

The Ninefold Sisterhood
The Maiden, Mother and Crone of Maiden, Mother and Crone
By Catherine Pennington

In the early 1970's feminist thought and Earth based Spirituality came together and into the light of popular culture. Feminist Spirituality, Women's Spirituality and Womanist Spirituality, among others came out this melding of the women's movement and the rise of alternative religions and spiritual forms which honored the Earth and all Her children. Women around the world began to reach out to this new way of expressing what was deep within their very be-ing. The work of authors such as Marija Gimbutas, who explored the archeo-mythology of Goddess worshipping peoples of the Paleolithic era and Robert Graves' collection of Celtic mythic poetry which defined a Triple Goddess of the moon, helped to build an image of a female divine figure who was the counter point to the monotheistic, patriarchal One God of the Judeo-Christian view. This Great Goddess had three aspects that corresponded with the three phases of the moon – waxing, full and waning. Many saw in her cyclical nature, the cycles of a woman's life from birth, to death and rebirth and from child to bleeding woman to life giver, to mature wise woman. "The moon," says Hilda Ellis Davidson in her book Roles of the Northern Goddess, "linked the goddess with measurement of time and with the tides, as well as with women's menstrual periods and the nine months' growth of the child in the womb. It has been suggested that the three faces of the moon, the new moon, full moon and waning moon, could correspond with the three aspects of the goddess in later times." In The White Goddess Robert Graves describes the Triple Goddess as having three faces and three colors linked with the cycles of the moon. "The New Moon is the white goddess of birth and growth; the Full Moon, the red goddess of the love and battle; the Old Moon, the black goddess of death and divination." ⁱⁱ In her 1979 book The Spiral Dance; A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess, author and Feminist witch Starhawk crystallized these thoughts of a Great Triple Moon Goddess into the image we are most familiar with today, that of the Maiden, Mother and Crone. "The Moon Goddess has three aspects: As She waxes, She is the Maiden; full, She is the Mother; as She wanes, She is the Crone." ⁱⁱⁱ Combined, this view of a Divine Female gives us one compelling image / archetype / Goddess mirroring the three phases of a woman's life that correspond with the three ever changing and renewing phases of the moon.

As a priestess and modern witch I have worked with images and manifestations of the Goddess for many years. I have worked with this Triple Goddess as metaphor, seeing value in the distinction of each phase and using the defining aspects of the Maiden in my personal growth and healing. I have worked with Her as an immanent and transcendent Divine form, walking the Maiden's path and relishing my own Maidenhood. Yet three weeks before I was to be married, and leave my Maidenhood behind forever, I found myself face to face not with the Triple Goddess, but with a Goddess who had nine faces. I found myself, as Maiden on the verge of meeting the Mother, standing before a mirror of three Maidens, and staring down a hallway at rooms with three Mothers, and three Crones.

At the time of my discovery I was a Maiden who had delved deeply into the act of being, living, working and serving my community as a Maiden. At 26 I had created for myself a ritual to honor and recognize my Maidenhood. A few months later I took an oath of celibacy to learn the deeper meaning of a Maiden as “one alone unto herself”. I became a woman defined by no man. I was living 3,000 miles away from my father, had no lovers and no brothers to answer to. I became my own embodiment of the Maiden Goddess. Five years later, I was no longer an innocent Maiden just taking her first steps on the road to womanhood. I was deeply in love with my partner, and very involved with planning my wedding to this man. I was becoming a woman bound up with a man and the partnership we were establishing. I was also at a place of endings. I had just completed 4 years of graduate work, I had moved out of a house and a family which had been a nurturing and healing place, and starting my own house with my partner. I was saying good bye to what I had been, experiencing in many ways, a death of myself.

As a Maiden Priestess I experienced all three faces of the Triple Goddess over the course of several years. I was the innocent maiden, alone unto myself, living beyond any man’s house, and exploring the wonders of my new “adult” life. I was the mother/lover giving birth to a ritual theater company, a play and a master’s thesis. I was in deep partnership with my lover and irreverent exploration of magic and philosophy with my friends. I was the crone cutting the ties of one phase of life to make way for a new set of experiences, closing the door on my years at school and saying goodbye to loved ones. Yet I was always the Maiden. On the eve of my wedding I was entering the Mother phase of the Goddesses cycle, but I was not a mother. I was neither Maiden in full form, nor Mother in full function. I did not know what I was or where I stood in relation to the Goddess/Woman cycle that I had been working with.

In order to understand, or at least give words to, what I was experiencing, I was forced to look beyond the metaphor and the Goddess that I was used to, to see the metaphor and Goddesses beyond. Behind the Triple Goddess of Maiden, Mother and Crone there lies a Nine-fold sisterhood of Goddesses, or nine reflections of one Great Goddess. For each phase of the Goddess that Starhawk named Maiden, Mother and Crone, I found a Maiden aspect, a Mother aspect and a Crone aspect. Each of these aspects augments the qualities and actions of the phase, for example: Maiden-Mother – is the Maiden aspect of the Mother Phase, Mother-Maiden is the Mother aspect of the Maiden and Crone-Maiden, is the Crone aspect of the Maiden Phase.

Meeting the Nine Sisters

Over the course of our lives, we will dance with the Nine Sisters in an ever-evolving pattern of growth. As we grow by experience: one adventure or challenge growing into the next, so too do the Nine Sisters grow through experience and practice. We all begin as children, in many ways outside of the adult cycle of the Goddess. This is not to say that the Triple Goddess or the Nine Sisters do not have child like attributes, they do, but our most active mythic work is focused on the point at which the soul begins to differentiate away from childhood and begins the road of the adult. And so the journey of the Nine Sisters begins with Maiden-Maiden, the core aspect of Maiden, grows into Mother-Maiden and then to

Crone-Maiden – each a face of the Maiden, just a little more experienced with each new day. From Crone-Maiden we evolve into Maiden-Mother and then to Mother-Mother, the core aspect of Mother and from there into Crone-Mother. Again we experience the Mother of the Triple Goddess as she grows and evolves towards Crone. From Crone-Mother we step into Maiden-Crone, to Mother-Crone and finally Crone-Crone, the core aspect of the Crone. What lies beyond Crone-Crone and before birth/rebirth is a mystery that one can only experience, but never reveal to another. The learning of that face of the Nine Sisters is a solitary journey, which is beyond the scope of this discussion.

While the Nine Sisters evolve from one aspect into the next as just described, at this time we will look, not at the linear progression of the aspects within each phase of Maiden, Mother, Crone, but rather we will compare how each aspect relates to its counter part in all phases i.e. Maiden-Maiden, Maiden-Mother, and Maiden-Crone.

The Maiden

The Maiden of the Triple Goddess is often associated with the color white, the waxing moon, young womanhood, youthfulness, individuality, and being bound to no man/partner^{iv}. She is considered a Virgin in the oldest sense of the word: “alone unto herself”. Goddesses commonly associated with the Maiden are Diana, Brigit, and Kore. When combined with either of the other phases of the Triple Goddess she brings youthfulness, new beginnings, and a sense of wonder.

Maiden-Maiden is the beginning of womanhood, that first great adventure within the cycle of bleeding and childbirth, the moment when her first blood begins. She explores the world, free for the first time of the bonds of parents, partners and children. This can be a frightening time, but also very exciting. This is the core aspect of the Maiden.

Maiden-Mother is the beginning of partnership. She has grown accustomed to the rhythm and cycles of blood within her body. Now she embarks on commitment. She is a woman who has tasted the freedom of her Maidenhood and now chooses to partner herself to another. She is the inexperienced, but excited and hopeful mother. Her children are not yet born, and motherhood as a job is one she is about to learn. As with Maiden-Maiden, this can be a frightening time, but also very exciting.

Maiden-Crone is the beginning of solitude. Her children are grown, her dominant partnership has either ended or has changed greatly since it first began. Her blood begins to dry up and be retained within her. She has seen the world, watched it change and grow many times over. She has gained the wisdom of age, and now must learn how to work with what she has been given. As with the other two Maiden phases, there is fear of the unknown in this aspect, and there is excitement, but her wisdom gives her a new strength to draw upon that the other stages of life did not have.

The Mother

The Mother of the Triple Goddess is often associated with the color red, the full moon, the married or relationally bonded woman, motherhood, giving birth to children, projects, or ideas. Goddesses commonly associated with the Mother are Demeter, Persephone, Hera,

Frigg and Sif. When combined with either of the other phases of the Triple Goddess she brings fecundity, the ability to follow through and organization.

Mother-Maiden is the creator, reveling in abundant discoveries. She may take many lovers, or none at all. She is the explorer following up leads and documenting her findings with an eye towards what can she do with this new information. She is coming to terms with the vastness of the universe and the possibilities before her.

Mother-Mother is the nurturer, tending to what has been planted. With her partner, or on her own, she has given birth to a child or a dream and now is learning how to care for and nurture that new creation. She is the most home bound of all the aspects, by her choice. Home and Hearth become her strengths and her delights. She will put all of her energies into building up and strengthening her home, her partnership and her relationships. This is the core aspect of the Mother.

Mother-Crone is the weaver, twisting the threads of knowledge into a new pattern. She is learning how to work her memories, her experiences and her wisdom into new tools and gifts for those around her. She is the most likely of all the Crone aspects to choose partnership in this time of her life. She must balance a life in with her new explorations into the deeper mysteries of the shadows and the Dark Moon.

The Crone

The Crone of the Triple Goddess is often associated with the color black, the waning or old moon, the postmenopausal woman, the wise woman and the grandmother who holds generations of experience and knowledge. Goddesses commonly associated with the Crone are Hekate, Hela, and Ereshkigal. When combined with either of the other phases of the Triple Goddess she brings wisdom, experience, and endings.

Crone-Maiden is the one who grows up. She is the young woman on the verge of losing all that she thinks she is. As one of the Maidens she is limited in her knowledge of the world and the cyclical nature of all life, and so fears the unknown the most of all the sisters. She only knows what she has is, not what she can be or what she has been. She is in the moment, and that moment is about to change. Her next step is into partnership. From that place she will be able to look back and begin to understand the patterns, but only after she has step across the threshold.

Crone-Mother is the one who lets go. She is the woman who opens her hands and allows all that she has created to fly free and go on without her. She knows, that the world changes and the wheel turns, but her investment in others and in herself as a partner makes the letting go and the moving on frightening. She knows only that she must let go, not what will happen to her when she is no longer someone's mother, lover, teacher or partner.

Crone-Crone is the one who keeps silent. She is the woman who knows that the end of this life is drawing close. She can look death in the face and contemplate its form and function. While she may still need time to adjust to the reality of dying, she is the most comfortable of all the sisters with change, and this final transition. She knows that there is much she has to

pass on, and much that others can only learn by doing. She knows when to speak and when to keep silence. She will be waiting at the gateway when it is time to leave this world and explore the next, and she is excited by the prospects of the unknown. This is the core aspect of Crone.

Looking Down the Hallway

Before my wedding I stood before a mirror and came face to face with three Maidens. As I was leaving the well-worn path of Maiden I was able to see how each of the three maidens has effected my life and how I had lived out my own mythic experience within the light of each of the Maidens. I had begun my explorations in wonder and uncertainty, fearful of being away from all that I had know and yet excited by the challenge of being on my own. I grew into an independent and courageous woman who was able to nurture herself and her dreams. And I learned to finish what I start, to complete my tasks, take my acquired wisdom and move forward to the next task. I had been Maiden-Maiden, Mother-Maiden and Crone-Maiden and at the end of the Maiden's journey I had incorporated all of her faces within myself and was ready to explore the next phase of my journey as a Woman and a daughter of the Goddess. I was ready to step across the threshold into the Mother.

Additional Biographical and contact information:

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ⁱ Davidson, Hilda Ellis, *Roles of the Northern Goddess*, Routledge, London and New York, 1998. Page 6.

ⁱⁱ Graves, Robert, *The White Goddess; a historical grammar pf poetic myth*. Farrar, Straus and Girox, New York, 1948 p. 70.

ⁱⁱⁱ Starhawk, *The Spiral Dance*, HarperSanFrancisco 1979, 1989. Page 92.

^{iv} While this phrase is generally stated in or from a heterosexual context, the concept is applicable to any sexual orientation if we define this as “bound to no partner”, the core concept being that the Maiden is not legally or emotionally bound to another person, man, woman or child.