CLOSETS OF SHAME IN THE WORKS OF DOROTHY ALLISON

by

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We the undersigned have read this thesis and agree that it is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as partial fulfillment for the degree of Master of Arts.

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ABSTRACT

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In this essay, three of Dorothy Allison’s short stories from her compilation Trash are analyzed in regards to shame: “River of Names,” “I’m Working on My Charm,” and “Don’t Tell Me You Don’t Know.” Using Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s theories from “Epistemology of the Closet,” I analyze how social binaries marginalize Others and what implications that can have on a person’s sense of self-worth. Each story, unique in its own way, gives readers invaluable insight into the life of someone from the white-trash social class. The narrator is a woman who is closeted not only by her sexual orientation, but more significantly by the social class within she grew up. She has learned that she is on the wrong end of many of the binary oppositions present within society. It is not her sexual orientation that she finds closeting her, rather it is her position as less-than others, her stereotypical image of being uneducated, poor, unattractive, and immoral. What these binary oppositions have done to the narrator is forced her into closets which she can only accurately express to a reader. Allison has provided readers with insights into the class of people and it is through the narrator’s story-telling that a conversation about the dangers of shame, binary opposites, and feelings of being less-than can occur.
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Closets of Shame in the Works of Dorothy Allison

I. Introduction

In Two or Three Things I Know For Sure, Dorothy Allison informs readers that she is going to tell us a story – that if she could convince herself, then she can convince us. Of course readers are supposed to immediately ask themselves – what did she try to convince herself of and is she going to try to convince me of the same thing? This is the point – the façade. For Allison, when she first started writing, “there were just nightmares and need and stubborn determination” (Two or Three Things I Know for Sure 1). She was not ready, at first, to tell her stories. They were painful and reminded her of the hurt and the trauma – she herself was yet to get over these things but wanted to write about them. So, why the hesitation? Why did it take her so long to tell her truth? Why did it take her so long to be able to write honestly even if it was for no one other than herself? The answer is quite simple… shame.

Through her stories, Allison’s narrator opens readers up to a world that they may have never encountered and types of people that they have tried to avoid. By doing this, she is able to unveil the female shame that can capture marginalized women who are a part of certain groups considered to be shameful by the majority of society. Before analyzing shame and its presence within Allison’s short stories, I will define it using Nicole Frayard’s “Rape, Trauma, and Shame
in Samira Bellil’s Dans l’enfer des tournantes”; she defines shame as “…a wound to one’s self-esteem, a painful feeling or sense of degradation excited by the consciousness of having done something unworthy of one’s previous ideas of one’s own excellence…Shame arises from the feeling of inferiority” (Fayard 35). It is this feeling of inferiority that has motivated Allison’s narrator in her short story compilation. In this essay, I will use three of Dorothy Allison’s stories from her collection Trash and various societal theories to detail how shame plays a pivotal role in the decisions the story’s narrator has made in life and, in turn, the decisions of anyone who feels as though they have something to be ashamed of. I will answer the question: what role did shame play in her narrator’s life and what implications does shame have on individuals in society? Allison’s stories start this conversation, and it is up to readers to continue it, to relate to it or, at least, to come to a better understanding of it.

Thinking about shame usually brings to mind an act that one has intentionally committed which they regret. However, what if you had no choice in what was considered shameful about you but, rather, you were thrown into it, inherently possessed it, or were captured by it? Could you live your life without feeling so shameful that you would feel the need to hide or escape altogether? This thesis explores those questions and uses Sedgwick’s theory of “The Closet” to shed light on just how such roles of shame are created and perpetuated. In Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s essay “Epistemology of the Closet,” she argues that it is not as simple a decision as some may think. In fact, the concealment of shame is complicated due to the fact that it is never actually complete. Sedgwick explains that there are, “remarkably few of even the most openly gay people who are not deliberately in the closet with someone” (Sedgwick 67). It is often thought that once a person comes out as being gay, the secret is out and over and done with;
Sedgwick explains that this is not the case at all. Instead they could be open with others, but be in the closet with someone who is, “personally or economically, or institutionally important to them” (Sedgwick 68). When a person feels the need to hide the truth about who they are from themselves and others, it is not something that can be dealt with once and then finished. It is a process that continues throughout their entire life. As depicted by Allison, through her narrator, it is the incomplete nature of ‘coming out’ that causes one to continually grapple with their sense of self. Indeed, the feelings one may have due to their shame may have devastating outcomes on their life.

‘Coming Out of the Closet’ was a term that was first heard around the turn of the century. Sedgwick argues that the binary opposites of being in or out of the closet may have been one of the first meanings for coming out as gay. She asserts that, “a whole cluster of the most crucial sites for the contestation of meaning in twentieth-Century Western culture are consequentially and quite indelibly marked with the historical specificity of homosocial/homosexual definition” (Sedgwick 72). In other words, the binary opposition between being inside of the closet (private about one’s homosexuality) versus being outside of the closet (publicly open about one’s homosexuality) has shed light on the fact that one may be identified not by what they are but by, instead, what they are not. These binaries set up the possibility for one to feel shame.

Sedgwick emphasizes the point that there are various “epistemologically charged pairings” present in our everyday lives (Sedgwick 72). I must argue that this fact (the presence of binary oppositions within society) has created a sense of shame if one is not on the socially acceptable side. The ideas of the closet and of coming out, she states, have had substantial impact on other definitions of binary opposites including: masculine/feminine,
majority/minority, same/different, and innocence/initiation among many others (Sedgwick 72). A person who is on the socially unacceptable side of one of these oppositions, according to Sedgwick, has a type of closet all their own. Sedgwick stated that, “The gay closet is not a feature only of the lives of gay people,” but that anyone in a state of negative otherness may be challenged to consistently question which side of their closet they belong on. This question in general makes the feeling of shame possible in the first place. Thinking you need to be on the other side of something (knowledge/ignorance, gay/straight, low-class/upper-class, fat/thin, attractive/unattractive, educated/uneducated) forces a person to feel inadequate. Sedgwick states that the motive behind this powerful organization of opposites is the fact that it allows one to demand respect (and therefore power) (Sedgwick 83). In addition, not only do the binary oppositions force one group to feel marginalized and another to be powerful, but it allows the powerful group to distinguish themselves as better because they are against the other (Sedgwick 83). These relationships between opposites make it possible for the socially-acceptable group to assign a level of lesser value to the other socially-unacceptable group. This marginalization is dangerous and is at the root of an innumerable amount of socially-created personal and public conflict.

In her semi-autobiographical stories, Dorothy Allison has painted a picture of the closets that she belongs to. By telling stories through her narrator, she illuminates the danger in defining otherness and the implications that a lack of understanding and tolerance can have on a person’s life, psyche, and self-worth. This essay will examine three of these short stories in light of Sedgwick’s theories of closeting, binary opposites, and feelings of otherness. These three stories each accomplish something different but necessary. The first focuses on the narrator’s shame of
being part of the rural underclass (white trash). The second shows how the members of this class combat their shame by using the tools of the powerless to find a temporary sense of joy, pride, and community. Finally, the third story focuses on the shame of wanting to leave one’s family and of wanting to be different than them depicting the fact that Allison is ashamed of the self of the first story. What these three, very different, short stories of Allison’s accomplish is paramount to the discussion of class and the implications of shame. In each of these stories, the reader is provided a perspective they may have never come across. They each provide insight into the life of the white rural underclass and may lead to a greater understanding of groups of people who find themselves on the wrong side of an opposite.

II. “River of Names”

In “River of Names,” the narrator gives the reader an intimate insight into her life and the type of closets she feels confined to. Switching between a scene of the narrator and her lover in bed to that of various instances of the narrator with her family, the story contrasts the material truth of the narrator’s past with what she is actually presenting as romantic truth to her lover. Ironically, this story presents two extreme manners in which the narrator can present herself to those around her. She can open up to her lover by using humor to show glimpses from her past, or she can allow her history, and her family’s, to remain hidden. It is clear that the narrator is not ready to come out of her closet of shame, but it does not seem to be specifically due to Jesse’s judgment of her. In this story, it is not the fear of judgment that scares her. The narrator is in the closet about her family because she, herself, is ashamed (a theme that later emerges with more vengeance in “Don’t Tell Me You Don’t Know”). In this story, the shame which the narrator
feels because she is different from Jesse prohibits her from showing her lover who she truly is. She is out of her closet of her sexuality, but the idea of coming out from the shame of her family is just not an option.

From the beginning, readers question the role they are playing as they make their way through the gut-wrenching material. If Dorothy Allison is speaking through the narrator, providing truth and fiction intersected, then what is the role of the reader? Are readers supposed to be complete outsiders to the story or are they supposed to see themselves through the lens of an unknowing shamer such as Jesse? I find that it is a mixture of both. I believe it is through these stories, and modes of story-telling that Allison is attempting to start a conversation about the ways in which people may deal with labels and shame in their lives and, ultimately, the repercussions that shame may have. In “The Politics of They – Dorothy Allison’s Bastard Out of Carolina as Critique of Class, Gender and Sexual Ideologies,” Moira Baker analyzes the implications that class-prejudice and shame can have on a person’s feeling of self-worth or lack thereof in regards to Allison’s most famous novel Bastard Out of Carolina. She states that, “Incandescent with grief, rage, and pride, [Allison’s] fiction also affirms the complex subjectivity of persons who must endure the contempt of a society that affords them one of two mythologized positions: “the truly worthy poor” or “white trash”” (Baker 117). Baker is stating that the narrator in Bastard Out of Carolina is aware that she belongs to yet another binary opposite (the “bad poor” as opposed to “good poor”), and she has exited from a lifestyle she found shameful only to find herself in a closet from which she is afraid to come out of. This is exactly the case for the narrator of “River of Names” in regards to her lover, Jesse.
With Jesse, the narrator finds herself stuck between the binaries previously mentioned. Baker continues by stating, “Allison deconstructs the category of class by demonstrating that the dichotomous and hierarchical terms it rests upon to distinguish the privileged from the lower classes—industrious/lazy, legitimate/illegitimate, respectable/shameful, civilized/uncivilized—are arbitrary, self-serving, and reversible” (Baker 118). These dichotomous terms are reminiscent of the binary opposites previously mentioned with regard to Sedgwick. For example, the narrator casts herself as the one who is uncivilized whereas her lover is civilized. In addition, she presents Jesse as attractive whereas the narrator is not. It is not only Jesse’s physical appearance which the narrator finds attractive, but she is fascinated with “the fairytale she thinks is everyone’s life” (9). Jesse represents much of what the narrator is not as evidenced by the narrator’s description of, “her smooth mouth, that chin that nobody ever slapped” (11). Again, the reader can connect the fact that these stigmas of opposition have powerful, and usually negative, impacts on those they are used to describe. This happens to be such the case with Jesse and the narrator; to the point that the narrator finds herself lying to her lover in order to hide from her shame and the shameful events of her past. The narrator feels she must compensate, with humor, for what her past lacks in comparison to Jesse’s.

Jesse tells the narrator about her childhood. She grew up in a typical household without abuse, tragedy, or trauma. Instead, her childhood was full of wonderful memories including that of her grandmother smelling of “dill bread and vanilla” (9). Embarrassed by her own truth, the narrator lies and replies that her grandmother smelled of lavender. She then admits to the reader that she is not sure what lavender even smells like. In reality, the narrator remembers her, “stomach churning over the memory of sour sweat and snuff,” of which her grandmother smelled.
(9). Again, a binary opposite is presented even in the form of how the two characters remember
their grandmothers smelling. By using a fake-memory in regards to the narrator’s very cliché use
of the smell of lavender, she attempts to distance herself from the actual-memory of her past. She
does this in order to relate with Jesse’s real-memory of how pleasant her grandmother smelled.
The narrator is in a very intimate situation with Jesse as they lay together in bed sharing stories.
Jesse thinks that she is learning about her lover’s humorous past and her familial history, stories
about her relatives, and wonderfully large family. She accepts the brief, humorous stories and
pictures presented by the narrator as truth, but the reader is told a different story.

The narrator tells the reader of the horrors of her childhood – of the death and violence
and trauma that engulfed so much of her life. It is easier for the narrator to tell her stories to the
reader – there is distance there. There is a safety present within this distance that does not exist
with Jesse. With her lover, they are far too close to one another to enable the narrator to be
truthful; but, how can this be? As these two women lay together naked in bed caressing each
other one of them is unable to be truly open with the other. A type of laughter and humor
shadows the narrator’s past from Jesse: “I tell the stories and it comes out funny. I drink bourbon
and make myself drawl, tell all those old funny stories” (11). Although she may not be exactly
open with Jesse, she is able to find temporary comfort in their relationship. Waking up from a
nightmare (presumably from some horror which took place in her past) the narrator calls to her
lover begging, “Hold me. Hold me…Jesse rolls over on [her]; her hands grip [her] hipbones
tightly” (13). The narrator is most vulnerable around Jesse when she is sleeping as she cannot
control the nightmares that she has or the memories that take her over as she sleeps. Once again
she covers up the truth with laughter and a “bland smile” and asks Jesse, “Did I fool you?” (13).
They both laugh off the intense moment hidden behind a joke. While this may be the reality Jesse is presented with, readers, however, are in a position to see beyond the opaque laughter and lies and are able to uncover the truth that she keeps hidden from so many.

The narrator is afraid to tell Jesse her stories. Even though they are both lesbian women who have known what it is like to be in the closet with their sexuality, the narrator still cannot come out as being from what many would consider a typical white trash family. What closets does the narrator attempt to remain hidden in from Jesse? There are parts of the narrator’s life that are horrifying and disturbing. She has witnessed tragedies unfathomable to most. Perhaps, telling these stories directly to Jesse, the vulnerability and shame for what her family was, and is, may be too difficult to come to grips with. The narrator is hiding her shame from Jesse by telling humorous versions of moments from her past. It is these hidden feelings of shame that will ultimately doom their relationship because the narrator will not be able to truly connect with Jesse.

One of the most disturbing and horrific stories told in Trash is that of the narrator’s cousin Little Bo. Once read, it is a scene that readers will keep with them forever. The narrator explains that after a brawl between her uncle and his sons, the littlest child, Bo, “…crawled around in the dirt, blood running out of his ears and his tongue hanging out of his mouth…It was a long time before [she] realized they never told anybody else what had happened to Bo” (14). The inclusion of this story is only one of the many examples of why the narrator is resistant to telling her lover the truth. It is easier to stay away from the reality of one’s pain than to have to explain it to someone who could not possibly understand and, who may in fact judge them for it. The narrator does not know how Jesse would react to the story. She may feel pity, sorrow, or
judgment; but, either way, it is not a story that the narrator is willing to tell because she is ashamed of it. This self-shame inhibits her from opening her past up to Jesse.

Those victims, survivors, and even monsters in her stories are her family and not only does she feel shame because of the actions they have committed, she also feels ashamed that she is embarrassed by them in the first place. Telling this story would let Jesse into the truth of her world. It would allow Jesse to see the rampant trauma present within the narrator’s family, and this thought is too much to handle. It would not be as simple as telling Jesse that her family was messed up and then the conversation would be over with. More questions would be asked and, in turn, more shame would be felt. It would not be as simple as opening the door to a closet and letting the secrets of her past out once and for all. This illustrates Sedwick’s point that coming out is complicated because it is never truly complete (Sedgwick 63). At this point in her relationship with Jesse, the narrator knows that staying inside her closet of familial shame is easier than coming out because its outcome is safer and more predictable. Unfortunately, she admits herself that this lack of communication will be to the detriment of their relationship. Indeed, the cost of one’s shame in any relationship is isolation.

Again, the narrator tells the reader more about her past than she is able to tell her lover. To the reader, she recalls that her entire childhood was filled with her loved ones overdosing, committing suicide, or dying of some other tragic circumstance. She explains that, “Somehow it was always made to seem they killed themselves: car wrecks, shotguns, dusty ropes, screaming, falling out of windows, things inside them” (10). The people in her family were drug-addicts; her own step-father was her rapist. She has been witness to, and victim of, an unfathomable amount
of tragedy. She grew up in this hellacious environment with her sister and such an environment inevitably impacted each of their psyches and futures.

Her uncles were fighters and alcoholics but they are portrayed as more complex by Allison. In Baker’s “Politics of They,” she explains that Allison depicts the characters in her stories not as the simple good-poor/bad-poor, but she thoughtfully depicts the characters for the complicated individuals that they are. This presentation of complicated individuals extends to the narrator as well. The narrator discusses the violence that the men in her family were known for and Allison is careful to represent them accurately. Baker explains that Allison’s representations of the men shows, “that they are emotionally drained themselves by a constant grind of work that never quite gets the bills paid” (Baker 131). Allison does more than provide the actions of characters; instead, she provides insight. As an example, take the moment where she presents the horrifying truth which has become a stereotype regarding southerners and incest. Through the narrator, Allison explains “Almost always, we were raped, my cousins and I. That was some kind of joke, too. “What’s a South Carolina virgin?” “At’s a ten-year-old can run fast.” It wasn’t funny for me in my Mama’s bed with my stepfather; not for my Cousin Billie in the attic with my uncle; nor for Lucille in the woods with another cousin” (10-11). Allison’s inclusion of rape is not only part of the story, but she uses the opportunity to shed light on the horrible reality that such a joke seems to be covering up.

This insight provided by Allison is further examined by Baker as she discusses Allison’s portrayal of the male characters: “Forced to live amid undeniable economic injustices and seething with anger because of it, they seek releases from their circumstances from fighting or
liquor, and they do not begin to acknowledge, let alone respond to, their wives needs” (Baker 131). An extreme of such an incident is recalled by the narrator as she details the story of Jack:

Caught at eighteen and sent to prison, Jack came back seven years later, blank faced, understanding nothing. He married a quiet girl from out of town, had three babies in four years. Then Jack came home one night from the textile mill, carrying one of those big handles off the high-speed spindle machine. He used it to beat them all to death and went back to work in the morning. (15-16)

Baker continues by explaining that Allison is not trying to provide excuses for the foul behaviors of certain characters but, “she contextualizes them in the material realities of economic oppression” (Baker 131). No excuse, or justification, is given for Jack by the narrator in this instance, but the reality of his life and what it had come to is methodically depicted.

The narrator describes a situation where she came to an understanding of these types of violent outbursts when she finally understood the motives behind a breakdown which her sister had. She recalls coming back to visit her sister one night shortly after she had given birth. Once the narrator enters the house she hears her sister screaming at her newborn baby, “Shut up! Shut up!” (18). Immediately, the narrator grabs her and begs her to stop to which the sister replies, “That little bastard just screams and screams. That little bastard. I’ll kill him” (18). The narrator explains her sister’s reaction when she finally made sense of what she had just said: “Then the words seeped in and she looked at me while her son kept crying and kicking his feet. By his head the mattress still showed the impact of her fist” (18). The sister becomes distraught and states that she never wanted to become like that; she had promised herself she would be different. As the sister cried she stated, “We an’t no different. We an’t no different” (18). The narrator and her
sister had grown up ashamed of their circumstances. They wanted to be different from those that they had been around for their entire lives and now the sister feels as though she is just repeating the past.

Readers are not told the end result of this unintended outburst by the narrator’s sister. Instead, they are immediately transferred back into the conversation with Jesse. She has asked the narrator if she is sure she cannot have children and the narrator becomes tense and replies, “I can’t have children. I’ve never wanted children” (18). Jesse unintentionally makes things worse when she tells the narrator that she is good with children. In this moment the narrator thinks back to all of the times she felt like her sister did in that moment with her newborn. She states, “I think of all the times my hands have curled into fists, when I have just barely held on” (18). It is possible that the narrator realizes that having children would open up the possibilities for her to perpetuate the cycle of violence in her family’s life. It could be that she does not want to know what she is capable of and does not want to make the same mistakes.

Although Jesse does not know it, in this moment the narrator is relating to her sister and, in a way, is realizing that they are more similar than she would like to admit. She knows what it is like to be pushed to the edge and the fact that she even knows what that feels like is shameful to her. She states that she never wanted to have children and that may be because she is uncertain of whether or not she would hurt the child in some way or another. Not only is the narrator ashamed of knowing what it is like to be pushed to the edge, but she is also ashamed that she is so much like her sister. It would be easier for the narrator if she could completely dismiss her sister’s actions as unacceptable and unreasonable, but she gets it. She understands such overwhelming moments and how they can push you too far. It is the fact that she can connect
with her sister and see their similarities that further compounds her shame. No matter how hard she may try, there is no complete separation from her sister and, therefore, from her family.

For the narrator, telling stories from her past means exposing herself at the same time. This exposure creates an intense sense of vulnerability, and that is why she keeps her history in the closet from her lover and, at times, from herself. Yes, she is able to give Jesse a few stories here and there from her past, but they are blurred. She talks about her family as though things they have been through were humorous. It is this humor that allows the narrator to feel comfortable enough to talk about her past. She shadows her past in humor so that she does not have to present the harsh reality of it.

Kaufman’s *Psychology of Shame* states, “If to feel shame is to feel seen and exposed, then shame acts as a powerful mechanism of social and internal sanction” (Kaufman 195). The narrator knows that her past and her family are what can socially situate her in life, not only that, but her own acknowledgment of her past continues to impact her self-worth. The shame that surrounds her entire life has dictated her choices, relationships, and love for not only others but herself as well. Kaufman goes on to show that shame, “causes the self to internalize injunctions about specific behaviors by identification with the shamer whose value judgments it cares about,” (Kaufman 195). This is precisely what the narrator is dealing with. She is not necessarily afraid of her lover’s reactions to her stories. Instead, she is afraid of the shame that she cannot control – the shame which comes from within. The narrator does not wish to stay distanced from her lover; rather, she is conditioned into doing so as an act of self-preservation.

What is surprising about this act of self-preservation is really that it is an act of repeated sabotage. As previously mentioned in “River of Names” the narrator’s dreams of her past wake
her up at night. The trauma that she has attempted to escape from continues to crawl its way back into her daily life. Freud would argue that this repetitive nature of traumatic dream sequences is characteristic of the Death Drive principle or the idea of Thanatos. In addition to her dreams, the narrator also admits that she continues to make the same mistakes in her relationships. She knows that with her lover she is unable to be open. Being open with her would leave her far too vulnerable and in a position to feel shamed, so she continues to sabotage her relationships by refusing to be honest with her lovers. Just as the relationships in her past have been disasters, she will repeat the disaster over and over again.

Freud’s ideas of the Death Drives and Life Drives are evident in the actions of the narrator in her relationships. With Jesse, she struggles with her death drive to repeat her failed relationships in order to find satisfaction for her life drive. In Freud’s words, the death drive and the pleasure principle do not contradict one another. Instead, one may find that there is, “unpleasure for one system and simultaneously satisfaction for the other” (Freud 13). It is difficult to pinpoint where the pleasure principle comes in here specifically with the narrator herself, but it is clear that she has rejected the principle for family. What she has learned to do in life is survive; in this case, her survival means not being a victim of the shame that has so controlled her life. Here, her pleasure principle of survival is fulfilled by her death drive initiative to compulsively repeat acts which will leave her alone again and again. Being alone guarantees that the narrator will not be shamed by an outsider in the relationship. Instead, she is free to move on and create another façade with another woman thus perpetuating the circle of self-sabotaging in order to guarantee self-preservation.
In “River of Names” there seem to be two different stories being told. There is the story that Jesse is told: the edited, cleaned-up version that seems humorous and charming. Then, there is the story that is presented to the reader; this story is not edited and is not coated with humor. Instead, the version presented to the reader is accurate, unrestrained, and disturbing. In one way, it can be argued that this story is deconstructing the binaries which it presents. This is possible because the reader is able to see the truth of the narrator’s life. Due to the fact that the reader is able to see past the white-trash stereotype and given more of an understanding of the narrator’s life, you could say that the opposites are deconstructed.

On the other hand, it can also be argued that this story is not deconstructing the binaries which it presents. The binaries are illuminated within this piece by showing how Jesse and the narrator are unable to connect because of the societal barriers which bind the narrator. In addition, this illumination shows the damage which binary opposites and feelings of otherness can do. The closets which the narrator feels trapped in are not deconstructed here, in fact they are only perpetuated due to her hiding the truth from her lover by covering it with humor. This story shows readers how powerful binary opposite definitions can be in society. Whether or not they are deconstructed in this specific story is debatable but, what is clear, is the fact that Allison’s narrator is so consumed with her shame that she cannot be truthful with her lover. Instead, she can only express her voice to the reader.

III. “I’m Working on My Charm”

In a book so full of stories dealing with tragedy, it is surprising to come across “I’m Working on My Charm.” It does not seem like the other stories by Dorothy Allison; however,
upon careful examination, readers are able to see that shame is just as much a part of this story as it is in the others. In this story though, shame is temporarily combatted with humor. The narrator is in a safe place in this story. Instead of hiding in her closet of shame because she is afraid of how different she is from Jesse, the narrator cultivates a sense of belonging with her mother and the other waitresses in the diner they are working at. The narrator is surrounded by women who have experiences like hers; they are able to band together and use humor to contest their customers’ judgmental demeanors. In this story, the narrator and her companions are able to find moments of comfortability within this particular environment because they have each other. Here, they are able to look at the outsiders from a position they are not normally afforded. At the diner, the narrator gets the opportunity to combat the probable judgment of the Yankee-tourists by joining the other waitresses to point out their differences. In the diner, amongst each other, the women are able to fight, with humor and trickery, the shame which they are so often made to feel.

At the beginning of the story, the narrator is at an office party and feels quite out of place. She is tugging on clothes that refuse to cooperate and being anti-social as she isolates herself from everyone at the other end of the bar. The fact that she cannot even make her clothes stay straight symbolically represents how out of place she truly is. She comments, “My borrowed silk blouse kept pulling out of my skirt” (63). She is in borrowed clothes pretending to be something she is not and she is focusing on how out of place she looks and feels. She takes a moment to look around the party and notices the odd little behaviors of the attendees. Eventually, she is approached by a woman who makes her recall how her Mama felt about Yankees. She walks up to the narrator with her wine and a cherry tomato. She tells the narrator that, “It’s so wonderful
that you can be with us, you know. Some of the people who have worked here, well ... you know, well, we have so much to learn from you—gentility, you know, courtesy, manners, charm, all of that” (63). The narrator states that she can almost hear the sound of her mother’s voice in her ear hissing, “Yankeeееeees!” and says that it was all she could do not to nod her head in agreement (64).

This idea of the differences between Yankees and southerners gives her a flashback to when she was 16 years old. She was working with her Mama at a restaurant in her hometown. At first, she was nervous to start waitressing, but she eventually got the hang of it and started bringing in a good amount of tips. Her Mama, and the other waitresses, looked out for her when she was there; in fact, all of the waitresses looked out for one another. As previously mentioned, this story stands out from others of Allison’s because it uses humor. However, it is this humor and sense of comradery amongst the women that provides such important insight into their lives and motives. In this restaurant, they are part of a group and the tourists are part of another, and this can be considered a representation of binary opposites. We are used to seeing characters in Allison’s pieces on the “negative” side of this opposite, but in this case the story is presented from a more positive perspective in the form of the waitresses. The Yankee-customers are not necessarily powerless here, but the waitresses are able to temporarily fight their shame by using humor and little tricks to get one over on the unsuspecting outsiders.

This story is a reprieve from the intensity of the others in the book and readers are given an intimate look inside of the narrator’s relationship with her mother and the understanding she gained of her world through this particular experience. Her mother taught her how to be a waitress and how to work her customers. The waitresses all used to play a game together; they
would guess how much tip a customer would leave. If they guessed right, they would not have to put into the bowl, however if they guessed high or low they would need to put the difference into the bowl which would be split evenly among them at the end of each week. This story shows readers the less-known sides of these characters by portraying them in a respectable women-centered place. These women that work at the restaurant are the women we have read about so far. They are the working class population of most likely used and abused women. They look out for each other because they know what the other women are going through; there is a sense of communal bonding between them.

So, why did Allison decide to show readers the women’s interactions with the Yankee-customers? I believe it was to provide a different perspective of the impact that shame can have on women in this class of people. Also, I believe it shows how they dealt with being in a position where they could be so easily objectified with humor and small jobs. Here, the powerless can mock the powerful. Readers could engage with this story from different perspectives depending upon their personal experiences, but I believe the reader is looking in at this story from the perspective of someone who is usually shown one side of a group of people. Rarely are readers given a chance to see humorous interactions in these short stories. In “I’m Working on My Charm” there is a sense of community and this is breaking the stereotypical idea of white trash while also showing how one may deal with feelings of shame with humor and community.

The majority of the time, these characters are presented as the outsiders because they are the class of people with whom most readers are unfamiliar. They are “the others” and because readers are able to distance themselves from them, they are able to look at them as alien. In “The Other Woman: Xenophobia and Shame” Jocelyn Eighan explains that otherness is what can
make one be considered alien to those around them. In fact, “It is precisely this sense of otherness—the stigma attached to this otherness, and its accompanying shame—that incites fear within those who deem themselves ‘normal’” (Eighan 24). Typically, readers see Allison’s characters, such as the narrator and her co-workers, as the outsiders or aliens. They are the ones that are not “normal” compared to societal standards and this creates a sense of uncertainty/fear within people who do not understand them. By presenting insightful stories about these “other” people, Allison makes it possible for readers to come to an understanding of those that they may have previously been unwilling to recognize.

What Allison is doing in this story that is so unique is putting the reader in the position of being “the other” instead of being the “normal” group looking in. For example, when tourists stop into the restaurant looking for a genuine southern experience, the female waitresses look at them as “the others.” These “outsiders” are being played by their waitresses in various ways. Not only are the Yankee-tourists’ services being played with, but so too are the “tax-people” and the owner of the diner. When the narrator’s Mama told her to write down two dollars on her tax form, the narrator replied, “But I made a lot more than that” (67). Her mother replied with, “Honey, the tax people don’t need to know that” (67). For once in her life, the narrator has found herself in a position where she can make a decision without someone else’s approval. In response to their conversation another waitress, Mabel, states, “Yeah, they [the tax people] don’t know nothing about initiative” (67). What is happening here with the power dynamic is interesting. The women are attempting to rebel against the system a bit; however, they are still trapped in a structure which demigrates them. This is clear in the fact because they are powerless (they are poor), they do not make enough money, and therefore the tax man is not going to audit them. In
this case, they are able to work the system but only because their situation at the lower end of society allows them to.

A coworker of the narrator’s, Mabel, makes her own decision to get one over on her customers and the tax-people for that matter, as she uses her seductiveness to improve her chances of gaining tips. Although the narrator remembers seeing Mabel’s “heavy bosom move dramatically, and I remembered times I’d seen her do that at the counter. It made me feel even more embarrassed and angry,” (67). The narrator ultimately understood the fact that Mabel was taking advantage of the situation in order to make more money. In this instance, she worked her customer and the system. While the women are able to use their seductiveness to earn more tips, that does not mean they are not vulnerable still. In fact, they clearly are in a vulnerable position which is evidenced by the narrator’s mother’s decision to not allow her to work on Thursdays. During that day of the week, the narrator was making a five dollar tip from one particular customer every time he came in. Clearly, this worried her mother and she was told to put a stop to it. Therefore, although the women continue to use the system to their advantage, they are obviously still in positions of vulnerability.

One of the most interesting aspects of this story is that there is no expectation for these women to share their stories with one another, or with the readers for that matter. They find comfort in knowing that they share similar experiences with one another and by creating a humorous environment they are holding on to their dignity in a situation where they could easily be objectified by those they are serving. There is an unspoken understanding between these women because of the similar lives they lead; there is no need to talk about their lives outside of the diner because they all live its harsh reality every day. Take, for example, the instance of the
narrator having a negative experience with a couple of tourists. When informing a couple that they do not serve breakfast on Sundays at the restaurant the couple replied, “Look, girl … just bring me some of that ham you’re serving those people, only bring me eggs with it. You can do that … even you” (69). “Even you” – a comment like this has the ability to stir up all of the feelings of shame one has felt or is still feeling.

Instead of letting this comment degrade her, the narrator and her mother band together and let humor lift them up again: “‘Tourists,’” I’d mutter to Mama. “No, Yankees,” she’d say, and Mabel would nod” (69). In this moment, they are making the tourists into the outsiders which is a spot so often reserved just for them! The narrator continues by telling us that her Mama would go over to the couple and talk with a nice southern drawl. She would, “offer them honey for their biscuits or tell them how red-eye gravy is made, or talk about how sorry it is that we don’t serve grits on Sunday. The couple would grin wide and start slowing their words down, while the regulars would choke on their coffee” (69). They have all made a complete joke out of the tourists by working them for their tips and secretly making fun of them; subsequently, the narrator has provided readers with an alternative view of the women who are often depicted as helpless and ignorant. In this case, they have more social knowledge than the tourists which gives them the ability to work their customers and the system (even if it is only momentarily).

In another example of the outsiders getting worked, fellow-waitress Mabel gives the narrator some advice. She tells the narrator how to increase her tips when she says, “Sweets, you just stretch that drawl. Talk like you’re from Mississippi, and they’ll eat it up. For some reason, Yankees got strange sentimental notions about Mississippi” (70). The waitresses have the ability to poke fun at their customers. They can slow down their service if they wish to and succeed in
making complete fools out of them as they secretly make fun of them. In many small ways they are enacting agency. Mama also discusses the strangers’ odd behaviors. Here, again, readers are seeing the “normal” people being labelled as the odd ones which is the opposite from what is usually presented: “They stole napkins, not one or two but a boxful at a time…they’d unfold two or three napkins…and fill them up with sugar before they left. Then they might take the knife and spoon to go with it” (71). One time Mama even watched a man write notes on a stack of napkins she was sure he was going to steal. Instead, he threw them away before he left. According to the narrator, “Mama was scandalized by that. “And right over there on the shelf is a notebook selling for ten cents. What’s wrong with these people?”” (71). Mama was unable to understand the tourists stealing for the experience of it. The tourists had money and did not need to steal. For Mama, it can be assumed that the stealing she knew of was typically done out of necessity. She simply cannot understand why someone would steal if they had the money to buy something. She wonders what could be wrong with them. Is that not a question we often assume to be asked of these women and the social class they belong to? People regularly question them and their ways of life and ask themselves what is wrong with “those people.”

The narrator and her coworkers joke about their encounters with the odd tourists in an attempt to elevate themselves. Fellow waitress Harriet comments to the narrator after work one night that the out-of-town customers were, “…the ones the world was made for” (70). Clearly it is no secret to these women that outside of their communal place of the diner, the world is not welcoming of their kind. Harriet continued to explain and stated, “You and me, your Mama, all of us, we just hold a place in the landscape for them. Far as they’re concerned, once we’re out of sight we just disappear” (70). Harriet is speaking the truth about this group of women and their
position in society. To many, they are considered “less than” and are not worthy of thought. Harriet is aware of her space within society. She is commenting on class-consciousness because she knows the world is not meant for people like her and the other waitresses. To most, they are simply a group of people that could disappear and no one would know the difference.

When together, however, they are more than just the “others”; they are a group of women sharing the same experiences trying to survive in the same world. In “Recomposing the Self: Joyful Shame in Dorothy Allison’s *Bastard Out of Carolina*,” Rachel Walerstein analyzes the intersection of gospel music, shame, and joy with the main character Bone. According to Alerstein, Bone’s friend, “Shannon Pearl and her Aunt Raylene show Bone what it means to live joyfully with one’s shame, despite what everyone else thinks” (Walerstein 170). Here, readers can relate the narrator in *Trash* to Bone because Dorothy Allison uses both voices to comment on her own past trauma. Although different in age and particular situation, both speakers are able to find joy in life while simultaneously experiencing shame. The narrator knows she is considered different because of the family she belongs to and because of her socio-economic status in the world. She is ashamed of the violence and trauma of her family’s past but is still able to find joy through her experiences with her mother and the other women in the diner. Similar to the binary opposites I have discussed in regards to Sedgwick, Walerstein also points out that, “Focusing on joy as shame’s counterpart further illuminates the tension between shame and pride” (Walerstein 171). Therefore, while the speakers are completely aware and present within their shame, they are “still finding joy” (Walerstein 171).

The women in this diner lean on one another because of their shared experiences, and they have been able to find joy in the humor and laughter they can also share with each other.
Just as Bone finds companionship in Aunt Raleyene because of their similarities, so too does the narrator in *Trash* find companionship in her coworkers and mother while at the diner. Walerstein comments on Bone connecting so seamlessly with her aunt and the power that such a connection can have. She states, “Raylene’s presence in the latter half of the novel illustrates how Bone proceeds to transform her shame, not only into interest in and joy for her-self, but into the joy of connecting with another” (Walerstein 179). This is exactly what the women at the diner are able to do with one another. The joy for the women in the diner exists in the fact that they are among those who are like them. In addition to finding comradery amongst themselves, they are also able to find joy in the feeling of being in a temporary state of control when that is usually not even an option they are afforded. Just as Aunt Ralyen’s praise of Bone, “encourages a shift to a more vulnerable and open relationship between the two,” so does the praise of the narrator by her mother, and the other waitresses, strengthen their relationship with one another (Walterstein 179). At the end of the story, the comradery shared amongst the women is exemplified by their sense of togetherness. In regards to Mama’s questioning of what could be wrong with the Yankees, the story reads, “‘They’re living in the movies,’” Mabel whispered, looking back towards the counter. “Yeah, Bette Davis movies,” I added. “I don’t know about the movies.” Harriet put her hand on Mama’s shoulder. “But they don’t live in the real world with the rest of us.” “No,” Mama said, “they don’t.”” (71). Clearly these women share a truly unique bond of truth and understanding.

“I’m Working on My Charm” presents differently than many of the other short stories in *Trash*, but its inclusion within the book, and this study, is necessary. The narrator wants the reader to close the distance between herself and the characters. In this case, the narrator is
attempting to get the reader to laugh along with the characters in order to relate. This ability to relate could be the key which leads to understanding between people and humor makes this relation possible. In addition, Allison also exhibits the intimate relationship that shame can have with joy if one is able to find relation to those like them. This temporary joy and humor does not negate the fact that the waitresses’ work is hard and demeaning, but it is an example of how one can combat the feelings of shame that they have come to know far too well. The narrator is able to look at the women in the diner as positive role models. Although they may not be out of the white-trash world they live in and the diner may only represent a temporary respite from the harshness of their daily lives, the narrator sees the women being able to relate to one another, find their voices, and work through their feelings of shame by using humor to find temporary joy.

IV. “Don’t Tell Me You Don’t Know”

Thus far through Allison’s stories, the narrator has shown the reader varying perspectives on shame and how it intersects with her life. She has struggled with the truth and decided to remain hidden in her closet away from Jesse, her lover. Her desire for self-preservation has also been temporarily fulfilled by an instinct to follow her death drive and commit a form of self-sabotage. In addition, the narrator also found a temporary sense of self-acceptance in mocking the judgers in an attempt to bolster herself and those like her against people who would judge her. In this case, the narrator is coming to terms with her shame and anger but in a different way. She must grapple with the truth of her mother’s abandonment and refusal to protect her from her abuser. Here, shame can neither be avoided nor concealed with humor; instead, she literally comes face to face with her past.
In the story “Don’t Tell Me You Don’t Know,” the narrator is caught off guard by her aunt. Her Aunt Alma has intruded into her life and has dredged up many of the feelings of shame that pushed her away from her family and into a distant closet in the first place. Aunt Alma’s confrontation pulls the narrator in different positions. First, her closet of comfortability has been intruded upon. There is no hiding from her past and her family now; her aunt is literally standing right in front of her. The narrator must also confront her past as her Aunt Alma discusses their family and their family’s history. This short story not only forces the narrator out of her closet to confront her aunt, but it also provides readers with insight as to what exactly the narrator has been so ashamed of – the shame of abandonment in more ways than one.

In this short story, readers witness a heartbreaking encounter between the narrator and her aunt. Stepping out of her shower, the narrator is blindsided with the presence of her Aunt Alma in her living room. She has driven 500 miles to get the narrator and take her back home to fix whatever has gone wrong between the narrator and the narrator’s mother. Unbeknownst to Aunt Alma, the reason behind her sister’s suffering is not because the narrator intentionally hurt her; instead, the mother has been presented with the truth. She has come to the realization that her inability to protect her daughter has resulted in her being unable to bear children – she must face the fact that she holds much of the responsibility for her daughter’s trauma.

In “Don’t Tell Me You Don’t Know,” the narrator is immediately faced with a feeling of shame not only because she is caught off guard but because she is in a vulnerable position physically as well. Nicole Frayard’s definition of shame accurately describes the physical situation which the narrator is in as well as her new position outside of her family. The fact that she is caught off guard, wet from her shower in an oversized tuxedo shirt is a symbolic
representation of her level of vulnerability, but she is also exposed in that her new life has been intruded upon by someone she used to consider to be infallible. To the narrator, she is ashamed of herself because she has run away from her past when compared to Aunt Alma and her willingness to stay in a situation that was so challenging and demanding. Aunt Alma has let herself into the narrator’s home and this is a breach of her privacy and of the life she has created outside that of her family. Her aunt has encroached on the narrator’s new life and namesake which she has created away from her family. She also immediately begins to shame the narrator by stating, “‘You really live here?’ she let out a loud breath as if, even for me, such a situation was quite past her ability to believe. “Like this?’” (93).

To Aunt Alma, the narrator appears to have abandoned her family and she immediately lets the narrator know she disapproves. In regards to the narrator’s apartment Aunt Alma states, “My God … Dirtier than we ever lived. Didn’t think you’d turn out like this” (94). This loaded phrase “dirtier than we ever lived” is Aunt Alma’s way of explaining that their family may have had their own issues and have made their own mistakes, but what the narrator is doing (abandoning her family) if far worse in comparison. What Aunt Alma is doing is of great importance in this story. The narrator left behind her painful past and her shameful family in order to be herself and escape. Aunt Alma, however, looks at this as betrayal and shames the narrator by implying that her new life is not any better than the one she had when she was ‘home’ and may in fact actually be worse. The narrator tries to explain to her aunt that she is happy and considers her roommates to be family, but she is immediately contradicted by her aunt and told, “You have a family, don’t you remember? These girls might be close, might be important to you, but they’re not family. You know that” (101). She shames the narrator for
leaving the family. While at the same time, Aunt Alma is shaming her for refusing to fix whatever issue she may be having with her mother. First, however, the past is dredged up and brought to the forefront. There is no escaping these memories. She is forced out of the closet she has created for herself, and her aunt is adamant that she will make things right.

As Sedgwick argued, the narrator is having to continuously come out of her closets. It is not enough for her to have her family be aware of the fact that she is a lesbian, but she must continue this confrontation with her identity whenever she is presented with a new situation. In this case, the narrator is being forced to come out of her new closet to her aunt. According to Sedgwick, “The gay closet is not a feature only of the lives of gay people” (Sedgwick 68). Of course, this is one closet that the narrator must come out of from time to time as she encounters new people and situations, but she is also forced to come out of a different closet at this time. The narrator has attempted to make a new life for herself away from her family in a new place full of new people. Aunt Alma has inserted herself into this new life of the narrator’s. Now, with the intrusive presence of her aunt, the narrator is made to feel ashamed for leaving her family in order to find something for which she is not ashamed.

The narrator attempts to defend herself as she offers Aunt Alma a more attractive place to converse, but she is rebuffed with a comment on how her surroundings are pitiful. Alma tells her niece, “Your Mama is worried about you” (95). The narrator replies that she does not know why, and the story turns to discussing memories from the past. Aunt Alma represents something different than the narrator: “She looked now as if she would go on forever—a worn stubborn woman who didn’t care what you saw when you looked at her” (95). On one hand, the narrator looks at Aunt Alma with pride in that she does not care what others think of her. Simultaneously,
she thinks of the women in her family as, “heavy women, gravy-fed workingwomen, the kind usually seen in pictures taken at mining disasters” and she worries about how her roommates may perceive her if they come home (99). The narrator goes on to discuss the women in her family and says, “My aunt, like my Mama, understood everything, expected nothing, and watched her own life like a terrible fable from a Sunday-morning sermon. It was the perspective that all those women shared, the view that I could not, for my life, accept” (96). The narrator finds herself stuck between emotions regarding the women in her family. She is proud of them because they persevered through the most difficult of times, but she also looks down on them for not getting out of the situation and for not wanting something more for themselves and their children. At the same time that the narrator wants to be considered different than her family, she is also bound with guilt because she did not stay and endure like so many of the women in her family had.

The narrator admits that her anger drove her away from her family and also drove them away from her. At times, “Their anger, their hatred, always seem shielded, banked and secret, and because of that—shameful” (96-97). The narrator admits that the women in her family are a source of shame for her. While she is filled with anger towards them, she also recognizes the fact that she loves them for some of the same reasons she is ashamed of them: “The women of my family were all I had ever believed in” and “The power in them, the strength and the heat! How could anybody not love my Mama and aunts? How could my daddy, my uncles, ever stand up to them, dare to raise a hand or voice to them? They were a power on the earth” (98, 100). It is clear that she admires the strength of these women in her family. She looks up to them for being able to stick it out through the hardest moments in life. While, at the same time, she is also ashamed
of them and resentful of their lack of action. The narrator is trapped in a position of love and
hatred and admits, “Again those twin emotions, the love and the outrage that I’d always felt for
my aunt, warred in me” (97). At the same time that she is ashamed of her family she is ashamed
at herself for even feeling that way; she is stuck between emotions just like Annie was stuck in
her basket without the ability to speak or move. The narrator is caught between the unconditional
love and loyalty she has for her family versus wanting to be different.

Since she was a small child, Allison has been able to distinguish herself and her family
from others. In the introduction to this book a distinction is made between how outsiders
perceived her family. It is stated, “The good poor were hardworking, ragged but clean, and
intrinsically honorable. We were the bad poor. We were men who drank and couldn’t keep a job;
women, invariably pregnant before marriage, who quickly became worn, fat, and old from
working too many hours and bearing too many children” (vii). Even before Allison left her
family and old-life behind, she knew that they were different. It did not take getting to a new city
to realize there was something off about her kind. From the time she was a little girl, she was
stigmatized as trash and she has attempted to relinquish that title for the entirety of her life.

According to J. Brooks Bouson in ““You Nothing But Trash”: White Trash Shame in
Dorothy Allison’s Bastard Out of Carolina” “learned familial and cultural shame can lead to
destructive forms of self-hatred and self-contempt,” (102). This is exactly the position that the
narrator, and Allison, found herself in. Throughout her life she has been told that she is no good
and the worst of the poor - trash. This judgment has led her to feel ashamed of her family and
herself. It is clear that she struggles with the shame of abandoning her family, but at the same
time she knows how they are perceived in society and does not want to be one of them. What
Dorothy Allison is doing in these stories is showing this fight within the narrator and providing an outlet for it. There are certain things she cannot tell an outsider (someone who does not come from the same social class as her) and there are also things she cannot say to her family (she cannot make them understand her points of view). What she can do, however, is tell the reader about all of it. She can present all of the different sides of the stories of her past and her feelings to the reader without hiding anything. It is this act of story-telling which seems to be the only true outlet for her.

Readers may assume that both the narrator of the stories in *Trash* and the character of *Bone* are mirrored experiences of the author Dorothy Allison. Natalie Carter’s article on maternal abandonment in *Bastard Out of Carolina* references the main character Bone and her past. Bone, like the narrator in this short story, was repeatedly raped and beaten by her step-father. Both voices (presumably representative of Dorothy Allison) have been impacted by their step-father’s abusiveness. But as Carter puts it, “Allison, like her alter ego, Bone, is not just traumatized by the unspeakable experience of her stepfather’s abuse, but also by the fact that her mother did not protect her and the socioeconomic stigma that is attached to her literally from birth” (Carter 890). Therefore, it was not just the physical and sexual abuse of their stepfathers which impacted the narrators, but the neglect which they suffered at the hands of their mothers and their label as trash by society impacted their entire lives. Her Aunt Alma turning up randomly at her apartment has brought back countless memories of her painful past and has reminded her of who she truly is.

As the narrator details her surprise encounter with her aunt, she flashes back to her aunt’s past and the memory of her now-deceased infant named Annie. In this section of the story,
readers are able to draw parallels between the helplessness of Annie as an impaired 4 year old and the helplessness that the narrator felt as she was being raped by her step-father during her childhood: “Annie had lived to be four…never talking back, just lying there and smiling like a wise old woman, dying between a smile and a laugh…while Aunt Alma never interrupted the story…” (102-103). Annie experienced more protection from her mother when compared to the narrator. For example, the narrator remembers seeing Aunt Alma care for Annie and recounts, “Aunt Alma had kept her in an okra basket and carried her everywhere, talking to her one minute like a kitten or a doll” (102). The narrator does not recount any memory like this between her and her mother and this provides a clear difference in the way she and Annie were cared for. Although they were treated quite differently by their mothers, there are numerous parallels between their experiences. The narrator and Annie share something that her mother, nor her aunt, were prepared to hear. As a child, the narrator was left without a voice as she suffered through the abuse from her step-father. Her mother knew what her husband was doing to her daughter, but refused to act for any number of reasons. Instead of being saved by her mother, the narrator was forced to bear the pain of the abuse on her own without having the ability to voice her pain just as Annie was left voiceless as well. The refusal of the narrator’s mother to acknowledge that her husband was raping her daughter is a form of betrayal that is difficult to fathom, but the fact that she was voiceless (like Annie was) can also be seen by the fact that they are all like Annie. At some point or another these women have not had a voice, but Allison’s story provides them with one.

As the story continues, the aunt explains to the narrator that her mother is acting as if there is nothing left to live for. The aunt explains that she does not care who the narrator sleeps
with or what she does on her own time, but it is cruel for her to keep her mother from the joy of 
having grandchildren. The narrator’s contradictory feelings of hate and admiration for the 
women in her family are quickly replaced with that of detestation. The aunt does not know why 
she refuses to have children and becomes furious with the narrator when she is asked to leave. 
The aunt tells her not to say such things to her and asks her if she knows what she is to her. She 
explains that she did not have to come to the narrator and ask for her help with the narrator’s 
mother. The aunt could have let the narrator live out her days shameful that she never did 
anything to save her mother from sorrow. The aunt yells at the narrator assuming that she refuses 
to go help her mother or have grandchildren for selfish reasons, she yells “YOUR MAMA’S 
LIFE, GIRL. Don’t you understand me? I’m talking about your Mama’s life?” (104). Indeed, the 
narrator knows exactly what the aunt is talking about; without grandchildren to look forward to 
caring for, her mother may give up on life. At this point, the narrator has had enough of hiding 
the truth. She must tell her aunt that she could not have children even if she wanted to. The 
narrator wants her aunt to leave so she can push the past away again. This time, her anger takes 
over and she tells her aunt exactly what she told her mother which has caused her so much pain. 
The narrator, “looked her in the eye, loving her and hating her, and not wanting to speak, but 
hearing the words come out anyway”:

Some people never do have babies, you know. Some people get raped at eleven by a 
stepfather their mother half hates but can’t afford to leave. Some people then have to lie 
and hide it ‘cause it would make so much trouble. So nobody will know, not the law and 
not the rest of the family. Nobody but the women supposed to be the ones who take care 
of everything, who know what to do and how to do it, the women who make children
who believe in them and trust in them, and sometimes die for it. Some people never go to a doctor and don’t find out for ten years that the son of a bitch gave them some goddamned disease. (104-105)

The rape resulted in the narrator contracting an STI which has caused her to be sterile. All of the aunt’s talk about not caring that the narrator is a lesbian and discussion that her narrator’s mom would find happiness if she could only have grandchildren is forgotten as the truth explodes out of the narrator: her mother pretended that her daughter was not being repeatedly raped, ignored it when it was finally over, and refused to take her to a doctor. Just how devastating this moment was to her aunt is seen in the fact she clumsily knocks the balls on the pool table which she so carefully had pocketed earlier.

One of the most shocking realizations in this piece is that the aunt still expects the narrator to be understanding of her mother. Just as Bone was abandoned in *Bastard Out of Carolina*, so too was the narrator abandoned as a child because her mother refused to acknowledge the abuse, stop it, and get her help. Amy Gottfried writes, “The shock of the text’s conclusion is not that [her mother] cannot choose between her husband and her child but that she can” (qtd. in Carter). Indeed, it is unfathomable to imagine a mother choosing to ignore her daughter’s abuse and that is what the narrator has been struggling with through her adolescence and through adulthood. As we learn, when the narrator finally voices the truth it ends up destroying her mother.

The reader is presented with the extent of the shame which the narrator feels. As a child, the sexual abuse she endured was ignored by her mother and various other family members. She was left to deal with the trauma on her own. Yet, at this place in the narrator’s life she feels
ashamed for what happened. She states, “I’m sorry. I would … I would … anything. If I could change things, if I could help…” (219). It is hard to imagine the narrator apologizing for the abuse that she was a victim of. Here, she feels guilty for being raped because she contracted a disease from her step-father which made her sterile. This shame in only further compounded by the fact that she has left her mother for a new life.

Now, the aunt expects her to not let it interfere with helping her mother out of her inconsolable state. Instead, she wants the narrator to, “Come home for a little while. Be with your Mama a little while. You don’t have to forgive her. You don’t have to forgive anybody. You just have to love her the way she loves you. Like I love you” (107). The narrator explains that she knew her aunt would go back and take care of her Mama and would never say anything about the conversation they just had because then she would be confronted by the truth of the narrator’s past; that the women of the family knew that the narrator was being raped and did nothing about it. The narrator comes to the realization that her aunt had, “done nothing then. She’d do nothing now. There was no justice in the world” (106). She began to cry and realized that she was not crying because of the fact that nothing had been done or would be done but, rather, “because of the things [she] hadn’t said, didn’t know how to say, and cried most of all because behind everything else there was no justice for [her] aunts or [her] Mama” (106). She was crying because of the silence that they all had seemed constantly to keep – she was crying for the fact that love was not enough, they were, and would continue to be, voiceless.

Through all of the hardship, loss, abuse, pain, and shame the narrator is still capable of loving her mother and her aunt. She may not be able to move past the resentment that she may harbor forever, but it is clear that she cares for these women more than she does for herself.
While she realizes that there will always exist a love between her and these women, there is one fact that is still devastating to the narrator – nothing is going to change. No one will admit what happened to her when she was a little girl, her mom will never stop wishing she could have children, and her aunt will always find it shameful that she has abandoned her family. Despite the love they possess, they are still as stuck as they have always been. They are each still trapped by the coexistence of their love and shame for one another.

Readers inevitably ask themselves, and in turn the narrator, what is to be done about the aunt? The aunt understands, perfectly well, what happened to the narrator during her childhood. Yet, somehow she wants the narrator to be understanding of her mother. How are readers supposed to interpret this part of the story and where are readers supposed to go with the narrator in this moment? I believe the answer is found in this exact lack of clarity. The narrator has told her mother how she feels, she has told her aunt what has been said between them, and still – the women in her family are bound by this sense of familial loyalty which they feel is unbreakable. Within their family, at this point in their lives, they feel that no one could make a mistake that would justify completely abandoning one another. I could certainly argue that this is what happened to the narrator as a child, but here I focus on this moment in their lives. The truth is out; it is known. The fact that it has been said has brought it out of the dark but has not allowed her family to understand her anger or shame. In this moment, readers are shown that the narrator is not going to be able to find understanding from the women of her family. To them, this is the reality of the lives they live, and it is not reason to leave. The narrator herself continues to feel bonded by responsibility to her family. She cannot truly turn away from them or the horrors that have been done to her, she is always going to be connected to them because she is part of them:
“I cried against her cheek, and it was like being five years old again in the roadhouse…If they were not mine, if I was not theirs, who was I?” (108). Clearly, the narrator cannot step outside of her family because they make up who she is and what she has become. Despite the shame and the anger, they are part of her and she will always be part of them. I believe it is only through telling the story to the reader that the narrator is able to truly express her feelings of shame and anger because her family is motivated by the love that they unconditionally have for one another. The reader, on the other hand, is able to see the situation for what it is, and this is the only true outlet for the narrator to express herself and her feelings of shame.

Allison leaves these characters in a state of limbo at the end of the story to show preconceived notions about this class of people are erroneous. Many people think that this social class is lazy, uneducated, and content in their ways. I do not believe she is arguing that everyone in this social class does not fit the stereotype or that all of these actions can be justified. Instead, she is forcing readers to look beyond what first meets their eye and to question the stories behind these people and why they live the way they do. Instead of shaming, readers of this story should feel ashamed of themselves because they are able to see that their judgments may have been uncalled for and unsubstantiated. In this story, readers must question their perception of white-trash females as people who willingly perpetuate their circumstances. Instead, readers must realize that the women mentioned in this story are so willing to do whatever it takes to sustain their families that they would succumb to the abuse of the men in their lives. They are forced to wonder what closets they may have forced others into by refusing to attempt to understand others.
“Don’t Tell Me You Don’t Know” achieves two important goals. First, it gives the narrator a voice which she cannot have elsewhere. She is able to express her stories to a reader who can truly see from an outsider’s perspective therefore allowing her the ability to speak truthfully and be understood. Secondly, it forces its readers to question themselves by analyzing the actions that take place in the story. Seeing this story through the lens of the Epistemology of the Closet and The Female Face of Shame, it becomes increasingly clear that we must take a more careful look at the groups of people whom we so easily judge and, instead, introspectively question our own motives and our own unfair judgments of others.

V. Conclusion

What Allison has done with these three, very different, short stories is present readers with varying challenges. In “River of Names,” readers are able to see the narrator struggles with her shame over things she cannot control. The narrator and her lover, Jesse, are in an intimate position with one another, yet they cannot truly connect because of the narrator’s self-shame. Allison provided this insight to make readers ask themselves if they have ever been victim to shame or guilty of judging others or if they have ever tried to hide the truth behind laughter. The horrifying truth of the narrator’s past is revealed without any restrictions but only to the reader and not the other character (the narrator’s lover). In doing this, the narrator educates the reader as to what the lives of those they may have judged are actually like. In this story, the reader cannot hide behind what they assume to be the truth about such a stereotypical type of character. Instead, they are confronted with the reality of the underclass. Hopefully this confrontation
encourages us to pause before we judge others and ask ourselves what is behind the stereotypes and behaviors.

To deepen empathy, “I’m Working on My Charm” achieves a particularly interesting goal by intersecting shame and humor with pride. The narrator is able to feel a sense of belonging as she works alongside women who are like her. Instead of being judged for what she lacks as determined by societal-norms, she, her mother, and the other waitresses are able to lift one another up by using the tools they have at their disposal. When they are together in the diner, the women are not considered ‘other’ because they are alongside one another. Their sense of group belonging helps them to feel pride in who they are. As they work together, they assert a temporary sense of power over a group of outsiders who most certainly judge them without knowing them. By poking fun at the outsiders and their “otherness,” the women find joy in belonging rather than shame of belonging to a lower class.

Painfully, in “Don’t Tell Me You Don’t Know” the narrator is confronted head on with her past and the fact that she has attempted to leave behind her and her family’s shame. The re-entry of Aunt Alma into the narrator’s life dredges up the trauma of her past. The narrator is able to fully express herself in this piece, but it is only with the reader that she can find understanding – not with her family who unconditionally loves one another despite their mistakes. Readers are able to see just how complicated one’s sense of self-worth can get when it is taught to be ashamed of itself by society and the world that they live in while simultaneously being shamed for wanting to be different than your family.

Each story, unique in its own way, gives readers invaluable insight into the life of someone from the white-trash social class. The narrator is a woman who is closeted not only by
her sexual orientation, but more significantly by the social class within she grew up. She has learned that she is on the wrong end of many of the binary oppositions present within society. It is not her sexual orientation that she finds closeting her, rather it is her position as less-than others, her stereotypical image of being uneducated, poor, unattractive and immoral. What these binary oppositions have done to the narrator is forced her into closets which she can only accurately express to a reader. Allison has provided readers with insights into a class of people and it is through the narrator’s story-telling that a conversation about the dangers of shame, binary opposites, and feelings of being less-than can occur.
Works Cited


