

Revolutionary Romances: Romantic Love in Gloria Naylor's *Linden Hills*

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Abstract: Gloria Naylor's *Linden Hills* (1985) cites the history of Nedeed's family generation and their loveless relationships. In the affluent Black community of Linden Hills, material wealth and power lead people to death and corruption and those who succeed in it are alienated and depersonalized, rather than having happiness in their life. At the top of the Afro-American community, there is Luther Nedeed whose humanity is consumed by his desire for this type of success, which finally makes him to kill himself and his own family in his burning house. In this paper, I illustrate how Gloria Naylor depicts the deepest emptiness in the absence of love with negotiation of the issues of race, class, gender and culture.

Keywords: Loveless Families, Material Wealth, Loss of Identity, Cultural Alienation, Corruption.

Sherley Ann Williams' review of Gloria Naylor's *Linden Hills* makes the claim that "though *Linden Hills* has many compelling moments, the 'sins' of this community - hypocrisy, loveless marriages and marital infidelities, idleness - seem too trivial to carry the weight of Naylor's expert literary attentions" (69). In fact, these "sins" are more than trivial. The scattered narrative takes the history of Nedeed family couplings as its catalyst. Although the history of Luther Nedeed's family and Linden Hills becomes a sidebar for future generations, it refuses to be invisible. The combination of this past and the many loveless relationships that follow underscores the failures in the community to embrace love in any form.

Linden Hills chronicles the lives of affluent Afro-Americans whose community epitomizes material success leads them only to death and damnation; in fact, material wealth is an empty space that will consume either black or white people, Afro-Americans who succeed in it are alienated from community and self, instead of finding happiness. Though many individual stories are relayed through the course of the novel, two young men become the narrative thread that ties them all together. Luther Nedeed is corrupted by the financial success. The economic power that his family has carried for generations now controls him, just as he controls the inhabitants of Linden Hills. His humanity is consumed by his desire for material wealth and power. Luther contributes to the unnaturalness that pervades this community, where

Wilson says "family relationships are stilted and forced. Neighborliness is borne out of obligation, not altruism. And marital relationships are founded on assets, not love or passion" (77). In the end, Luther Nedeed becomes a man who can kill his own son, and he, his wife and his dead son finish their existence in a burning house on a frozen lake. He is the epitome of "civility and gentility," yet he also epitomizes "unprecedented barbarity" (Wilson 80).

Naylor begins the novel with an introduction to the community that acquaints readers with questions about the location of Linden Hills and with Luther Nedeed's "double great-grandfather," who bought the land (1-2). Luther Nedeed reproduces himself generation after generation. Each son is "short, squat, dark and with an immobile face, even from birth. He grew up to carry his father's first name, broad chest and bowlegs" (4). Each generation assumes the helm of the undertaking business started by the first Luther Nedeed, brings an octoroon woman into his home and produces only one son. The marriages between Nedeed men and pale octoroon women are not conceived in love. The Nedeed wives are completely subordinated to their dark-skinned husbands; each is known only as "Mrs. Nedeed". Their sons are alienated from them by their husbands, who remain blind to the mother/producer's role and claim their sons as their own, as Nedees, as incarnations of essential blackness. Indeed, the original Luther Nedeed reputedly sold his octoroon wife and six children to get the money to move the North and buy the land for Linden Hills. Later, he takes on another octoroon bride, whom he buys out of slavery, but as we later learn, he never manumits her and in fact keeps her as his own, legal slave. Willie Mason and Lester Tilson become Naylor's narrative thread that ties together the disjointed stories. Their perspective reflects a sensitivity that the community desperately needs. However, their "journey down Linden Hills" in the five days before Christmas cuts a path from the past to the present. They uncover the profound emptiness in the absence of love.

Nedeed himself marries not an octoroon woman but rather a darker-skinned woman, whom he nevertheless treats just as tyrannically as his fathers treated their pale wives. His wife, however, gives him a son who looks just him, but it turns out to be white, "a ghostly presence that mocks everything his fathers had built." Nedeed considers the child a bastard and to punish his wife he locks her and the six-year-old boy in the morgue-basement of their home; the son dies, as Nedeed had hoped. Willa Prescott Nedeed has been making her own journey through time as she discovers the name and history of the Nedeed women. There is a tale of progressive depersonalization, despair and madness for each wife, as each husband became in turn more cruel and evil than his father. Willa suffers in this circle because she has betrayed herself by willingly submerging her own identity in her husband's. She becomes his faceless tool and allows him to starve their son to death without really putting up a fight. Early in the novel, Willie and Lester encounter Ruth and Norman Anderson in the street and are invited into their humble house. Ruth

chooses poverty and love over affluence and lives in Putney Wayne with her second husband, who gets “the pinks” every other spring when he loses his mind, tears up their house and spends all their saving on medical bills. Though “no one would ever believe that she was still there because of some aspirin and a glass of water,” their sacrifices for each other outweigh the drive to make it in Linden Hills (37). And yet, their genuine love for each other does not ignore that legacy. It is Ruth who suggests to Willie and Lester to earn Christmas money by doing odd jobs for the residents of Linden Hills. This suggestion juxtaposes the love in their home with the lack of love the young man will reveal on their journey. Norman claims that “love rules in this house” and Ruth agrees (38). Ruth lived in Linden Hills with her first husband; she comments to Norman that she will never return to Linden Hills: “You know, wherever you go, I’m game—Spring Vale, Park Heights, even out of state. But I’m never going back down there again. I’ve had that life, Norm and I lasted six months. Those folk just aren’t real” (39). Ruth has repudiated material success in favor of love and so she is the real success in this novel. She epitomizes the ultimate in human love. To Willie she is a dream and a source of inspiration. She is a symbol of the fullest expression of human love. Willie and Lester find lovelessness and disconnection in the rest of the community, but begin in a place where love rules. While Ruth and Norman cannot leave each other even when they think they want to, each Nedeed wife is a version of the first octoroon woman who reproduced her husband in the form of her son. The novel as a whole, then, is a portrait of contradiction and failure.

Xavier Donnell exemplifies the contradictions in Linden Hills regarding the place for romantic love. He feels genuine affection for Roxanne, Lester’s sister, but his ambitions in the business world impede his expression of it. He acknowledges her as an Afro-American, “the road was a lot more cluttered for a black woman and a successful journey meant sharpening her spirits to grind away all garbage that stood in her way. And just maybe when that switch was turned on, it couldn’t tell the difference between his living flesh and anything else” (11). Xavier is discouraged from pursuing his love by his colleague Maxwell Smyth, who believes that romantic love is a luxury that the ambitious cannot afford. Xavier worries about whether she would be a “wise” choice as a wife. When he asks Maxwell’s opinion about marrying Roxanne, Maxwell advises against it because Roxanne’s family “has one foot in the ghetto and the other on a watermelon rind” (116). Loving Roxanne means that he cannot completely disengage, as Maxwell has.

Willie and Lester work hard for a full day at Winston Alcott’s wedding. Winston struggles to finish his eight-year relationship with his lover, David, as he finds his homosexuality a threat for his job. In the wedding, David recites Whitman’s poem to announce to Winston that their love affair will be ended if he goes through with the marriage. They are punished for a lifelong separation; it’s David who suffers much for his love for a man who doesn’t deserve his love. Like the Nedeed men, Winston has married for convenience, not love; thus his home, a descent

into lower hell, will be as spiritually barren as Luther Nedeed's.

For their next work, Willie and Lester go to Chester Parker's home, the man who is entertaining mourners the night before the funeral of his wife, Lycentia. The house is crowded with guests who keep the twelve chairs around Chester's dining room table filled. The scene is a parody of the Last Supper as Parker's guests stuff themselves with food, especially with the white cake that Luther Nedeed brings. They don't let the chairs get vacant, as soon as one eater vacates a seat, another takes his place. This is a paradigm of Linden Hills where new residents rush in to take over one of the leases as soon as it is available. The table is also a reflection of Chester's marriage. Chester has hired Willie and Lester to steam off the wallpaper in the bedroom so that the room will be repapered and everything will be ready for Chester's next wife as soon as Lycentia is buried.

Laurel and Howard Dumont present a perfect example of Linden Hills' vacuous existence. Laurel's sense of emptiness, her preoccupation with swimming and classical music and her feeling of not belonging anywhere all fall in line with the Nedeed vision of affluent black life; this marriage is contextualized by Linden Hills' history without missing a beat. Like the Nedeed wives whose lives and deaths set the standard, Luther comes to Laurel's house to inform her that, without her husband, "there are to be no more Dumonts at seven Twenty-Two Tupelo Drive" (245). In effect, she does not exist in that house. Laurel becomes another version of Nedeed wives who are unloved by their husbands and unconfirmed by the love of a community. Without the sustaining value of community, love relationships morph into disjointed imitations that, in this case, resonate through time and space to infect the other couples in Linden Hills. Laurel eventually commits suicide in despair over the emptiness of her life because she can't find that place "they ain't got no name for yet, where you supposed to be at home," as her grandmother, Roberta Johnson tells her. When her husband of ten years decides to divorce her, she faces not just the emptiness of her life, but the emptiness of herself. Finally, a confrontation with Luther Nedeed makes Laurel realize that there is no inner core to her person, only a frightening void. Her education fed a professional ambition that left no room for human love. She never forged any ties with her past or developed any close sense of her own identity. Luther watches, immobile, as she kills herself by diving into an empty pool; her faceless body symbolizes her spiritual state. Laurel's death corresponds with Willa's ascent up the basement steps. While Laurel models the lives and deaths of Nedeed wives, Willa changes the script.

What saves Willa is what she learns about the previous Nedeed women from the homely records they have left behind through a bible, a set of cookbooks and a family photo album, although the recovery of the past does not yield romantic love. Each woman lacks love and affection and this lack manifest itself in a different way for each woman. Kathleen Puhr

states that, “physically and spiritually cut off from others, Willa uses the experience of these other women to heal herself, affirming her choice of being Luther's wife and taking responsibility for all her actions” (521). Willa uncovers a past that begins with Luwana Packerville; from her papers Willa learns how enslavement by her husband causes Luwana to lose faith in God, because Luwana's husband had bought her before he married her. After he uses her to produce the male heir he requires, he totally ignores her. Years pass; no one speaks to Luwana and she speaks to no one. But her total silence is not even noticed. She realizes that she has remained in slavery both literally and figuratively. She finds that she has allowed her husband completely to alienate her from every human connection, including her son. The child she bears is not the tangible symbol of their love; she concludes that “it is not just that he is Luther's son, he is Luther” (123). In desperation she writes and answers letters to herself. A religious woman, Luwana eventually loses her faith and decides, “There can be no God” (125).

The second Nedeed wife, Evelyn Creton bakes large amount of food in order to win her husband's attention, if not his love. When the device doesn't work, she starves herself to death by eating little. Next Nedeed wife, Priscilla McGuire tracks her own disappearance and invisibility through family photographs; in the last photos, she has cut out her face and in the empty space has written “me” (249). The Nedeed women have betrayed themselves when they have cooperated with their husbands' denial of their value. Willa departs from her predecessors and decides to turn the tide of Linden Hills and correct the legacy. When she emerges from the basement, she has found the identity she had lost. Willa is shocked by Priscilla's annihilation of herself. She glances down into a pan of water; there she sees the reflection of her soul. When Willa sees the blurred outline of her dirty face, she realizes for the first time that she really exists. She cries, then drinks the water and decides to rebuild her life (268). In a recorded conversation with Toni Morrison, Naylor comments,

After she had dug up the remnants of other Nedeed women, I created a way for her to see her own reflection in a pan of water because she had no self up to that moment. And when she realized that she had a face, then maybe she had other things going for her as well, and she could take her destiny in her own hands. (Southern Review)

For the first time Willa examines herself and decides that she is responsible for her life; she is stuck down in the cellar not because of her parents or Luther, but because of herself. Willa realizes that she has made wrong choices and is continuing to make them.

She was sitting there now, filthy, cold, and hungry, because she, Willa Prescott Nedeed, had walked down twelve concrete steps. And since that was the truth—the pure, irreducible truth—whenever she was good and ready, she could walk back up. (280)

In the conversation with Morrison, Naylor says that when she realized that Willa, content to be mother and wife, must ascend from the basement, Naylor exclaimed to the character, "Oh, Lord, woman, don't you know what the end of this book has got to be? You've gotta tear that whole house to the ground, or my book won't make any sense" (587).

Willa cleans the filthy basement; then, carrying the body of her son wrapped in an old lace bridal veil in her arms, she goes up the steps and pushes open the door leading into her kitchen. Willie is there, helping Luther get boxes down from the attic. When Willa steps into the kitchen, she accepts fully the realities of her life with all of her mistakes; she is determined that nothing will hinder her from putting her life in order. However, Willa's rebirth breaks the downward cycle. When she ascends from Luther's hell, she reclaims her identity as an individual and a mother. She appears in the doorway and announces, "Luther... your son is dead". She begins to clean her kitchen, and when Luther tries to stop her, she hits him; she grabs him, while still holding on to the child. In their struggle, the Christmas tree crashes to the floor, its lighted candles setting the house on fire as Lester forces Willie to flee the scene. The house burns to the ground while the entire community watches it and *lets it burn*, denying the evidence before their eyes. Willa's journey ends in catastrophe; although Willa and Luther are destroyed in a flash fire that sweeps the house, still Willa is triumphant. She puts an end to the Nedeed dynasty and frees the rest of the community.

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