ABSTRACT

SYDNEY ANDERSON. The Power of Womanism as seen in Toni Morrison’s *Sula*, Gwendolyn Brooks’ *Maud Martha, and* Ann Petry’s *The Street*. (Under the direction of Dr. Marc Dudley.)

The 1940’s was a period of tumultuous change and uncertainty for African American women. While the horrors of slavery were behind them, the black population was still controlled by white culture through Jim Crow laws and segregation. Toni Morrison, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Ann Petry’s novels *Sula*, *Maud Martha*, and *The Street*, respectively, chronicle what this period meant for black women and their roles within society. These authors produced characters who refuse to settle for the belittling narrative white society constructed for them. The novels told the stories of women who strived to find autonomous identities outside of societal expectations. In these identities, they felt a sense of power and community that novelist Alice Walker would define as womanism decades later. Walker’s womanist theory explained how, despite having the odds stacked against them, black women found control, confidence, and community within one another. The works of Morrison, Brooks, and Petry exemplify Walker’s womanism through favorable themes such as friendship and self-love, but they do not shy away from the darker sides of the theory. All three novels show how rage can be equally empowering for women who feel bound by suffocating societal expectations. The stories seen in *Sula*, *Maud Martha*, and *The Street* remain as pertinent today as they were during their time of publication. Their messages of strength and self assurance are still necessary reminders for modern day society as racial tensions remain. The stories seen in Morrison’s *Sula*, Brooks’ *Maud Martha*, and Petry’s *The Street* assert the necessity of womanism for African American women.