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### Mysticism and meaning in Gloria Naylor's Bailey's cafe and Mama Day

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**MYSTICISM AND MEANING IN GLORIA NAYLOR'S *BAILEY'S CAFÉ* AND  
*MAMA DAY***

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C2975  
1999  
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A THESIS

Presented to the

Honors College at Southern University  
Baton Rouge, Louisiana

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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

Honors College Degree

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by

Crystal L. Carodine

May 1999

Honors College

Southern University  
Baton Rouge, Louisiana

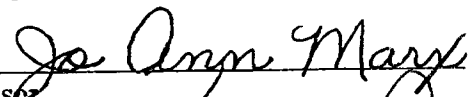
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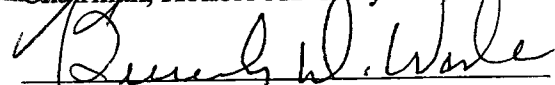
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**MYSTICISM AND MEANING IN GLORIA NAYLOR'S *BAILEY'S CAFÉ* AND  
*MAMA DAY***

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## ABSTRACT

Negative images of black females are often depicted in American fiction. Black female authors are accepting the challenge of reconstructing these negative images into more positive ones. Gloria Naylor is one of these authors who has taken on the quest of focusing on the black female in her novels. Her novels, Bailey's Café and Mama Day, are two of her tools used for reconstructing images of black femininity. She uses the characters of Eve (Bailey's Café) and Mama Day (Mama Day) to depict strong, intuitive women.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## CHAPTER ONE

### BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Although Black female characters are often depicted in literature, the images of them that are portrayed are often negative. These negative images have been created by a society who demanded black female slaves were to be brought to this country specifically to fulfill female roles and to work in the fields. One of the most prevalent images, the mammy, is portrayed in Margaret Mitchell's Gone With The Wind. Jeanne Noble refers to the mammy as the "take charge" image who is "always expected to be an affectionate woman who loved unstintingly. In order to make sure there was enough bosom and lap, mammies were most often depicted as fat." Mammy, in Gone With The Wind, is a loyal and faithful servant who also serves as a disciplinarian and companion. Another image is the "rock of Gibraltar domestic" who is referred to as "a good black." Dilsey, in The Sound and the Fury by William Faulkner, represents this image who has accepted her "fate with dignity and shows affection and concern for human beings." She is a surrogate mother and provides emotional stability for the family, although she was hired as a cook (71-74). These negative stereotypes have invaded the minds of authors who attempt to present what they feel are realistic black female characters.

To combat these negative images, black female authors like Zora Neale Hurston, Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker took on the quest of improving the black female image in their writings. In Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God, the heroine Janie Crawford serves as a positive image because she discovers her self-identity and becomes self-reliant and wise. Toni Morrison features females who prevail in the conflict between

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society and the individual in The Bluest Eye. Claudia is a self-secured young girl with integrity that "serves as a center of consciousness in the novel" (Begna 2425). In Meridian, Alice Walker describes the struggles of black women and the main character, Meridian Hill, reaches an awareness of power and feminism during the Civil Rights Movement.

Inspired by the example of Toni Morrison, Gloria Naylor joined the trend of focusing on the lives of black women in her novels. She too recognized the need to reconstruct the negative images of the black female character (Branan 2490). However, unlike her predecessors, Naylor focuses more fully on the internal, spiritual natures--that is, the mystical qualities-- in her female characters to show their spirituality and attunement with nature.

Mysticism is defined as the doctrine or belief that direct knowledge of God, of spiritual truth, of ultimate reality, or comparable matters is attainable through immediate intuition, insight, or illumination and in a way differing from ordinary sense perception or reasoning (Gove 1497). Since Naylor is a feminist and the mystical powers in her novels are possessed by women, it appears that this is her way of reconstructing the image of the black female. To read Bailey's Café and Mama Day is to witness women possessing outstanding knowledge and remarkable, intuitive qualities. Not only that, there is something about these women that is also unbelievably wonderful. Naylor presents strong, intelligent, invincible women by giving them this gift of mystical power.

Critics are fascinated with Gloria Naylor and her works. Very few critical analyses of her novels fail to acknowledge the mystic qualities in her them. Harold

Branan states that Naylor writes in a "romantic mode that sometimes verges on the melodramatic or gothic." He is convinced that Naylor was influenced by earlier readings of Charlotte and Emily Bronte, Charles Dickens, William Faulkner, and Toni Morrison (2490). Jewell Gomez declares Naylor "takes black people and black women in particular more seriously than most writers do today" (7). Bailey's Café received many commendable reviews from different critics. One reviewer says, "Naylor has successfully integrated form and content. Both the ingenious concert framework and the richly symbolic setting have been judged to be successful; far from getting in the way of her characters, the devices enable them to reveal themselves in all of their complexity" (Reisman 106). Another critic, Sybil Steinburg, points out that Naylor "movingly captures life in New York and America." Kakutani believes that in Mama Day, "the beauty is its plainness, and the secret power of her novel is that she does not simply tell a story but brings you face to face with human beings living through the complexity, pain and mystery of real life" (325). Another critic comments that "she bends black folk and spiritual lore to her uses, all the while scrupulously respecting the integrity of that lore" (Nicholson 326).

Naylor is a very talented writer who addresses societal issues in a captivating way. Her novels are essential in the African-American canon and are especially significant in the current discourse of Black feminist writing. Her two novels--Bailey's Café and Mama Day--feature women in very positive aspects of black femininity. The characters Eve (Bailey's Café) and Mama Day (Mama Day) are Naylor's tools for reconstructing negative images into positive ones. This feat Naylor accomplishes by



## CHAPTER TWO

### MYSTICISM IN BAILEY'S CAFÉ

Bailey's Café offers interesting characterizations in a familiar setting imbued with mystical qualities. The actual place Bailey's Café has a mystical pull that attracts people and invites them to remember the trying times of their lives. The run-down, never-closing café has an ever-changing, unprinted menu. The food is bad and the coffee is lousy. Bailey, recognized as the owner, explains that despite all of these downfalls, he still has customers.

And it can't be for the company, like others think. Our customers are all so different. I've yet to see anybody get along in here. But that door will still open and close, open and close. (3)

Bailey implies that his café offers much more than a hot meal. Actually, it is a way station. It is a magical place where lost souls find redemption, or at least a safe haven. The café appears "wherever and whenever someone is 'hanging on to the edge' and needs a place 'to take a breather for a while.'" The customers are drug addicts, rape victims, and mentally and physically abused women who cannot be helped anywhere but here. They have nowhere to go and no one to turn to. The people that the café appears to are desperate and cannot endure the pain any longer (Reisman 102). The richly symbolic setting forces the reader to accept Bailey's Café as a state of the human soul. While the inside of the café represents the memories of their hard times, the back door of the café can symbolize death or reasons not to give up. The setting is instrumental in preparing the reader for the mystical events to come.

Eve's place is ironic and symbolic; as women provide sexual favors, they are cherished by being paid with flowers. For flowers are representative of appreciation for women and their delicacy. Having been taken advantage of by men, these women enter Eve's place and begin to feel better about themselves. At this place, women find themselves the same way that they lost themselves. Men once destroyed their lives, but at Eve's the men make the women feel appreciated and make them feel good about life. Thus, similar to the surrealistic atmosphere of Bailey's Café, Eve's place is a fitting environment for the unusual personality and power of Eve.

Eve is really the reason most people visit the café. Women stop there for directions to Eve's place, actually for some direction in life, for she runs a boardinghouse down the block from the cafe. Single women needing help and guidance rent out her rooms. Bailey explains, "Sometimes they pay her, sometimes they don't" (80). Reisman contends, "Eve snatches her residents from death and gives them the chance to feel cherished, not used, by being paid by flowers" (105). The peculiar happenings that occur at Eve's place make her a victim to statements like these:

"She runs a whorehouse. Nothing but a whorehouse.  
Every pimp don't wear pants.  
She'd sell her own mama for a dime." (81)

However, Eve is the type of person who goes on with her life with no concern with what others think of her. Some café customers have negative notions of her, such as those quoted above. Sister Carrie is one of those mentioned. She is a "religious fanatic who pretends to be highly moral" and tries to protect her daughter Angel from the "filth and abomination taking over this world" (Reisman 103). Sugarman, a hustler and a pimp,

wears diamond rings and alligator wingtips. These two characters are the only ones that voice negative opinions of Eve. However, these characters prove to be unreliable mainly because they have reason to be at the café in the first place. Sister Carrie is suffering from sexual sin that she is struggling to overcome.

"You gotta help me, Lord Jesus. Remove this burning from me. Remove these evil thoughts. Wipe out Satan. Wipe him out. I ache and touch, Lord Jesus. I ache and squeeze. I ache and dig out the heat. I bring up my fingers, wet, and give glory to your name." (34)

Carrie puts up the façade of a pure and innocent Christian, but she is actually "a woman afraid of her own appetites." She claims to be trying to save her daughter Angel, yet she and her daughter are faithful customers in the café that Carrie says is full of "riffraff and scum" (32-33).

Sugarman's credibility can also be questioned. This a perfect example of how people are blind to their own wrongdoings, but think that they have room to criticize others. He is a pimp "working hard to protect his women" (34). He has no shame in what he does, but he criticizes Eve for running what he calls a **whorehouse**. Therefore, their opinions of Eve cannot be considered credible because they are having personal struggles within themselves and have no room to judge. Plus, the revealing of their character flaws make them possible candidates for Eve's help.

Eve is a strong woman who helps these women in her own way and does not care if she is criticized or commended. She does what she feels is right and appropriate. Eve says exactly what she feels needs to be said with no consideration of whom she may be offending. Bailey, the narrator, respects Eve and what she does to help her tenants. He

often gives directions to Eve's: "Go out the door, make a right, and when you see the garden--if you see the garden--you're there." Bailey knows that it is not charity that makes Eve let these women in. He asserts, "You can look in her eyes and see that." Although he has much respect for Eve, he insists that there is something about her that does not add up. Bailey offers that Eve is a very stylish woman who wears tailored silk suits and oxford heels. "But if you look real close, there's always a faint line of dirt just under her manicured nails" (81). Like the women who sought help from Eve, Eve also has a testimony of how she became who she is. She also experienced trials and tribulations and had to struggle to get in control of her life. Raised by her godfather who sent her away naked and hungry when he discovered her sexual desires, she had to learn to be self-sufficient, which was difficult considering that she started with nothing. She knew how it felt to be abandoned and this inspired her to begin her business. Eve understood women and their needs.

Every woman's situation is different, so Eve helps them in different ways. Her skills and intuition are so extraordinary that Eve has a mystical quality about her. The mystical powers can be seen in the manner in which she rescues her tenants. One example of her special powers is how she helped Jesse Bell overcome her heroin addiction. She began by taking her to the back of the café for her to see her childhood bedroom in the plain darkness of the night. Jesse Bell also saw the kind of bathroom she always wanted. Eve used the darkness as an image of death to show Jesse where she was heading toward and she told Jesse Bell that she was in hell. Given the reality of Jesse's present addiction and lost hopes for the future, the image of her childhood bedroom

symbolizes her innocence and the bathroom gives her new hope for the future. When Jesse clings to the backdoor of the café to keep herself from disappearing into the darkness, she is choosing life over death. Eve rehabilitated Jesse and got her life back on the right path.

Another example is how she helped a fourteen-year old Jewish girl who was pregnant but had never been touched by a man. Eve performed a ritual with a plum which was symbolic of the little girl, sweet and tender. She carefully removed the flesh of the plum from the skin which shows the delicacy of the little girl's body. The little girl was from a society that circumcised females and sewed them up to ensure their purity. When Eve delivered the baby, she helped ease the girl's labor pains by using all sorts of light.

Sequins of light that swirled and spun through the air.  
Cascades of light flowing in, breaking up, and rolling  
like fluid diamonds over the worn tile. Emerald.  
Turquoise. Sapphire. (225)

The use of lights reveals Eve's attunement with nature. Light is symbolic of several ideals-- the light of life, warmth, truth, happiness and knowledge. Also, Eve used the magic of light to symbolize love and support to help the little girl endure the pain. The magic-filled room kept everyone in silence as the miracle of birth took place.

Naylor uses her plot of psychological realism (Reisman 102) to show the metamorphosis of an immature, helpless girl into a strong, nurturing woman. The development of Eve's womanhood also includes an attainment of a special gift that she uses to help others who are in situations similar to hers before she became who she is.

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Eve represents a very positive image of black femininity. The fact that she persevered through her abandonment and did not give up makes her strong. Her mystical powers not only make people respect her, but also reveal her incredible knowledge and understanding of the world. She is considered intuitive because she has a second sight that allows her to know and feel things that others do not and can not. She has a special relationship with nature. Eve can read people and, most importantly, she can heal people.

## CHAPTER THREE

### MYSTICISM IN MAMA DAY

Mama Day is set on the magical island of Willow Springs, located between Georgia and South Carolina. It is in neither state and is governed only by its citizens. Kakutani describes Willow Springs as “a small, paradisaal island, situated off the southeast coast of the United States, but utterly sovereign in its history and traditions” (325). The mysticism of this place setting derives from the fact that the island was deeded to slaves by the aid of a conjure woman Sapphira Wade. She married Bascombe Wade, a Norwegian slaveowner, persuaded him to give all of his land to slaves, and later killed him. She was not punished for the murder, managing to “escape the hangman’s noose, laughing in a burst of flames.” For it is said that she could “walk through a lightning storm without being touched” (3). Thus the origin of the place is somewhat surreal and proves to be very mystical.

As an island, Willow Springs represents its separatism from the real world. Unlike other towns and cities, it is a one-of-a-kind place, free of mayors, police, or any type of city official. There is no government at all. Yet, the citizens of Willow Springs are orderly. Willow Springs is connected to the mainland by a bridge, but citizens there feel that “anything coming from beyond the bridge gotta be viewed real, real careful” (7). They do not agree with people leaving Willow Springs, going “mainside”, and coming back trying to rearrange Willow Springs’ history to regard it as an ordinary place. Secrets are learned from the wondrous island only by listening to “inaudible voices in

boarded-up houses and hard to reach graveyards" (Mukherjee 325). All Willow Springs citizens are aware of the mystical quality of the island and have accepted it as a normal way of life. By creating this surreal environment, Naylor persuades her reader to accept truths that do not derive from "mainland" history, reason, and facts; she wants to make certain that her reader knows that this is no ordinary town. Its history, location, and citizens not only make this place unique, but also mystical.

It is within this mystical environment that Mama Day emerges, and we began to understand Naylor's intentions of creating a positive female image. Mama Day, the main character, is the great-granddaughter of Sapphira Wade. The same powers that Sapphira possessed trickled down through the generations and now rested in the hands of Mama Day. Everyone in Willow Springs knew of and respected Mama Day's second sight and powers. Citizens looked to her for guidance and medical attention. No one ever crossed Mama Day until Ruby's, "a manipulative devil woman," judgment was impaired by her insecurity for her fiance Junior Lee (Kakutani 325). He approached Cocoa, Mama Day's niece, and Ruby put a curse on Cocoa by braiding her hair with nightshade. This hairdo cost her husband's life and almost her own. With Mama Day's help and her own special solution, Cocoa survived the curse. But Mama Day was not satisfied. She went to Ruby's house and performed a ritual with her cane, which had snakes winding around it, and some silvery powder. She alternated striking the house with her cane and throwing the powder. Then she finished by walking the island—first south, then east, north, and west. She warned the bridge repairmen that the clouds they noticed were the type that

held lightning. The lightning hit Ruby's house twice, and the second time the house exploded.

Ruby and the outsider George, Cocoa's husband, are the only persons who oppose Mama Day and her powers. Though Ruby is a believer of Mama Day's special gift, she would just do anything to keep Junior Lee. George, on the hand, has a hard time accepting the things that occur there. He is the only character who is not a citizen of Willow Springs. He does not understand Mama Day's rationale about certain things, especially when she failed to seek medical attention for Cocoa when she was sickened by Ruby's nightshade. George is an outsider and a non-believer. An engineer from New York, George can not adjust to the mysticism in Willow Springs. Determined to save Cocoa in his own way and not trust and believe in Mama Day, George causes his own death. He was instructed by Mama Day to retrieve an egg from a chicken coop in specific detail. George failed to follow instructions and consequently died from a heart attack triggered by frustration.

Full evaluations of these oppositions prove them to have no credence. Ruby is just a manipulative woman who is overly possessive of her man. She really did not feel that she could overpower Mama Day. It seems as if she suffered from temporary insanity, so her opposition to Mama Day was merely a bad mistake. George was too caught up in his own world and his "mainland" rationale handicapped him more than it helped him.

Calculating from all the babies Mama Day delivered, she is over a hundred years old. She inherited a special gift from her great-grandmother that makes her an expert in nature. Mama Day has a special intuition that aids her in making people fall in love, delivering babies, and causing lightning storms. Further illustrations of her mystical powers are evident. Her great niece Cocoa interviewed for a job but did not get it because she was visiting Willow Springs and the position was filled in her absence. Mama Day sent a letter to the interviewer with lavender powder on it. Consequently, the interviewer found Cocoa an accounts manager position. George, the interviewer who later became Cocoa's husband, had forgotten all about her until that letter came. However, as he washed the powder from his fingers, he remembered everything including the way she raised her hand to move stray hairs from her neck.

Mama Day has knowledge that an ordinary country woman would not have. She displays an overwhelming medical instinct and prescribes treatment for gout, bone inflammation, diabetes, and even heart trouble. She has delivered many Willow Springs citizens and performed many gynecological examinations. She could do a Caesarian section better than any physician. Mama Day performed a pelvic exam on Bernice, a Willow Springs citizen, and diagnosed her with ovarian cysts. She knew this path so well "that the slightest change of moisture, the amount of give along the walls, or the scent left on her hands could fix a woman's cycle within less than a day of what was happening with the moon" (75). She could tell Bernice had pus in her body just by the smell and could tell if she had liver damage just by looking into her eyes. Bernice is also

mysteriously impregnated by Mama Day by her use of a chicken and an egg when Bernice could not get pregnant by any other means.

The mystical powers of Mama Day present her as a very positive, black female image. She is shown as strong, intelligent, and spiritual. Her special powers make this matriarchal figure very well respected in her community and in the reader's world. Her conjuring powers may very well be regarded as voodoo; however, Mama Day only uses her gift for the good and to satisfy her fascination with life. Compared to Dr. Buzzard, Mama Day is almost godlike. Her neighbor, Dr. Buzzard, is a "hoodoo" man and a con man, who plays crooked games of poker and makes moonshine on the side. He pretends to know as much as Mama Day, but everyone knows that he is not genuine. But Mama Day is omniscient and omnipotent.

She had a spectacular intuition and she could sense things before they happened, a power that came natural to her. She had a special way of just knowing things. Before Ruby cursed Cocoa and before Bernice's son died, Mama Day felt "death all around her" (226). Her intuition kept telling her that something very bad was going to happen. After she had examined Bernice, "something the air was telling her" (86), something was wrong. Bernice was to go to Mama Day in order to get pregnant. Some said she had "gifted hands" (88). It could be that she just had her own way of doing everyday things. Dr. Smithfield, the licensed doctor in Willow Springs, admitted Mama Day's examinations, diagnoses, and treatments were not much different from his-- "just plainer words and a slower cure than them concentrated drugs" (84).

Mama Day loved life and got joy from any kind. She saw nothing wrong with giving nature a little push to bring on life. Although she admitted to getting under, around, and beside nature, she swore she never tried to get over nature. Mama Day did not feel that she had some exceptional powers. She said, "Most folks just do not know what can be done with a little will and their own hands" (262). Erskine states that Mama Day's knowledge transcends this world and makes her "something akin to the conjure woman, the seer, the prophet, the deliverer of truth" (757).

## CHAPTER FOUR

### CONCLUSION

Black women have been struggling for their identity since they arrived on this continent. They were twice handicapped and had to achieve such selfhood not only as black people, but as black women--who could demonstrate strength and independence without endangering their identities as "true women" (Carby 33). In Naylor's novels, she examines the quality of black women's lives as affected by the interrelationship of sexism and racism. She addresses the question concerning "to what community black women must belong in order to understand themselves most effectively in their totality as blacks and women (Christian 242).

The development of Afro-American women's fiction is, in many instances, "a mirror image of the intensity of the relationship between sexism and racism in this country" (234). This statement could be evaluated in terms of self-expression and therefore self-empowerment. Christian further asserts the emphasis on the culture of women as a means to self-understanding and growth is treated thematically in Naylor's novels. She addresses the "multiplicity of life issues that converge with black American women's historic and coeval experience" (235).

The desire to portray women in different aspects in fiction is recognized by black novelists. Narratives by black women "embody the tension between the author's desire to privilege her experience and being able to speak only within a discourse of conventionally held beliefs about the nature of black womanhood" (Carby 22). Naylor

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uses the experiences of her characters to portray positive female images. The characters Eve and Mama Day are two of her instruments used in fulfilling her commitment to making black women more positively prominent in American fiction. With these characters, she reconstructed past and prevalent negative images of black females into positive ones. She created images of strong, spiritual, intuitive, intelligent, nurturing, invincible, healing women. Naylor uses mysticism to make these women possess many qualities, but most of all the mystical powers make them superior to other characters. Naylor has captured the spirituality and power of black women that has always been in existence, but had been suppressed by a racist society. These novels make Gloria Naylor a "reconstructor of black womanhood."

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## VITA

Crystal Carodine was born May 2, 1977 in Minden, Louisiana. She began her undergraduate study in the fall of 1995 at Southern University in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. She is a member of Alpha Mu Gamma (a foreign language honor society), Lambda Iota Tau (an international English honor society), the Pre-Law Club, and Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc. Crystal has been on the Dean's List every semester of her college career. She will receive a Bachelor of Arts degree in English. After graduation, she will attend the Southern University Law Center on a full scholarship. Crystal will pursue a career in law and her ultimate goal of becoming a judge.

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