throughout the novel is in African American dialect. In an interview with radio personality, Tavis Smiley, Hendricks provides his own description of his novel: “…an African American retelling of [the biblical story]...[with] characters [who] are African American, and the story is told through the lens of African American culture, sensibilities,...needs,...desires, and struggles” (Hendricks). Hendricks highlights the destruction of what appears to be a fictitious law created as a result of the brutality faced by the Samaritan community. He examines racial, spiritual, and sexual oppression. Hendricks captures the torture and the testimony of Maryam, the woman at the well, who is not addressed by her name until the 11th chapter of the novel. When Maryam is nine years old, her father, Aridai, forces her to hide her exuberance and bravery. In fear of Aridai’s abuse towards Maryam, Ma Tee, Maryam’s grandmother and Aridai’s mother, employs herself to teach Maryam obedience and carefulness, warning her “to be careful how [she] lives” (43). Ma Tee is aware that Maryam’s
“gibora-mindedness” (gibora means strength, bravery, and boldness) will lead to her destruction. Maryam’s father, along with the majority of the men in her Samaritan community, is angry, evil, and threatens the women in the community against being “gibora-minded.” If any girl or woman disobeys, she is beaten and/or divorced, and possibly forced to live on the streets. As a result, Maryam wears a submissive mask to prove her obedience and to protect herself against the unwritten laws in her community: “to walk through … life, not run…to be quiet, to lower [her] gaze and speak when …spoken to” (52). Maryam is conflicted with her physical and emotional displacement. She struggles through five failed marriages, her daughter’s murder, and her fifth husband’s suicide. Later in the novel, Maryam marries her sixth husband, Yeshua, whose love initiates Maryam’s redefinition of marriage. He is not like her father whose love is invisible and void. He believes that women are equal to men. And, in connection with Yeshua’s sense of fairness, after years of forced masking, Maryam evolves and discovers herself.

Maryam’s name—or what others call her—changes throughout the novel, and so does her identity. Similar to Emma Jean, in Perfect Peace, whose mother only sees her outer appearance, Maryam is often limited by her physical appearance. The narrator introduces Maryam as “the little girl with cinnamon skin” (3). Immediately the reader knows the importance of Maryam’s appearance. Considering that Maryam is not introduced by name but by physical characteristics, Hendricks centers the reader’s attention on Maryam’s physical attributes which represent the social caste within the Samaritan community. The reader knows her age, her gender, and her skin complexion;
therefore, the reader also knows how Maryam is viewed by her community. Early in the novel, the townspeople comment and focus on Maryam’s outward appearance; her inner self, her emotions, and her intellect are of little or no importance to them. In the first chapter of the novel, the narrator notes how the townswomen watch Maryam and send prayer to Hokmah, the female side of God, to “stay with [Maryam]...You know how men are about gibora-mindedness” (4). As well, the men sit, watching Maryam and say, “look at that girl, running around like she’s a boy...I wouldn’t let no female whatsoever dishonor my name like that” (4). Later in the novel, Maryam’s fifth husband, Nahshon marries her, in part, because he hopes that her “light-skin” will be passed on to their sons (233). After all five of Maryam’s marriages, she comes face to face with the man, Abba Samuel, who performs her five marriage ceremonies. He cannot recall Maryam’s name which further supports the concept of Emma Jean’s invisibility.

The variations of the referents relating to Maryam illustrate the impact of society on her identity. Importantly, Lieber notes that “identity is to a great extent socially bestowed and socially maintained” (88). Maryam’s friend, an older gentleman, Mr. Ishmael, unlike any of the other Samaritan men, calls her “little-girl friend, little friend-girl” and when she is at the age of betrothal, “Miss Friend-Girl.” Mr. Ishmael’s attention to the word friend suggests that he considers Maryam his friend beyond anything else. Even after Maryam is forced to mask, to Mr. Ishmael, she is always a friend. To her grandmother, Maryam is “busy body, child, and baby.” Maryam represents who Ma Tee once was and who Ma Tee wishes Maryam still could be. Ma Tee acknowledges Maryam’s busy spirit, the one that keeps her running, asking question, and full of energy.
Unfortunately Ma Tee recognizes these things as destructive characteristics for a young girl in a patriarchal society. Although Ma Tee is reluctant to assist in Maryam’s masking, she finds it necessary. She teaches Maryam “to put men’s thoughts and interest above her own” (54). Her repetition of referring to Maryam as “child” and “baby” makes it appear that Ma Tee is trying to freeze Maryam into a childlike state so that she does not have to deal with the “the coldest days of womanhood” (18). Then there are her playmates whose “listening, the hearing, the internalization of the hard judgments of their fathers … learn to be complicit in the slow strangulation of her spirit and the gradual shackling of their own” (6). As her playmates leave her to play alone, fearful of what their father’s will think of them playing with her, Maryam is socially isolated, and she “is left grasping … [and] little by little the small voice that usually befriended her instead began to admit a growing decay in its humor” (7). To the men and some of the women in her community, Maryam is just a gibora child, a notion that assists with the suppression of her identity and the wearing of the mask of submission.

Like Emma Jean, Maryam’s oppression originates in childhood at the hands of a parent. While Maryam’s mother is briefly mentioned in the novel, her absence conveys that Maryam is neglected by her mother. Maryam’s father concerns himself with Maryam’s gibora ways only after other men confront him. After Maryam is seen running and panting through the town, the townsmen feel that it is their duty to warn Aridai of his own trouble in having a gibora daughter and his declining status as a man, for “a man unable to control his womenfolk—that is no man at all” (47). Considering such facts,
Aridai asserts himself as a man and supposes that his only viable alternative is to beat Maryam.

Hendricks illustrates female objectification throughout the novel. When the townspeople discuss Maryam’s *gibora* nature with her father, Aridai, they are concerned with the profit that Aridai will receive once Maryam marries. They inform Aridai that the size of Maryam’s mohar, “the bride-price he can demand for his daughter to become another man’s chattel is fast diminishing” (46). Aridai receives their concerns yet he is humiliated that Maryam “been out dishonorizing [his] name, growing up all mouthy and *gibora*-minded like she’s a man-child or something” (49).

Hendricks addresses the collective oppression enforced by the townspeople. Early in the novel, a boy asks his father, “What’s gibora, Daddy” (5)? His father answers:

Something shouldn’t no woman ever be, son. Or no girl-child either.

Better for a woman to be deaf, blind, and not able to speak a word than for her to be *gibora*...the last thing any man wants is a *gibora* woman.

They’re nothing but trouble...a gibora woman just don’t want to let a man be a man...they’re always keeping some mess going, arguing about this and questioning that. (5)

This answer represents the upbringing that all of the male children learn to fit into their lives, developing disdain for any woman or girl who, like Maryam, loves to run, ask questions, and speak before she is spoken to. Additionally the men have banned their daughters from playing with Maryam, and one man suggests fear as his reason: “I’m afraid they’ll [his daughters] get all messed up in their heads with all that *gibora*
stuff…that’s a headache I just don’t need” (46). Thus, girls are threatened into solitude, away from their childhood friends, if they do not comply to wear the mask of submission.

Like Mae Helen, Emma Jean’s mother in Perfect Peace, Aridai is embarrassed by his own flaws. Once Aridai’s fellow townspeople complain to him about Maryam and her gibora ways, Aridai is driven with embarrassment and travels home “with a branch slender and supple and long enough to crack like a whip and slash like a knife” (47) with plans to “cut the gibora clean out of [Maryam]” (47). Aridai plans to force Maryam into submission, and reclaim his position of power. Aridai knows that Maryam’s mannish behavior is viewed as dishonorable, and Maryam’s gibora-mindedness will also hinder her chance at marriage. In this awareness, Hendricks uses the dynamics of Maryam and Aridai’s relationship to express an overall father-daughter dynamics within the novel. The townsmen serve as surrogate fathers to all the girls in the town as they criticize any girl or woman, whether they are their daughters or wives, who act like Maryam.

In the examination of Cholly Breedlove, the father in Toni Morrison’s The Bluest Eye, Debra Werrein recalls Cholly’s abusive nature towards his daughter. Werrein comments that “through Cholly’s inability to express love constructively, Morrison paints a picture of black fatherhood so incapacitated that it sacrifices its children to save itself” (61). Accordingly, Aridai’s abuse towards Maryam reflects his absence or, at best, his invisible presence as a father, and Hendricks uses narration to illustrate Aridai’s role in Maryam’s life:

In [Aridai’s] studied practice of looking past her, looking over her, looking around and through her, she has warranted his notice only when
she has acted in ways that did not augur well for her future as a husband’s chattel. On those occasions Aridai counseled her with the shocking violence of the back of his hand. (45)

Aridai’s choice to neglect and abuse Maryam concurs with what Werrein reminds us of: “Morrison…suggesting that histories of suffering not only debilitate parents, but turn them from nurturers into oppressors” (61-61). One day, the Samaritan village was under attack by Roman soldiers. The Samaritan men were stripped of their clothes and their manhood and beaten while their wives and children watched. Afterwards the men were left feeling angry, “cursing them [the women] in their absence,” embarrassed, “unable to face the women in their shame,” and they felt incapable of protecting themselves and their families (35). Thus, the unwritten laws and the hatred for gibora-minded wives and daughters can be attributed to actions of abuse against the men and of their powerlessness. Therefore, Aridai fears being stripped of what classifies him as masculine. The history of the Samaritan men’s own oppression drives Aridai and the other fathers to become oppressors of their daughters and wives.

As well as parental neglect, Maryam’s mask also makes her invisible. As stated previously, Lieber identifies mask-wearing as a method of invisibility (87). Maryam tacitly agrees to wear the mask of submission which calls attention to her acknowledgement of her own invisibility. While Hendricks does not fully examine all five of Maryam’s marriages, her husbands, Jalon, Man, and Nahshon, stand beside her during their marriage ceremonies, none of the men know or care to know Maryam. Instead each husband focuses on their own desires.
Before presenting Maryam’s marriages, Hendricks captures the unrest that each marriage within the Samaritan community produces. When Maryam asks her grandmother, Ma Tee, what an *erwat dabar* (divorce) is, Mae Tee introduces her to a possible fate that women face if they are found doing “indecent thing[s]” (17). This *erwat dabar* is a way for the men to divorce their wives if they find her displeasing in anyway. Mae Tee describes some of the many qualifications of *erwat dabar*:

if you don’t give him children, especially sons, he can frown up his face and call that an *erwat dabar* and divorce you right out of your home.

Don’t keep his house clean like he wants, he can call that one, too. Miss cooking one of his meals, or cook it too done, or don’t snuggle up close enough to him in bed...it’s simple: when a man doesn’t want his wife anymore...he can declare anything she says or does an “indecent thing.” (17)

With this knowledge, Maryam’s fear forces her to fight for the survival of her marriages. She does not want to be put out of her home. So, she proceeds with life carefully, like Ma Tee tells her to. She greets each of her marriages with caution. Maryam appears to accept her fate, allowing men control over her flesh, suppressing her identity and wearing the mask of the happy and obedient wife. In her first marriage to Jalon, Maryam prepares for a life of pleasing her husband and abandoning her own freedom and desires to nurture his. In support of this idea of Maryam’s marriages, Hendricks speaks about what he tries to capture about the woman at the well and what he wants to convey to the reader:
[Maryam] was not a gold digger or some loose woman or some *femme fatale*...she did have five husbands...but...she was a woman who was denied the right to choose, who was denied the right to flower and live as she chose...choices were made for her ...her husbands... in their own way used her up and discarded her when they were through. (Hendricks)

Keeping Hendricks words in mind, it becomes easier to dissect the four marriages that are discussed in the novel. As Maryam remarries, she relocates and with each new marriage comes a new and different aspect of duty that she must perform. Maryam’s values are determined by her husbands, and with each marriage she must learn how to please differently.

Like Emma Jean, Maryam aspires to receive love from people who do not want to give it to her. Although Maryam is forced into her marriage with Jalon, she does not wish for the marriage to end. In Maryam’s marriage to Jalon, she is confronted with sexuality and motherhood, both duties she knows nothing about. Maryam tries unsuccessfully to make love to Jalon the way he prefers. Even though she hides her humiliations of being “pulled onto her knees before him [and] her face pulled against the...his groin” (123), her fear of being put out of her home coerces her to become a better wife, unaware of what that entails for Jalon. She refuses to spank, bite, or talk dirty to Jalon when they had intercourse, but she does tend to her hair and skin, prepares meals, greet him with sincerity which is not enough for Jalon. She cannot express her anguish, so she hides it. Jalon’s behavior is insulting and degrading as he never calls Maryam by her name, only referring to her as “stupid...ugly...skinny... [and] heifer”
(128). During their marriage, Jalon visits and sleeps with a prostitute, Big Mama, frequently. Jalon invites Maryam to travel with him on one of his visits, tricking her with compassion and promising her that “there’s a lot a man can experience with his wife in Shechem” (131). Jalon suggests to Maryam that Big Mama will teach her how to please him, how to nurture him like a mother and love him like a wife. Maryam wants to believe in Jalon, but her gut feeling that “it isn’t right” (137). Jalon divorces Maryam for not being “a woman who will rock [him] like a baby and rock [him] like a man” (143). She pleads with him to reconsider, but Jalon refuses. Jalon’s refusal to salvage what is left of his marriage to Maryam is reflective of the unbalanced effort in holding together marriage throughout the novel. While Maryam and the women committee to their marriage, Jalon and the men only committee to themselves. However, the women are always to blame for having been divorced.

Despite not knowing Man, her second husband, Maryam is forced to marry him. After Jalon divorces her, Maryam has no home to return to. Her father disowns her and her sister, Oholibamah, pleads with her husband to let Maryam live with them. Despite the sass that questioning her husband, Sonny Boy, will bring, Oholibamah asks Sonny Boy if Maryam can stay. After answering no on more than one occasion, Oholibamah tries again, this time alerting her husband to her own declining performance in her house chores and their marital bed. She requests that Sonny Boy understand that her sister’s wellbeing is attached to her own happiness and performance which changes Sonny Boy’s answer from a no to a yes. Nonetheless, Maryam’s stay isn’t long. Sonny Boy begins feeling passion for Maryam and refuses to give in to it, so he insists that Maryam is
remarried immediately. Oholibamah is silent with agreement because she fears that she will end up like Maryam, without a home or family, if Maryam stays any longer. Thus, Sonny Boy finds Maryam a new husband, Man. This is how her marriage to Man comes into play. Fearful of returning to her life without a husband and not really having a say in who she marries, Maryam marries Man. With Man, Maryam attempts carefulness not to arouse Man’s sorrow and tears and “to fit into his life as seamlessly and unobtrusively as she could” (197). Man suffers from the impeding grief over the death of his wife and children and refuses to love again. Thus, he seldom speaks to Maryam, and after months of marriage, they have not kissed, hugged, or consummated their marriage. What appeared to be a union of stability and comfort is stripped from Maryam. After consummating their marriage more than a year later, Man leaves Maryam. He refuses to let her love him. He burns the hut down that he and Maryam shares together and leaves her alone, without a husband or a home. Again, Maryam is displaced and dispossessed. She is left with more pain and Ma Tee’s treasured box of trinkets and the tunic she made for Man.

Maryam finds herself smiling at Nahshon, the man who will be her fifth husband, leaving her gifts, yet her soul is still troubled. Into her fifth, Maryam is no longer the girl who ran around like the boys. Now, unlike before, Maryam is “in a state of anxious tension… [has] developed a nervous twitch…ke[eps] a headache and her hair beg[ins] to fall out…smiling bec[omes] foreign to her” (247-248). Maryam’s mask leaves little room for freedom, and she is no longer lively, smiling at everyone she passes, and her “hair full of thick wavy braids” (248). In her childhood, questions were second nature,
but now they were something to avoid. She ignores her intuition and neglects the
questions she raises in silence, forcing them to disappear because she is taught that
questions lead to trouble, for her. She wears the humiliation from her marriage to Jalon,
the husband who left her for a prostitute and forced her father to disown her. Her soul is
tortured after falling in love with her second husband whom everyone including Maryam
calls Man. Maryam’s abandonment and divorces leave her feeling trapped, limited, and
imprisoned. After four marriages, Maryam has tended to the various needs of her
husbands. So, when Nahshon brings her gifts and courts her, Maryam does not see his
evil nature but his generosity. Despite her sister warning her not to marry Nahshon,
Maryam marries him anyhow.

Maryam’s marriage to Nahshon results in a pregnancy; like Emma Jean, her
freedom depends on her child’s gender. But unlike Emma Jean, Maryam is pleased no
matter what her child’s gender is. It is her husband who is concerned. He brags about
the arrival of a baby boy. For Nahshon, the birth of a daughter would be a sign of his
weakness. Maryam goes to Huldah, the town’s midwife, and receives a tea that she
believes will help her with pregnancy. Every night Maryam performs a ritual, “finger[s]
the amulet from Huldah, brew[s] tea from a bit of mandrake root, and pray[s] to be with
child” (250). Like Emma Jean, Maryam hopes that the birth of a child grants her a
“chance for happiness” (250). When Maryam gives birth to their daughter, Nahshon
takes the baby and kills her, declaring to Maryam, “I told you not to bring me no girl-
child…you wanted a girl…just to make me look bad” (257). Nahshon’s allegation
suggests that he acknowledges a power present in women, but he is unsure of its nature.
In his suggestion that Maryam is the cause of them having a daughter, the reader assumes that even in an act of God, the woman is at fault. However, the reader can also assume that Hendricks uses Nahshon’s allegation to show a direct line of communication from God to women.

Nahshon admits to killing all of his daughters, yet it is Maryam who stands accused of murder which represents the law that “if a man says it, his word is treated like law” (15). Therefore, the death of Nahshon’s daughters represents his, along with the townsmen, invincibility to the law. Earlier in the novel, Aridai too, mentions that he could have killed both daughters, Maryam and Oholibamah, but he didn’t, even in his belief in “firstborn girls are bad luck... [and the scripture] a man with sons is blessed” (49). Although Maryam is not convicted of Nahshon’s death, the fact of the matter is that she could have died because he could not live with himself, his flaws, or with her courage to stand against him. Maryam walks away from this marriage empowered and free from Nahshon’s torture.

The murder of Maryam’s daughter, while tragic, empowers Maryam to disconnect from Nahshon mentally and physically which represents her disconnection from her mask and the acceptance of her own oppression. While Maryam’s silence does not come in the same “symbolic act” of sewing, as does Emma Jean’s, her silence is just as powerful as Emma Jeans. Nahshon begins to hear Maryam’s silence differently. Instead of “the quiescence of defeat” Nahshon heard “the declaimed and proclaimed language of impudence and overt challenge” (259). Maryam grows unresponsive, she does not
protest to having sex with Nahshon, even though she is not healed. Hendricks allows narration to express Nahshon’s fear of Maryam’s new found silence:

More than that, now he [Nahshon] saw the paucity of her response to him, her uncaring if he spoke or did not, if he touched her or did not, as a real and manifest denial of his power to control her movements, even her smallest moods, as real as if she had cursed him to his face. (258)

Hendricks illustrates women’s role in defining men’s masculinity, more specifically, Maryam’s role in Nahshon’s identity as a powerful man. When the townsmen ridicule Nahshon for Maryam’s birthing a daughter and not a son, Nahshon begins to “feel …the true measure of weakness” and feels that he must reassert himself as a powerful man. Therefore, when Nahshon and Maryam visit the town’s market, Nahshon plans to recapture the power that he feels the birth of a daughter has stripped from him. Nahshon attempts to publically degrade Maryam in an effort to reestablish his power. Nahshon believes that if the other men witness his control over his wife, he will no longer suffer their ridicule and will regain his masculine standing amongst the townsmen and within the community.

Nahshon’s attempt to use his control over Maryam to employ his masculinity backfires when Maryam refuses to comply. After Nahshon commands Maryam to “pull herself together…and do what [he] say[s],” Maryam responds: “Nahshon, I don’t care what you feel or don’t feel. I just know that I’m tired. I have bowed my head to you for the last time” (264). Nahshon tries to regain himself, not expecting Maryam’s defiance, and he follows his words with violent blows to Maryam’s body. However, Maryam does
not fall, but stands before Nahshon, “burie[s] her knee in Nahshon’s groin” (266), yank[s] his head to expose his throat and raise[s] her arm” (267) with a knife in her hand.  
Nahshon pleads with Maryam and begs her not to kill him, promising that he will give her another daughter. This act leaves Nahshon embarrassed and emasculated; he feels that his manhood, his masculinity, and his power are now irreparable. When both, Nahshon and Maryam, return home, they both stand face to face with knives in their hands. Nahshon “pull[s] the knife across his throat with a swift repudiative motion” (270). Nahshon’s death is the only way he can escape what has taken place at the market. He is unable to use Maryam’s defeat as a sign of his masculinity, and resolves to die. Nahshon’s death also suggests that the depth of masculinity and manhood among the Samaritan men and within their community is greatly rooted in the oppression of the women and their forced submissive mask. This notion also proposes that a man whose wife rises above her oppression and removes her mask, that man’s only choice is to die. The reader can assume that the Samaritan men cannot acknowledge women’s equality unless they are resolved to die. Nahshon and the other men cannot acknowledge women’s equality unless they are resolved to die.

In comparison to Emma Jean, Maryam begins to hear a voice that compels her to recall her past. Hendricks creates a recurring image of Maryam ignoring or lying to herself when she slowly loses herself and her memory and remarks that “the memory of her days with Ma Tee were no longer vivid, and she could not recall the name of God” (214). Maryam hears “her name in a whisper” and dismisses “it as the lazy rustling of the leaves” (214). Until Maryam begins to “relive the beatings and the pain and the abject
terror she endured in her own home” (260), Maryam is unable to recall Ma Tee’s words, “love yourself always” (261). Once she faces her past, Maryam is able to live again.

Like Emma Jean, Maryam finds peace. Maryam moves in with Huldah and learns about Hokmah, the female side of God, who also represents God’s balance. She is visited by Jesus while at the well, and she is convinced of His love. In the following passage, Hendricks reveals the depth of Jesus’s love through Maryam’s eyes:

The man had such a womb-spirit that it seemed like I was talking to the feminine side of God. And love...have mercy! Ma Tee loved me. Yeshua loves me. Huldah loves me. You all love me as strong as anybody can love in this world. But the love I felt from that man is mothering like I’ve ever known. It’s so strong it’s like it’s not even of this world; so much love that you can feel it all over… (325)

Maryam’s description of the love that she finds covers her entire being. It fills her up from inside to outside. In the midst of her troubles, she joins the townswomen at the river and prays to Hokmah, the female side of God. After discarding her mask of a submissive woman and a lesser being, Maryam rises from her broken and bruised past and retrieves the identity that she is forced to hide. She no longer searches for love in dysfunctional marriages. Like Emma Jean, the love that Maryam finds is not a human love. It is a spiritual, heavenly love. Even though she marries again, Maryam’s marriage to Yeshua is a marriage of equality, love, and respect. Yeshua declares that he wants to not only Maryam as his helpmate, but he wants to be a helpmate to her.
What makes Maryam heroic is her courage to go against her patriarchal community’s definition of marriage. She redefines marriage to fit her life, and she recreates, within her last marriage, a ceremony that identifies her equality to her husband. Maryam tells Yeshua, “If we married invoking the name of Hokmah, that would be a new kind of marriage, a marriage of a man and woman as equals. I would marry you that way, but that’s the only way I would marry you” (307). Yeshua agrees and instead of Abba Samuel performing their marriage vows, Maryam and Yeshua stand before Huldah as she pronounces:

Maryam, Yeshua, you are one flesh now. Love each other. Protect each other. Serve each other like it’s God you’re serving call on Hokmah...the mercy of God...to be merciful is to be as good to folks as you can. Serve God and be merciful to each other, strengthening and inspiring each other to make a world where everybody can be happy and free. (314)

In Maryam and Yeshua’s union and through these words, Maryam has merged her life of tragedy into a beautiful life. Maryam lives with her husband, acknowledging his desires and her own and finds balance in an unbalanced society.
CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

Daniel Black’s novel, *Perfect Peace*, and Obery Hendricks’s novel, *Living Water*, illustrate the affects of masking and its aftermath. The two novels address the concepts of invisibility and the blindness that evolves as a result of masking. Black and Hendricks introduce female characters who reach self-integration in spite of the opposition from their family and community. Emerging from violent pasts, the female characters in the two novels negotiate life on their own terms. In the two novels, the female characters repress abusive and undesirable memories, and strive to accept the hand they are dealt. While masking their anguish and despair, the female characters learn the art of self-preservation. And, after surviving years of chaos, the female characters reinvent themselves.

In Black’s novel, *Perfect Peace*, Black examines the struggle between motherhood and self-aspiration. One of the main characters, Emma Jean, desires, over all things, love. She compromises her integrity, and forces her seventh son, Perfect, to wear a “gender mask.” Once Emma Jean quiets herself and confronts her past, she rediscovers herself outside of her mask. Emma Jean’s death represents self-love as she refuses to suffer any longer, and drowns herself at the Jordan River.

In Obery Hendricks’s novel, *Living Water*, Hendricks explores how fear leads to an acceptance of wearing a mask to survive. Maryam, the protagonist, is taught to mask
when she is nine years old. Her fear of being put out of her home by her husband causes her to wear the mask of weakness, cowardice, and meekness. After Maryam’s daughter is killed by her husband, Nahshon, Maryam finds the strength to remove her mask.

Black and Hendricks approach masking as an act that requires effort. Whether inherent or voluntary, the mask protects and preserves the true self until the wearer is whole enough to emerge from the mask and deal with his or her life directly. The two novels inspire self-preservation, self-awareness, and wholeness.
Works Cited


Werrlein, Debra. “Not so Fast, Dick and Jane: Reimagining Childhood and Nation in the