

Advancing Nursing Scholarship through the Interpretation of Imaginative Literature: Ancestral Connectedness and the Survival of the Sufferer

Imaginative literature has played an important role in nursing practice and education since the time of Florence Nightingale. Used primarily as an exemplar, however, its potential has not been realized fully by nurses. This article addresses the use of imaginative literature in scholarly inquiry. Often considered the aegis of literary critics and philosophers, the formal discipline of literary criticism enables the nurse to identify concepts and to generate theoretic explanations about human phenomena. The relationship between the ancestor and the survival of the sufferer is illustrated using Morrison's literary and cultural paradigm applied to selected novels. Implications for practice are identified. Key words: *ancestor, ancestral connectedness, kin, literary analysis, nursing, suffering*

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*She entered the story knowing she would emerge
from it feeling she had been immersed in the
lives of others . . . her body full of sentences
and moments, as if awaking from sleep with a
heaviness caused by unremembered dreams.*

—Michael Ondaatje^{1(p12)}

Imaginative literature in the form of novels, poetry, plays, or short stories enriches our lives in many ways. It is easy to imagine feeling “immersed in the lives of others” after reading a good story. The experience is similar to Watson's actual caring occasion because, like reading, “the moment of the caring occasion becomes part of the past life history of both persons and presents both with new opportunities.”^{2(p59)} Although the actual caring occasion involves at least two people and reading involves only one does not invalidate the comparison. From a literary perspective, it is reasonable to consider that both the reader and the story are

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altered in the process of reading, because repeated readings (particularly in the case of complex literature) reveal added insights, connections, and details about characters and events colored by previous encounters with the text. For the reader, then, the story acquires a history and provides new opportunities by virtue of having been read and reread.

Imaginative literature does more than enrich our personal lives from an aesthetic standpoint. From a nursing perspective, it has played an important role in practice and education since the time of Florence Nightingale. In *Notes on Nursing*, Nightingale³ talks about the value of reading aloud to patients. Perhaps the first nurse to consider the benefits of bibliotherapy, she includes precise instructions regarding what should be read, how it should be read, and the pace at which reading should proceed. Consistent with Nightingale's approach throughout *Notes on Nursing*, she warns the nurse, "be very sure of what your patient can bear."^{3(p56)} Reading, according to Nightingale, was beneficial, provided it did not tire the individual.

In addition to bibliotherapy, practicing nurses may refer patients to imaginative literature, illness narratives, diaries, or memoirs to help them cope with suffering. For example, Audre Lorde's⁴ *The Cancer Journals* is a diary in which the author, an African American lesbian, reflects on her recovery from breast cancer surgery and struggles to integrate those experiences into her life. In *A Slant of Sun*, Beth Kephart⁵ writes about the distress and the rewards of raising a child with special needs. Both authors record their experiences as part of their own therapy, but the books also have a universal appeal as stories of human suffering and survival.

In nursing education, imaginative literature is most often used as an exemplar. For instance, Tolstoy's⁶ novella *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* and Shakespeare's⁷ play *King Lear* frequently are used as case studies in classroom discussions. Both have wide application for students of the human condition, including, but not limited to, their examination of the nature of suffering, the vagaries of old age, and the meaning of human caring.

Indeed, the uses of literature in nursing are well documented⁸⁻²² and are often related to its value as a contributor to aesthetic knowing, a pattern of knowledge development described by Carper²³ and developed further by Jacobs-Kramer and Chinn.²⁴ Germain's¹² comments are typical of the conclusions of nurses who have described the advantages of using literary work in class discussions. She writes that, "classic or contemporary literature and a textbook permits the integration of aesthetic, personal, and ethical knowledge with the scientific."^{12(p85)} The aesthetic value of literature appears relatively clear in Germain's comments, although she implies that imaginative literature's contribution to nursing is at least partly dependent on scientific knowledge for validation.

In essence then, imaginative literature has been used in nursing education and practice as an exemplar. It confirms what we already know, supplements information found in textbooks, and provides patients with inspirational stories about others who have overcome suffering. Its value is primarily aesthetic, and nurses tend to look for accuracy by comparing novels or poems to information from science and to events within their experiences. Although it is fair to say that imaginative literature has been an ef-

fective strategy in nursing education and practice, it would be inaccurate to assume that we have exhausted its potential. This article addresses a component of that untapped potential—the use of imaginative literature in scholarly inquiry.

The analysis of imaginative literature allows the researcher to identify concepts, engage in speculation regarding the relationship between concepts, and to develop nursing theory based on those conclusions. It is particularly valuable in situations involving sensitive subjects and human phenomena that may be considered taboo in certain cultures or groups. Imaginative literature not only adds depth and breadth to our understanding but is an innovative approach to scholarship that is worthy of further consideration. Despite its potential, however, literary analysis or criticism is often considered the aegis of literary critics and philosophers. It has not been described by nursing scholars. The interpretation of imaginative literature is discussed and illustrated here from a nursing perspective, using excerpts from selected novels by African American writers.^{25–29} The development of a theory of human suffering is the focus of the reading.

LITERARY ANALYSIS

Reading, in the context of literary critique, is an approach to the text and often is preceded by the words close or strenuous or followed by the words deeply or well. As Bloom³⁰ informs us, “there is no single way to read well, though there is a prime reason why we should read. Information is endlessly available to us; where shall wisdom be found?”^{30(p19)} He continues, “We read deeply for varied reasons, most of them fa-

miliar; that we cannot know enough people profoundly enough; that we need to know ourselves better; that we require knowledge, not just of self and others, but of the way things are.”^{30(pp28–29)} Clearly, for Bloom, reading well goes beyond understanding the words on a page. It becomes a philosophic endeavor.

The language of literary interpretation or analysis may seem strange and unfamiliar to many nurses. The formal discipline of literary criticism, however, shares many of the same goals as other types of analysis or inquiry. In essence, it takes the literary work apart and puts it back together to establish meaning or reveal truth.³¹ A novel or poem may be examined to learn about the political message embedded in the text, to learn the manner in which minorities are portrayed, or to identify the nature of human suffering. Although key words and phrases become apparent in the initial reading, multiple readings enable the critic to develop a deeper understanding of concepts, ideas, and preliminary impressions. In this regard, literary analysis resembles a variety of qualitative approaches to research and knowledge development. For example, phenomenologists, grounded theory methodologists, and researchers using single-subject designs seek to discover the particulars of a given phenomenon by probing the transcripts of interviews and field notes. In the case of literary analysis, the text of the novel is the “subject” or “case.”

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Literary theory, although not a prerequisite to reading, may help the analyst interpret the text by providing a set of guiding principles and assumptions about literature and the nature of reality. For instance, a feminist scholar approaches reading with a different set of assumptions than a historicist or a reader-response critic. Literary theory, although it is rarely used by nurses, has been available to readers since the time of Plato³² and Aristotle.³³ It became more popular and controversial in the 1960s and continues to generate both interest and debate.³⁴ A discussion of the merits of various literary theories is beyond the scope of this article, although one framework is used to illustrate the role literary theory may play in nursing scholarship. It is important to recognize that there are as many approaches to reading as there are readers, and the choice of framework is nearly limitless.

Morrison's³⁵ paradigm is an example of a literary theory. It reflects her cultural commitment and approach to writing and scholarship. "I don't like to find my books condemned as bad or praised as good, when that condemnation or that praise is based on criteria from other paradigms. I would much prefer that they were dismissed or embraced based on the success of their accomplishment within the culture out of which I write."^{35(p342)}

According to Morrison, Black literature possesses an "elusive but identifiable style."^{35(p342)} Her paradigm is an attempt to describe the distinct elements of African American writing that contribute to that style, and it is similar to the ideas of other African American critics and literary theorists.³⁶⁻⁴⁰ They, like Morrison, are advocates for African American culture and are interested in strengthening African American

scholarship and general knowledge of their cultural heritage. The paradigm directs the reader's critical attention by providing a broad base of culturally derived assumptions about literature and art, which, when applied to the text, inform and enlighten the reading.

The paradigm's assumptions about literature are framed as characteristics of Black art and yield to the formation of questions. The questions in turn help the critic interrogate the text and uncover meaning, in this case, the meaning of suffering. For example, Black literature, according to Morrison's paradigm, combines aspects of both print and oral literature, resulting in stories that may be read in silence but that take on added meaning when read aloud. The critic, then, is asked to examine the ways in which the oral quality of the text reveals information about the characters' suffering. In the novel *Beloved*,²⁵ Paul D's suffering is exposed when he makes love to Beloved:

"Beloved." He said it, but she did not go. She moved closer with a footfall he didn't hear and he didn't hear the whisper that the flakes of rust made either as they fell away from the seams of his tobacco tin. So when the lid gave he didn't know it. What he knew was that when he reached the inside part he was saying, "Red heart. Red heart. Red heart," over and over again. Softly and then so loud it woke Denver, then Paul D himself. "Red heart. Red heart. Red heart."^{25(p117)}

The passage is complex, and its romantic, dreamlike character lulls the reader and produces a floating sensation. At the same time, Paul D's despair and helplessness become evident as he is drawn into an encounter with Beloved that is more than sexual. It exposes his suffering with surgical precision, as his heart, a rusted tobacco tin, begins to

beat insistently and becomes too strident to dismiss or ignore.

The lush images of the written word reveal additional meaning when the passage is read aloud. Red heart, red heart, red heart shares the cadence of lub dub, lub dub, lub dub, the sound most recognize as the beat of a human heart. In giving these lines to Paul D, the writer infuses his suffering with a visceral quality that further intensifies his pain and despair.

The second characteristic of African American writing is that it provides “the places and spaces so that the reader can participate.”³⁵(p341) In this way, the reader develops a relationship with the speaker in the novel, and the question becomes: How is this tale crafted to allow the reader to participate in the suffering of the character?

Participation is a more intimate literary tactic than the oral quality of African American writing, because the reader is inclined to feel “present” in the story. Although the novel’s ability to create a place for the reader to participate may appear inviting, participation also may create apprehension. The introduction to Naylor’s²⁶ *Mama Day* is a case in point. It tells the legend of Sapphira Wade, a necessary prelude to the story that is about to unfold. Before moving into the story of the novel, however, the narrator speaks directly to the reader.

Think about it: ain’t nobody really talking to you. We’re sitting here in Willow Springs, and you’re God-knows-where. It’s August 1999—ain’t but a slim chance it’s the same season where you are. Uh, huh, listen. Really listen this time: the only voice is your own. But you just heard about the legend of Sapphira Wade, though nobody here breathes her name . . . you done heard it without a single living soul really saying a word.²⁶(p10)

Although acknowledging that the reader is not physically present in Willow Springs, the narrator is, at the same time, pulling up a chair and inviting the reader to take part. Harris³⁶ calls this the “porch connection,” an “interactive metaphor for tellers and listeners.”³⁶(p57)

The reader is privy to more than a seat on the porch, however. Sapphira Wade is a legendary figure, and the details of her life are shrouded in mystery, as evidenced by the fact that no one in Willow Springs will speak her name. In making a place for the reader, the narrator has fashioned a position of honor and trust. More importantly, the story of the legendary slave mother is related directly to the suffering of the protagonist, and in metaphorically inviting the reader to take a seat on the porch, the narrator has made it possible to learn about that suffering.

Notions of orality and participation may appear to have little application in nursing. This concern is unfounded, however. Attending to the places that have been created for the reader’s participation and the oral quality of the literary work requires skills with which the nurse is already familiar. For example, although the patient’s story or chief complaint often is recorded many times in the chart, the focus of each note varies. The language of the dietitian, nurse, physician, or pharmacist adds dimension and clarity to the narrative, but the story recorded in the patient’s record often pales alongside the same story told aloud by either the patient or a family member. Hearing patients speak has a profound effect on the way we understand their suffering.

Participation, too, has implications for nursing practice and is more than a characteristic of African American writing. Patients,

either unintentionally or deliberately, create places and spaces that enable nurses to know them better. A family Bible, photographs, or a handmade quilt, accouterments to a hospitalized patient's room, pique our curiosity and invite our participation. In addition, patients create places for participation when they tell only part of their story. They are, in essence, testing the water, perhaps fearing that caregivers may judge them unfairly or fail to take their concerns seriously. In this situation, one of Morrison's suggestions is a valuable guide for nurses. She maintains that in creating a place for the reader to participate "what is left out is as important as what is there."^{35(p34)} Listening for gaps in the patient's story and allowing it to unfold at a pace determined by the patient is more likely to result in the opportunity to become a partner in care, and in that way, to learn about the patient's suffering.

The presence of an ancestor is the final characteristic of African American writing in Morrison's paradigm. She describes the ancestors, or elders, as "not just parents, they are sort of timeless people whose relationships to the characters are benevolent, instructive, and protective and they provide a certain kind of wisdom."^{35(p343)} For readers who are not African American, this is perhaps the most difficult and challenging tenet of Morrison's paradigm. For example, two questions appear to flow from this characteristic of African American writing. One is: Who are the ancestors? The other is: What is the relationship between the ancestor(s) and the characters' suffering? The search is infinitely more challenging than these simple interrogatory statements. The immediate challenge is to discover individuals who may or may not be related by blood and are not defined by their presence

in real time. Rather than looking for an ancestor in the European-American sense of the word, the ancestor in African American writing may be identified by looking for the person that fills the *role* of protector and instructor and is a source of wisdom and benevolence in the sufferer's world. In *A Visitation of Spirits*,²⁷ Aretha Cross is an example of an ancestor who is a blood relative, although not a parent.

He remembered his grandmother's hands to be small and firm, also callused from hard work, but still soft in a womanly way. Tender. People called her Retha. Aretha Davis Cross. A mother of the church. His mother. Hers were the hands that were his beginnings. . . . Her hands reached through the darkness. Her hands lifted and supported. Undid and did up. Comforted. Scolded. Fed. Clothed. Bathed. . . . Her hands spoke and listened, smiled and encouraged. She died when he was ten.^{27(p72)}

Again, a dreamlike quality is created as Aretha Cross is remembered by her grandson, Horace. The excerpt begins with a sentence about his grandmother's hands, but it is the single-word sentences that give meaning and depth to Horace's relationship with her. The fact that he shared Retha with the community does not diminish her in Horace's memory, nor does the simple declarative sentence, "She died when he was ten." Taken alone, it is a statement of fact, without emotional overtones. In this passage, however, the oral quality of the writing transforms simple sentences into a tribute to a remarkable ancestor and timeless individual. The novel leaves no doubt about the source of wisdom, benevolence, instruction, and protection in Horace's life.

Critical evaluation of the texts cited here enables the reader to extend Morrison's notion of ancestor. For example, in Bambara's²⁸

novel *The Salt Eaters*, Velma's ancestral figures are found in the traditions of her people. They are *noncorporeal* sources of wisdom, protection, instruction, and benevolence. In this passage, Velma is trying to remember when she lost touch with her ancestral system and when her suffering began.

She thought she knew that. At some point in her life she was sure Douglass, Tubman, the slave narratives, the songs, fables, Delaney, Ida Wells, Blyden, DuBois, Garvey, the singers, Malcolm, Coultrane, the poets, her comrades, her godmother, her neighbors, had taught her that. . . . Thought she knew how to build resistance, make the journey to the center of the circle.^{28(p258)}

It is not difficult to imagine, after reading this passage, that Bambara's novel is criticized for its complexity.³⁹ Although the excerpt is a confusing mix of familiar and unfamiliar names, cultural references, and incomplete thoughts, it is typical of the novel's construction. West African-retained religious figures and practices (including voodoo, Dahomey, obeah, loa, and haints), 47 characters, a nonlinear plot, multiple subplots, spirit guides, mud mothers, and the magic powers of certain African trees and plants are a small example of what the novel offers the reader. One of the central messages in *The Salt Eaters*, however, is "that the truth was in one's own people and the key was to be centered in the best of one's own traditions."^{28(p169)}

Ultimately Velma is able to make the "journey to the center of the circle" because she realigns herself with the traditions of her people. Velma's godmother, a prayer circle, and a healer are part of her journey. The ancestor, like novel's construction, is complex and cannot be known at a single glance. The traditions that center Velma are

both ancient and modern, supernatural and rational, and comprehensible and obscure, and as she struggles toward them, Velma is often confused and frightened. It is the confusing and manic quality of the writing, however, that inadvertently increases the reader's identification with Velma's situation, making her return to the center all the more comforting. Every element of the traditions that ground her offer Velma wisdom, protection, benevolence, and instruction, and as the reader's understanding of the notion of ancestry in African American writing grows, so does an understanding of its richness and complexity.

According to Morrison, more than a characteristic of African American writing, the "presence or absence of that figure determine[s] the success or the happiness of the character."^{35(p343)} She continues by saying "if we don't keep touch with the ancestor that we are, in fact, lost."^{35(p343)} This provision allows the reader to answer questions about the relationship between the ancestor and the characters' suffering. The survival of the sufferer is dependent on the connection between the sufferer and the ancestor. Although it is clear that some ancestral systems are inadequate, others provide a powerful and effective safety net. Two examples from the texts will help define the relationship more clearly.

In Kenan's²⁷ novel *A Visitation of Spirits*, Horace Cross succumbs to suffering because he is unable to establish a connection

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with his ancestral system. In a complicated story that combines elements of his Baptist faith and the occult, the teenage protagonist struggles to resolve the tension between his homosexuality and his notions of sin and salvation. Unable to find a viable alternative, he takes his own life. Although Horace's ancestral system is unusually rich and deep, he cannot make the connection that will enable him to survive. Horace is left with nothing to hold on to because he is unable to find a place to admit his failures and weaknesses. In the final moments of his life, a veil of suffering covers his eyes as he thinks about death. "He thought of his family, of what they wanted of him; of his friends and what they offered him; and of himself . . . what did he, Horace, truly want? Suddenly life beneath the ground had a certain appeal it had never had before. It was becoming more attractive in a macabre way. No more, no more ghosts, no more sin, no more, no more."²⁷⁽²³¹⁾ The mood of the passage slides from simple reminiscence to hopelessness and despair as the repetition of the words "no more" seals the lid on Horace's coffin.

Horace's decent into madness and eventual suicide are given added meaning because they are incongruent with the strength of his ancestral system. Horace's ancestry not only consists of people, but also includes buildings, the land of his ancestors, and the legacy of slavery. All are described in near epic proportions. First, the land of his ancestors defines its inhabitants. It was ceded to Horace's great-great grandfather after the Emancipation and figures prominently in Horace's suffering. Its smells, sounds, and memories are so strong that Horace cannot imagine leaving "the soy-bean fields surrounding his grandfather's

house, the woods that surround the fields, the tall, massive long-leaf pines."^{27(p11)} The grandeur of the land is constructed in crescendo fashion as the reader assimilates images of fields, then woods, and finally, the massive pines.

Next, there are the Crosses, who for generations have been deacons of the church and community leaders. His grandfather, described here, is as memorable as his grandmother, Retha.

[H]is grandfather was the center, the source of the church's memory, the link to the terrible past they all had to remember. His father and his father's father before him were church leaders, and it had fallen upon him to lead, to guide, to counsel his people, their people. A chief, a great elder. His place was higher than the pastor's, and to Horace this seemed so very close to God that he realized, one day, that his grandfather was something of a David. He was the grandson of a shaman.^{27(pp71-72)}

Given the power and authority of the Cross lineage, the reader is not surprised when Horace asks, "how could he tell his grandfather he was not like him?"^{27(p157)} Not only are the Crosses guardians of their people's history, including the legacy of slavery, but they are close to God as well.

The play of words in this passage has a dizzying effect on the reader. Fathers, grandfathers, and father's father make it difficult to know who Horace actually is referring to. Similarly, the reader is aware that both Horace and his grandfather are the grandsons of a shaman. The writer seems content with uncertainty. The literary design of the excerpt makes it difficult to separate elders and grandfathers from kings and wise men. Horace's ancestors cannot be teased apart like tangled filaments or threads. They not only are linked, but also

appear to be invincible, leaving no room for the connectedness he seeks.

Horace's suffering has implications for nursing. The signs of suffering are described clearly in the novel, but their significance is determined by careful reading and close examination of the text. In the same manner, the nurse's interview skills uncover a story that is more complex than the patient's chief complaint or admitting diagnosis. *A Visitation of Spirits* teaches the reader/nurse about the richness of the ancestral system and the inevitable consequences of intolerable suffering in the absence of ancestral connectedness.

*Mama Day*²⁶ is another novel that teaches us about ancestral connectedness and the survival of the sufferer. In this story, however, because the protagonist's ancestral connectedness is well established, she does not succumb to suffering. Understanding Cocoa's ancestry requires close reading and careful attention to the novel's complex imagery and use of metaphor. For example, the carvings on Miranda Day's kitchen cabinets hold one of the keys to Cocoa's ancestry and her suffering. Miranda is Cocoa's great-aunt, one of the two remaining children of John-Paul Day, the seventh son of the seventh son of Sapphira Wade, mentioned earlier. At the beginning of the novel, Miranda watches a column of steam rise toward the pine wood cabinets in her kitchen, and the ancestral system is metaphorically presented to the reader.

Her daddy made those with his very hands, using nothing but a flat chisel and mallet. John-Paul worked each apricot cluster and trailing vine into them panels so lifelike you'd think they was still growing. A little drop of water beads up on the tip of an apricot leaf and shines in the morning sun. Miranda smiles as the bead turns golden in color.^{26(p34)}

At first glance, the scene is comforting in a pastoral fashion. It appears to be nothing more than the description of a woman watching the steam from her teakettle, remembering the care her father used in carving each panel of her cabinets. This is where the craft of the literary analyst may be brought to bear, however.

Repeated references to apricot clusters and trailing vines are easy to overlook. It does not take long, however, before the reader understands that these references are a significant part of the complex symbolism and folk wisdom of the novel. Apricot fruit clusters and their vines decorate Miranda's cabinets, and apricot is the color of the homespun fabric worn by Sapphira Wade and the gingham worn by John-Paul's wife, Ophelia (Miranda and Abigail's mother). Miranda and her sister Abigail use fabric swatches from Ophelia's and Sapphira's discarded dresses in the wedding quilt they stitch for Cocoa. In this manner, many generations of Day women are connected symbolically in the text.

The richness of the passage has not been exhausted in botanical metaphors, however. In it, Miranda makes loving reference to her father's skill with a chisel and mallet. Indeed, wood carving and working with one's hands are folk traditions that many readers will respect. Memories of John-Paul are associated with more than the decorative art he created. His carving reminds Miranda of the mourning and madness that followed her sister Peace's death.

Her mama's wail and the angry thud of her daddy's hobnail boots spiral above her head louder and louder. The sound will fill the house while one and then the other grows mad, mad. . . . Long after her mama will spend her days rocking and twisting thread, twisting

thread while her daddy spends his nights digging, digging into blocks of wood.^{26(p36)}

In this passage, comforting activities such as sewing and woodcarving are connected to intense mourning and Miranda's and Abigail's fear and loneliness. Their parents' grief and madness do not happen in front of the children, but the sound of their mourning spirals above the children's heads. The image of Abigail and Miranda huddled in their beds, listening to their mother's wailing and the pounding of their father's boots appears to the reader almost before it is mentioned in the text. The madness is intensified by the repetition of the words "twisting" and "digging," causing the reader to interpret grief as a force pushing down on this family like a corkscrew or a chisel.

Miranda and Abigail survive because they *do* huddle together, and "Miranda's small fingers place themselves around the rhythm of Abigail's breathing. Nestled under the quilt, they are four arms and legs, two heads, one heartbeat."^{26(p36)} The quilt is a symbol of ancestral connectedness, and again, the reader is aware of the existential nature of connectedness. Miranda places her fingers, not around her sister's rib cage, but around the *rhythm* of her breathing. It is difficult to imagine the quality of a relationship that enables Miranda to encircle the rhythm of Abigail's breathing, much less to share her heartbeat. When these two women join forces to rescue Cocoa, however, there is little doubt that they will succeed.

These novels, like the transcripts of a phenomenologist's interviews, provide a rich source of data for scholarly inquiry. The analysis of intolerable human suffering and the role of the ancestor in alleviating or mediating that suffering are examples of

how extant themes and explanatory concepts from literature may contribute to scholarly inquiry and to the development of nursing theory. The use of a literary or cultural paradigm as part of the research design facilitates a scholarly approach to reading and makes understanding possible. Like the phenomenologist, the literary analyst recognizes the importance of accuracy and rigorous attention to detail.

INVESTIGATIONAL RIGOR

Traditional *empiric* studies define rigor in terms of reliability and validity. Standards of precision or accuracy for *qualitative* researchers are part of an evolving discussion based on the differences between the underlying assumptions of each paradigm.⁴¹ Owing to the newness of nursing studies of imaginative literature, the criteria for determining rigor have not been addressed. It is important, therefore, to consider what constitutes good literary analysis. Whereas some criteria from qualitative discussions are appropriately applied to the analysis of imaginative literature, others are unique to nursing studies of literature. The criteria cannot be delineated without some degree of overlap, as the excerpts demonstrate.

For example, in their discussion of narratives in nursing research, Frid et al indicate that "The validity of the interpretation depends on the entire interpretive process."^{42(p701)} Further, they warn against the naïve reading and encourage the "articulation of ambiguity" in the narrative. This criterion is important to the analysis of imaginative literature as well. Literary analysis makes use of ambiguity, paradox, metaphor, and a variety of literary tools to understand better the phenomenon of interest.

The style and structure of the writing is a key element in the analysis. Morrison's novel *Beloved*²⁵ is a case in point. In it, scenes of unbelievable and sickening horror are also places of incredible beauty. Sweet Home, the plantation where Sethe and Paul D. were slaves, is remembered as follows:

And suddenly there was Sweet Home, rolling, rolling, rolling out before her eyes, and although there was not a leaf on that farm that did not make her want to scream, it rolled itself out before her in shameless beauty. It never looked as terrible as it was and it made her wonder if hell was a pretty place too. Boys hanging from the most beautiful sycamores in the world. It shamed her—remembering the wonderful sloughing trees rather than the boys.^{25(p6)}

In this scene, the writer uses inversion, a literary tool that serves up incongruent images for the purpose of establishing meaning and emphasizing the complex nature of reality. Here, the beauty of Sweet Home is as significant to its description as a weapon is to a crime, and it represents an inversion of the natural order of things, because under “the most beautiful sycamores in the world,” young boys were hung to death.

The text goes beyond inversion to make its point, however. Sweet Home has a palpable beauty. It is not a still life, and its beauty does not simply roll toward the horizon. When the word “rolling” is repeated, the image is bacchanal, and the shamelessness of Sweet Home is not in doubt. According to Sethe, Sweet Home is a “terrible” place, but she also considers it a place of incredible wonder. The reader is likely to see Sweet Home as a metaphor of suffering, and, as a result, may conclude that suffering not only is an intense and complex experience, but includes incongruent and, therefore, confusing elements. The responsibility

of the critic in this situation, and in literary analysis in general, is to deliver a faithful interpretation of reality as reflected in the text of the novel.

Determining the rigor of literary analysis also depends on the accuracy with which it addresses phenomena of concern to nurses, and the degree to which it helps generate viable theoretic explanations of those phenomena. One way to ensure that the findings reflect the complexity of reality and address issues of concern to nurses is through the selection of the literary work. Novels should be intense, thought provoking, and have profound messages that, with repeated readings, reveal added insights, connections, and details about the events and characters in the novels. In the analysis of imaginative literature, a text that lacks depth and complexity will limit the critic's ability to answer the research questions, identify explanatory concepts, or generate viable theoretic explanations. The literary work, therefore, should be complex and intricately written, qualities of literature that are similar to the richness of data sought by phenomenologists or grounded theory methodologists.

According to Hall and Stevens, all persons “are purposeful beings situated in particular historical, sociocultural, political,

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economic, and embodied life circumstances,” and scholarly inquiry should, therefore, reflect the influence of these larger socioeconomic and political structures.^{43(p23)} The literary work also should speak to broad social issues and human concerns. For example, in *The Bluest Eye*,²⁹ 11-year-old Pecola observes the distaste in Mr Yacobowski’s gaze and realizes that she “has seen it lurking in the eyes of all white people.”^{29(p49)} She concludes that the “distaste must be for her, her blackness.”^{29(p49)} Mr Yacobowski’s revulsion is a psychologic form of racial violence that causes suffering and is as harmful as a physical beating. The attack is directed not only at Pecola but at *all* Blacks. The repetition of the word “her” is a literary technique that makes Pecola the standard-bearer for her race. Pecola’s story of suffering is bound inexorably to the larger issue of racism and suffering.

Morrison’s paradigm supports the dual role of the novel. She maintains that a novel “should be beautiful and powerful, and it should also *work*. It should have something in it that enlightens, something in it that opens the door and points the way.”^{35(p341)} Although using a subtly different vocabulary, Morrison is identifying functions of the novel that are congruent with the criteria of complexity, intricacy, and social consciousness. The alignment between the selection criteria and the elements of the literary paradigm also speaks to the precision of the study and helps establish the accuracy of the findings.

The rigor of the literary interpretation is determined further by the manner in which specific concepts or themes are revealed in the text. Explanatory concepts, such as the role of the ancestor, should appear as significant threads in the literary work. This is ac-

complished in several ways. The concepts may be expressed in the dialogue and non-verbal behavior of the protagonist and other characters and in the observations of the narrator. Unlike other qualitative analyses, the concepts also may be reflected metaphorically in nature and inanimate objects, reinforcing their meaning for the characters and their explanatory capability. For example, in *The Bluest Eye*,²⁹ although Pecola rarely speaks, her tale of suffering is not unspoken. Pecola is introduced to the reader as an unnamed guest at the home of Claudia and Frieda MacTeer. To make her situation more unpleasant, she is relegated to the center space in their bed, a place neither sister finds appealing. Throughout the novel, Pecola endures verbal assaults and is shunned by others. In a particularly powerful moment in the novel, Pecola is beaten and verbally abused by her mother for spilling a berry cobbler. Despite the burns on her legs, she retreats without a word. In another encounter, Claudia describes Pecola’s response when Maureen Peal turns on Pecola after temporarily befriending her: “Pecola tucked her head in—a funny, sad, helpless movement. A kind of hunching of the shoulders, pulling in of the neck, as though she wanted to cover her ears.”^{29(p72)} Pecola “seemed to fold into herself, like a pleated wing.”^{29(p73)}

Evidence of Pecola’s suffering is provided by the humiliating and abusive situations that the narrator describes and by the eyewitness of her friend Claudia. Her suffering is reinforced by her defenseless posture, her “sloughing step,” and the shame with which she retreats from confrontation. In addition, Pecola’s environment underscores her suffering, as the narrator tells us: “she moves down an avenue gently buf-

feted by the familiar and therefore love images. The dandelions at the base of the telephone pole. . . . There was the sidewalk crack shaped like a Y.”^{29(p47)} The unfortunate consequence of Pecola’s fascination with dandelions and cracked sidewalks, however, is that they easily lose their power, and that the world she constructs is not strong enough or beautiful enough to prevent her from succumbing to suffering. In this case, the conclusions of the analyst are constructed from a variety of sources and may be validated by returning to the text of the novel. Drawing on multiple sources in the analysis of imaginative literature may be seen as a form of triangulation, a technique that enhances rigor by contributing to the completeness of the information from which conclusions are drawn.⁴⁴

Finally, rigor is achieved by the logical integration and consistency of the theoretic generalizations that result from the analysis. Because the interpretation of imaginative literature seeks to generalize from a small and nonrepresentative sample (in this case, one or more novels), a discussion of sample size and the notions of empiric and theoretic generalization are necessary. Validity in the analysis of imaginative literature is based on what Sharp describes as the “adequacy and explanatory power of the concept itself.”^{45(p788)} In other words, does ancestral connectedness explain the individual’s ability to survive intolerable human suffering? The answer does not depend on representativeness, as Sharp⁴⁵ and others⁴⁶ have noted. They suggest that a single observation is as valuable as observations across samples, or in this case, across texts.

Empiric generalization, according to Sharp,⁴⁵ is based on statistical inference,

and “at its simplest it involves the selection of a random sample from the population, and calculating the probability that this sample will be representative of that population.”^{45(p786)} The data gathered in empiric studies enable the researcher to identify the *existence of correlations* between variables. In order to explain the *reasons for the correlations*, however, the investigators must refer to a theory.

On the other hand, theoretic generalization is the result of “analytic induction [and] proceeds by the intensive study of a limited number of cases, or indeed a single case, and its goal is to generate some general theory or model which can explain the relationships between the elements found to be generally in that class of phenomenon.”^{45(p787)} Unlike enumerative induction, which attempts to explain the results of empiric studies, analytic induction is generated from concentrated studies of individual cases, like novels. According to Sharp, “it seeks to discover the logical and necessary relationships between variables rather than the actual and contingent,”^{45(p789)} making it an ideal choice for qualitative nursing studies. Phrased another way, inductive reasoning identifies patterns of meaning and the relationships between them. It is particularly useful when little is known about a given phenomenon,⁴⁷ such as suffering.

The relationship between ancestral connectedness and the survival of the sufferer has been discussed at length. In addition to being consistent within the text of the novels, it is supported by the major tenets of Morrison’s paradigm. The theory extends Morrison’s notion of ancestor and expands the application of the literary and cultural paradigm to human science and the discipline of nursing.

The ability to generate theoretic explanations from individual literary works enriches nursing scholarship by identifying, as Sharp points out, "the logical and necessary relationships between variables."^{45(p789)} For example, the relationship between the ancestor and the survival of the sufferer is a theoretic connection whose adequacy has yet to be determined. Although ancestral connectedness appears to explain the characters' abilities to survive intolerable suffering in the novels cited here, further study is warranted. As cases, the characters are not typical study participants, and imaginative literature is not chosen because the characters represent a larger segment of the population. The relationship between the ancestor and the survival of the sufferer, therefore, is strictly theoretic, and the challenge is to discover if the explanatory ability of the notion of ancestral connectedness holds in other contexts.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of imaginative literature for the purposes of uncovering explanatory concepts related to human phenomena is an innovative approach to nursing scholarship. It uses many of the investigative skills with which nurses are familiar, but it derives its conclusions from analytic induction. The practice of literary analysis has been illustrated in this article by using excerpts from selected novels by African American writers. The connection between the ancestor and the sufferer is worthy of further speculation and investigation.

The analysis of the novels expands Morrison's notion of ancestor to include the person, group, or thing that fills the role of protector and instructor and is a source of

wisdom and benevolence in the sufferer's world. This allows for the consideration of noncorporeal factors such as the traditions of the sufferer's people, including, but not limited to, folk wisdom and traditions, religious practices, and political activism.

The implications for nursing have been described. It is important to note that literary analysis as a scholarship approach broadens our abilities to investigate human phenomena. In addition, the notion of ancestor appears to parallel the role of caring across the human community and should be explored through the examination of other literature and in human populations.

Criteria for evaluating rigor in nursing studies of imaginative literature have been proposed. They are not an endpoint but represent a work in progress. The question, "What constitutes good literary analysis?" was approached with respect for what constitutes good nursing scholarship. Hopefully, standards of precision or accuracy for nursing studies of imaginative literature will become part of the evolving discussion of rigor in nursing science and philosophy.

The practice of literary analysis offers new opportunities to nurses, not only as a research methodology but as a key for unlocking the mysteries of the texts we choose to study. The analysis of imaginative literature enables the nurse to become immersed in the lives of others and to return to the text with questions that help establish meaning and reveal truth. This path to knowledge engages the nurse in speculative thinking about the phenomenon that he or she seeks to diagnose and treat. The effect that this new approach to scholarship will have on the care we give our patients is potentially boundless.

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