The Search for Completion in Toni Morrison's "Sula"

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THE SEARCH FOR COMPLETION IN TONI MORRISON'S SULA

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ii
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ABSTRACT

This paper is an exploration of the characters and community in Toni Morrison's novel *Sula*. By beginning *Sula* with a description of the destruction her fictional community will suffer, the author establishes a pattern of inversion and reversal which pervades the novel. This beginning, which is antithetical to traditional story openings, denies any expectation of traditional plots or character roles in *Sula*.

Morrison creates the Bottom community as the result of a "nigger joke," an example of the white man duping the black. In this case, a white farmer tricks his slave into believing that the "Bottom" land that he has been promised as the result of his labor is not the fertile valley land at all; instead, the slave owner convinces his slave that the steep land of the hillside is the "Bottom," for that is what God sees when he looks down. When the founder of the community accepts this reasoning, he and all ensuing generations of residents will suffer from the white man's twisted argument.

The residents of the Bottom grow up in the midst of this town that offers only hardship and back-breaking work. They are too preoccupied with their own survival to provide nurturing to family or neighbor, and the residents all seem to lack something that could make them physically, mentally, and emotionally complete. The physical deficiencies in each of Morrison's characters reflect a more profound lack at the character's core, and symbolize the difficulties characters encounter in establishing independence and community spirit in a world created and defined by whites.

This paper examines the strategies Morrison's characters employ to survive this destructive world and establish a modicum of wholeness. While most characters lack the energy to embark on a personal search beyond survival, those who can undertake such a journey tend to take extreme measures to accomplish their goal. Morrison suggests that attaining wholeness of self is nearly impossible for the Bottom's residents, but she provides a possible formula for success: characters must establish a careful balance between community and self-awareness to achieve completion.
THE SEARCH FOR COMPLETION IN TONI MORRISON'S SULA
In Toni Morrison's *Sula*, the author's fictional setting of the Bottom invites analysis of the effects of this unusual community on its residents. Trudier Harris, for example, focuses on the seemingly mythical and fairy tale-like characters and events which the community seems to foster, while Hortense J. Spillers views Sula, rebelling against these surroundings, as a "new female being" in literature. According to Diane Gillespie and Missy Dehn Kubitschek, *Sula* is a female epic whose main character embarks on a heroic quest for the "female self." These critics and others recognize that characters in *Sula* often lack something that could make them feel complete; consequently, many suggest, Morrison's characters embark on quests, and attempt to fill these lacks through relationships with other characters, in order to create the effect of wholeness. I will argue that the characters' innate sense of incompleteness, often manifested in a physical lack, reflects their origin in the physically displaced and incomplete world of the Bottom. Recognizing the intrinsic deficiencies felt by this community born from a "nigger joke" is imperative to understanding the struggle of its residents for self-completion.

The title character in *Sula* expresses this pervasive feeling of incompleteness in her assertion late in the novel, "I don't want to make somebody else. I want to make myself" (92). Sula Peace's declaration defines her search for completion of self, which dominates the second half of the novel and which eventually consumes her life. Although Sula embarks alone on this quest, others seek similar fulfillment and completion; many members of her community engage in a search for personal wholeness born of their awareness that they are somehow incomplete. Morrison suggests
that conquering the odds of being raised in a community born of a "nigger joke" in order to achieve self-completion is nearly impossible, but if her characters are to achieve self-completion, they must attain both personal and community awareness. Most of the characters in Sula are unable to embark on this quest, for they are too preoccupied with survival to focus on personal development. If these characters are able to attain self-awareness and establish identity despite the odds against them, they often lack the energy and resources to connect with other people and make the commitment to others which can create Morrison's ideal of "community." Morrison has created an enormous obstacle for these characters, however; because the Bottom is displaced, it has no history, and therefore no ancestor upon whom descendants can depend. The residents become independent and fail to take responsibility for one another, and therefore what is called "community" is only "place." Morrison's characters employ many strategies to survive the Bottom world and attain a modicum of wholeness; however, the author suggests that these characters must establish a balance between attaining self and creating true community in order to transcend the obstacles innate to their subverted world and achieve self-completion.

By beginning her novel with a description antithetical to traditional story opening such as "Once upon a time" or "In the beginning," Morrison reverses the Creation myth and establishes a pattern of reversal and destruction which pervades the novel:

In that place, where they tore the nightshade and blackberry patches from their roots to make room for the Medallion City Golf Course, there was once a neighborhood. (3)

These images of destruction, combined with Morrison's creation of the Bottom as a
"nigger joke," provide the backdrop before which she can examine the town's effects on individual development and explore the traits necessary to survive whole the hardships intrinsic to the Bottom. This "place" of the town is dangerous in its influence; independent and self-reliant, the town is destined to fail, just like Morrison's characters who embark on their quests independently. The town, preoccupied with survival, adopts traditional expectations and keeps its problems self-contained in order to survive its origin as a joke. The "nigger joke," Morrison explains, is an example of the white man duping the black; in the case of the Bottom, the joke is a cruel reversal of the word of a white man when he promises his slave "freedom and a piece of bottom land" for difficult work (5). When the slave completes his tasks, the farmer, instead of giving the fertile valley land he promised, explains that the steep hills above are the bottom, for that is what God sees when he looks down; the slave reconsiders and requests that backbreaking land (5), and all ensuing generations of blacks in the Bottom suffer from the white man's perversion of the truth.

The residents of the Bottom, like the town itself, suffer the physical manifestations of loss from the oppression of whites outside the black community and the resulting economic hardship. Although displacement is, as Morrison admits, "a prevalent theme in the narrative of black people" (Afro-Am. 26), she creates a town spatially displaced from the fertile land it needs to survive in order to reveal the characters' methods of coping with immeasurable loss. As John Domini points out, Morrison's characters are "each in some way bent to extremity by poverty, oppression, or loneliness" (79). In their attempts to survive this world, these characters, especially
female, often resist socially-constructed roles in their quest for completion, taking drastic measures and making extreme sacrifices to battle the incompleteness intrinsic to their origins in the Bottom.

One of the ways Morrison shows the profundity of the loss suffered by Bottom residents and establishes the characters' search for wholeness is through Shadrack, whose story frames the larger one. He embodies the signature loss of the Bottom, surviving a war—the fire of his Biblical counterpart—only to return shell-shocked and scarred from the horrors he has witnessed. He appropriately begins the story, for as Maureen T. Reddy argues, he "represents the impinging of the outside world on the black people of Medallion through war . . ." (31). Although Shadrack returns physically intact, the suffering he has endured manifests itself in, first, a fear that his hands have been amputated: in his hospital bed upon his return, he "was relieved to find his hand attached to his wrist" (8); and then he fears that they will grow to a boundless size: "they began to grow in higgledy-piggledy fashion like Jack's beanstalk all over the tray and bed" (9).

Shadrack's intense fear of his hands reflects a deeper, more personal anxiety with the faceless soldier at its source: the fear of lost identity. The war in which Shadrack participates strips him of the little identity he has— he left for the war with "his head full of nothing and his mouth recalling the taste of lipstick (7)"—as well as anything he could grasp as proof of his existence. In his hospital bed Shadrack is devoid of identity and isolated from family or ancestor. He finds himself

not daring to acknowledge the fact that he didn't even know who or what he was . . . with no past, no language, no tribe, no source, no address book, no comb, no pencil, no clock, no pocket handkerchief, no rug, no bed, no
Morrison characterizes Shadrack here in the negative. He, like the Bottom, is defined by what he is not, and he must first rediscover himself before he can become someone. He fears that he may not exist: "if his hands behaved as they had done, what might he expect from his face?" (10) and he has a manic desire to glimpse his reflection. Because, as Reddy argues, "the chaos he has witnessed . . . seems to have invaded his own body" (32), Shadrack seeks order and normalcy; seeing himself whole may restore balance to his world. In the hospital, for example, he "wanted desperately to see his own face and connect it with the word 'private' - the word the nurse . . . had called him" (10). And after a brief jail stay for being mistakenly arrested for drunkenness, "his earlier desire to see his own face" grips him and he searches for a mirror to allay his growing "apprehension that he was not real--that he didn't exist at all" (13). His paranoia wanes when he sees his reflection in the jail toilet bowl, for he is certain of at least the reality of his physical being. Once he is secure in his apparent existence, Shadrack discovers that his hands lay "courteously still" (13).

Although Shadrack is far from achieving completeness of self, his assurance of his physical being allows him to return to a somewhat normal existence. To continue his recovery, Shadrack seeks a way of ordering the chaos which issues from his overwhelming fear of "the unexpectedness" of death and dying (14). He resolves to "mak[e] a place for fear as a way of controlling it," and from this desire National Suicide Day is born (14). Shadrack creates a time and a place for death in his January third
parade with a bell and a rope tolling death for anyone who chooses to get it over with. His seemingly outlandish ceremony illustrates what Morrison identifies as the blacks' "creative, if outlawed determination to survive [the war] whole" (Afro-Am. 26).

Shadrack comes first in *Sula*, therefore, because through him, Morrison calls "attention to the traumatic displacement" which men suffered during this war, and which the residents of the Bottom have as their roots (Afro-Am. 26). Although Shadrack is one of many blacks of the Bottom who suffer displacement, through him, Morrison can emphasize the traumatic effects displacement has on a community and its residents and illustrate the extreme strategies they will use to cope with it. Through his displacement, Shadrack mirrors the town uprooted from its intended place, and he becomes representative of the town. Shadrack, with his unusual ploys to come to terms with death, embodies the Bottom's philosophy of living: the people of the Bottom are determined to survive whatever obstacle comes their way, and they, too, often resort to unconventional methods in order to survive. Therefore when Shadrack invents his National Suicide Day to control fear by making a place for it (14), the residents of the Bottom make a place for Shadrack, their Pied Piper of death: "Once the people understood the boundaries and nature of his madness, they could fit him, so to speak, into the scheme of things" (15). The townspeople allow Shadrack to exist, but they do not reach out to him to form the human bond of community which could make themselves, and possibly Shadrack, whole.

While the people of the Bottom never really understand Shadrack himself, they respect his difference because they know he is also a survivor. Having been brought up
in a needy community, the Bottom's residents constantly struggle; for this reason, they focus what energy remains on simply surviving the obstacles they may not have the energy to defeat. For many people of the Bottom, their goal in life is simply to live it, and if evil appears, as it did for Shadrack, "the purpose of evil was to survive it and they determined . . . to survive floods, white people, tuberculosis, famine and ignorance" (90). Often that evil manifests itself in a fear of physical deficiency similar to Shadrack's. Such a palpable fear of incompleteness in the Bottom seems a carry-over from the time when slaves' bodies, like the land they worked, were not their own property.

While the Bottom fosters and perpetuates the reversal at its base, it also shelters its inhabitants from this fear of incompleteness, for when they venture outside their microcosm, the residents return more vulnerable than they were in their own perceived community. Morrison describes the Bottom as offering a "life-giving . . . strong sustenance" which protects its citizens at the same time it holds them in an inescapable grasp (Stepto int. 11). Morrison suggests through this paradox that the town can be a safe haven for its residents while it impedes the struggles of the individual within it. Although many of the Bottom's residents seem drawn back to Medallion or never leave, they are crippled by its traditional expectations and restricted by its isolationist self-rule. Victoria Middleton attributes Medallion's negative influence to its nature as "a self-destructive, closed world that functions at the expense of the self-esteem of its individual members" (369). The town has suffered at the hands of outsiders, however, and looks to itself for survival. Morrison creates conflict within her characters by having them so tied to their community that they cannot function outside it; at the same time, however, they
confuse "community" with the values of the town, and they often assume the town's self-destructive traits.

Two characters who illustrate such a conflict of place are Helene Wright and her daughter, Nel. Through these characters and their journey outside their town, Morrison shows not only the oppression outside the Bottom, but also the pressure for propriety within it. Helene, the daughter of a prostitute, struggles to separate her identity from her mother's and becomes an exemplary member of the community and the stern embodiment of its values. When she journeys with her daughter to the Sundown House, the place of her birth in New Orleans, however, the identity she struggles to hide reemerges. Venturing outside the Bottom exposes the vulnerability beneath Helene's carefully constructed facade and allows Nel's newly shaping fears to surface.

This "train journey to New Orleans teaches Nel about the humiliations in store for any black woman . . . who ventures into the wider world" (Reddy 32), and these humbling experiences begin as soon as the Wrights board the train. When the conductor addresses Helene as "gal," her Shadrackian fear emerges: "all the old vulnerabilities, all the old fears of being somehow flawed gathered in her stomach and made her hands tremble" (20). This "daughter of a Creole whore" (17) has made a life-time career of running away from her roots, but one demeaning remark from a white man evokes memories of the Sundown House, her mother's occupation, and her racial insecurities. Nel senses this vulnerability, and when she sees her mother smile "dazzlingly and coquettishly" (21) at the conductor for no apparent or understandable reason, she fears that her mother is physically offering herself to the conductor and will turn to yellowy
custard—a metaphor for sexuality in blues lyrics (McDowell 155)—and certainly a sign of imperfection reflected in the racial insecurity of the mulatto, or "high yellow." This fear is especially poignant for impressionable Nel, for she fears that "if this tall, proud woman [her mother], this woman who was very particular about her friends, who slipped into church with unequaled elegance . . . were really custard, then there was a chance that Nel was too" (22).

Nel, in her newfound insecurities, must confirm her existence, at least on a physical level, upon her return home. With the characters' uncertainty of physical being outside the Bottom, Morrison demonstrates the white world's power to strip blacks of whatever identity they have been able to establish. While Helene has carefully constructed her new identity in order to gain the community's respect and seems protected within it, Shadrack and Nel are newly conscious of their own existence, and therefore more vulnerable to the hardships of the outside world. While Nel, in youth, is optimistic, these early insecurities about identity seem to haunt her and keep her in the Bottom regardless of her personal hopes for the future.

Helene Wright battles her insecurities by basing her identity on the physical, superficial battles in life she chooses to wage, concerning herself with outward appearance rather than inner completion. She assumes the expected female roles of proper wife and mother, rejecting both her heritage as the daughter of a whore and the frightening emptiness she would face if she were to acknowledge her origins. Morrison describes Helene as "busy reacting against her own mother" (Stepto int. 13), preferring to focus her energy on her homemaking, church-going, child-raising and her impeccable
reputation in the community rather than to question the roles she is happy to fulfill or how she attained them. By denying her origins and failing to question the roles she assumes, Helene may find stability; because of these roles, however, she cannot embark on the search for self that Morrison deems necessary for life.

While Helene succeeds in obtaining a modicum of happiness from the respectable persona that she projects to the town, she fails to find completeness. She buries her background beneath her church membership and subsumes any interest in self-discovery in the act of raising her daughter. She lives by "adherence to a strict code" which "enables her to survive but only at the expense of living with fear, humiliation, and loss of freedom" (Middleton 373). She places all hopes in her daughter, having her pull her nose (28) and straighten her hair (55), not for Nel to attain physical beauty, but because Helene is glad to fulfill a maternal role; Nel "offered her more comfort and purpose than she had ever hoped to find in this life" (18). Helene rejects her mother and her daughter's individuality, and in failing to acknowledge her ancestor, Helene fails in becoming part of Morrison's idea of community. Morrison clearly criticizes Helene's choices in life when she writes that Helene plans Nel's wedding to be "the culmination of all [Helene] had been, thought or done in this world" (79), but this is a gentle criticism, for many women chose similar routes--and few were open to them--to attain happiness. Through this description of Helene, however, Morrison shows how stifling such a traditional role can be; Helene's development of self ends at the moment her daughter marries.

Nel, at a young age, has higher expectations for her future, however, and after her one foray out of the Bottom, she hopes to see the result of her trip reflected in her face:
"she . . . lit the lamp to look in the mirror. . . . 'I'm me' she whispered" (28). Morrison again uses mirror imagery to show Nel has the same desire for identification and self-discovery as Shadrack, but like her mother's reliance on her, she will rely on the important people in her life to give it depth and meaning. Despite Nel's earlier hopes for travel and self-exploration, she will turn, instead, to sources outside herself to fulfill her needs rather than delve inside herself or to venture out and risk imperiling her safe position in the Bottom.

Morrison finally introduces her novel's heroine twenty-nine pages into the novel, but the delay is important to show Sula against the backdrop of the Bottom and its characters and to help the readers understand her. C. Lynn Munro persuasively argues that "by exposing the reader to Shadrack's National Suicide Day," and "Helene Wright's rigid conservatism . . . the reader senses that [Sula], like the town's other residents, is attempting to forge a strategy which will allow her to respond to the vicissitudes of life" (150). By introducing the reader first to the Bottom, Shadrack and the Wrights, Morrison lays the groundwork for a better understanding of Sula, the incompleteness endemic to her community and the obstacles she, too, will face.

Sula Peace inherits traits passed down through a matriarchal order composed of her grandmother Eva and her mother Hannah. Eva, in her quests to survive and to give her life meaning by controlling her world, seems the twisted embodiment of prototypically strong, masculine creators from Christian and pagan myths, for she takes the decisions of life and death into her own hands. At the same time, however, Eva defies classification because of the multiplicity of images and actions which Morrison
associates with her. Eva's name, for example, is evocative of the first mother, Eve. She is also the "creator and sovereign" of her own space within the Bottom, a rambling assemblage of various "rooms doors and stoops" (30) which acts as the "center" of the community (Harris 64). From this homestead on "Carpenter's Road" (35), Eva enacts her design for survival: controlling her surrounding world.

Eva rejects the traditional God-centered or community-centered morality which she finds ineffective and defines her own rules for living. Like a maimed fairy godmother or an enigmatic witch, one-legged Eva sits "in a wagon on the third floor directing the lives of her children, friends, strays, and a constant stream of boarders" (30), renaming her children, claiming those of others, and appropriating the role of life-giver and taker-away. Morrison allows Eva to imitate the roles of both males and females from myth, folklore and religion, calling Eva's traits "god-like" (Stepto int. 16) to show her many tactics for survival in the Bottom. Despite these tactics, however, Eva remains incomplete in Morrison's view; even mythic qualities are mere options for enduring life in the Bottom.

One stratagem Eva uses to exert control over her community is renaming its inhabitants in order to lay claim to them. She renames the fair-skinned man named pretty Johnnie "Tar Baby" "out of a mixture of fun and meanness" (40), then promptly strips of their identities the three little boys she claims. In her possessiveness, Eva "snatched the caps off their heads and ignored their names" (37), calling all three the impish nickname "dewey." "A dewey," Trudier Harris posits, "is the physical manifestation of Eva's power to control the environment around her" (65). The children
are happy to fill their mold, for like some adults in the community, they find it is easier to be defined—even though limited—by someone else than to make themselves. They become "in fact as well as in name a dewey—joining with the other two to become a trinity with a plural name . . . inseparable, loving nothing and no one but themselves" (38). The deweys rely upon their redefinition for safety and protection. When one dewey gets into trouble at home, for example, "all the deweys got whipped" (38), and at school, the teacher "gradually found that she could not tell one from the other. The deweys would not allow it" (39). While there is safety in numbers and the "denial of individual dewey reality" (Harris 65) which Eva determines for the orphans, simultaneously there is danger in the stunting ability of matriarchal power like Eva's, evinced by the deweys' symbolic size: they never grow above forty-eight inches tall (84).

Often female literary figures like Eva Peace who possess the power to mold their surroundings evince a goddess-like quality, but Eva, though a mother, repudiates the conventional matriarchal tendencies of such women by manipulating the fates of her children and using hate for the husband who abandoned her as her reason for living. Hating BoyBoy provides Eva with the "safety" and "consistency" of knowing she can hate him "as long as she wanted or needed it to define and strengthen her or protect her from routine vulnerabilities" (36). Morrison endows Eva with this typically masculine self-defense technique evinced by other of her characters like Cholly Breedlove in The Bluest Eye. He also detests his spouse, and like Eva, he finds that in "hating her, he could leave himself intact" (42). Morrison suggests that by focusing hatred against someone weaker than they, these characters are able to sustain feelings of control over their lives.
Therefore, they avoid self-loathing simply by displacing it onto the hated person.

Such self-preservation seems Eva's foremost goal, but she displays, at times, unselfish maternal concerns, for example, when she uses their last bit of food in a desperate effort to loosen her baby boy's constipated bowels. When this son, Ralph, "whom she called Plum" (32), returns from World War I addicted to heroin, stealing from his family and hibernating in his room for days, Eva resolves to destroy her son rather than allow him to "crawl back in my womb" (71) and destroy her. Morrison describes Eva "swinging and swooping" (47) on her crutches like some great bird of prey to enter Plum's room, douse her son with kerosene and ignite him in a baptism by fire. Eva's nocturnal immolation of Plum evolves from both self-preservation—in her fear that her son will drag her with him to the abyss—and, ironically, the maternal instinct to protect her offspring from the harsh world, represented by the war which drives Plum to drugs. At the base of Eva's distorted reasoning, however, lies her knowledge that Plum is her son, and having saved him, his life, like those of the deweys, belongs to her. Morrison explains that through this reasoning, Eva believes "her son was living a life that was not worth his time" (Stepto int. 16). Morrison examines the negative implications of such possessive love to show it has a devastating effect on a character's search for self, and, as in Plum's case, a character's life.

Although Morrison explores the phenomenon of physically sacrificing children more fully in Beloved with Sethe's morally questionable decision to kill her children rather than subject them to a worse fate at the hands of the slave catchers, here Morrison has Eva act out of the need to protect her child from outside horrors. In an equally
ambiguous moral decision, Eva kills Plum to halt his regression to infancy. Oblivious to
traditional Christian morality, and acting independently from any community values, Eva
believes she made the best decision for Plum. Eva rationalizes that she helped him to
maintain his manhood; that with the fire, she "thought of a way he could die like a man
not all scrunched up inside my womb, but like a man" (72). While Sethe is prosecuted
for the "murder" of her child, Eva remains inculpable in her self-contained community,
for although the residents of the Bottom can speculate on the cause of Plum's death, the
only one to know the truth is Hannah.

The black community in Jazz (1992) reacts similarly to Joe Trace's murder of
Dorcas. Even though this case differs in that it is not a parent/child relationship,
Morrison draws parallels between the communities' views of crime within it. The
community of Jazz knows Joe's guilt, like Medallion knows Eva's, but "there was never
anyone to prosecute him because nobody actually saw him do it," and they "didn't want to
throw money to helpless lawyers of laughing cops when . . . the expense wouldn't
improve anything" (4). Morrison's closed black communities operate as separate entities
from their surrounding worlds, demonstrating their absolute authority within their
physical bounds; "legal responsibilities, all the responsibilities that agencies now have,
were the responsibilities of the community" (Stepto int. 11). Because the community
undertakes all responsibility, it weakens itself in its isolation. The community, like Sula,
becomes subjective and unbalanced and is destined to fail with these weaknesses.

While Morrison allows Eva to act with impunity, she invites speculation about
Eva's moral code by making her physically incomplete without providing a reason for her
handicap. Whatever the cause of Eva's amputated leg—though the prevailing rumor has it that she "stuck it under a train to collect insurance" (93)—her inexorable will to survive allows her to abandon her infant children while she discovers some means of living. Knowing Eva's saving and killing of Plum, it should not surprise us that she would do anything, including "barter her own flesh" (Domini 81) to provide for her children. In her unselfish act of attempting to save Hannah, Eva renews her willingness to make extreme physical sacrifices to keep a child alive. Perhaps her daughter, unlike Plum whom she desperately struggled to save, has not yet exhausted her mother's beneficence. When Hannah catches fire in the yard, for example, Eva flings herself out her upstairs window, knowing "there was time for nothing in this world other than the time it took to get there and cover her daughter's body with her own" (75) and extinguish the flames which swallow her firstborn. Eva seems to punish her son for failing to fulfill the masculine role of inheritor and progenitor which she envisioned for him, but she has not hoped Hannah would aspire to more than wife and mother. Eva's divergent expectations allow her to attempt to save her daughter after sacrificing her son, but these actions reveal the extreme measures Eva will take to keep herself emotionally intact.

Only an oppressed, horribly needy community can produce women like Eva Peace and her progeny and tolerate their idiosyncrasies at the same time. The Bottom community, itself perpetually on the edge of survival, allows these citizens to exist, having no energy to struggle against them. Because of the extreme circumstances which it endures, the Bottom "lends itself . . . readily to occurrences that are strange or fantastic" (Harris 52), and the characters are rarely shocked by, or judgmental of, the
occurrences in the Bottom. The reader as the outsider, however, as Susan Blake indicates, is not sure "whether to applaud Eva's self-sacrifice or deplore her tyranny" (191). Because of the community's needs, Shadrack can have his National Suicide Day, Eva has free reign to manipulate her family and friends, and Hannah, before her death by fire, has affairs with the husbands of the Bottom with impunity. Despite the characters' extreme measures to attain some sort of self-completion, none of these means is successful. These characters see themselves only as individuals and fail to act as part of family or true community; because Morrison views these social structures as vital to individual development and survival, the structures of family and community will crumble without the characters acting in concert, or at least acting with some awareness of their ancestors.

Another of Morrison's characters destined to fail in her search for self is Hannah Peace, for she too undergoes her search for completion insensitive to community and heritage. Hannah is unconcerned by her mother's extreme methods of survival and oblivious to the consequences her own search for completion may have on others. Her desire for completion manifests itself in sexual needs that she has inherited from her mother; these yearnings, importantly for self-protection, conspicuously exclude love. Hannah acquired an appreciation of men from Eva (with the exception of BoyBoy), and though Eva had hoped to leave her possessions to Plum (45), "it was manlove that Eva bequeathed to her daughters" (41). Hannah "simply refused to live without the attentions of a man" (42), and "what she succeeded in having more often than not, was some touching every day" (44). In her desire for touching, Hannah reveals the emptiness
within her resulting from being born of an unnuerturing mother and an absent father as well as her attempts to regain these integral parts of her up-bringing. She, like her predecessors, suffers from the Bottom's displacement; her mother was too busy surviving in this world to provide nurturing, and her father fled to avoid the Bottom's struggle.

Hannah can love men easily and freely, but being the offspring of Eva Peace has taken a toll on her. In a seemingly off-hand query which reveals the concern at its heart, Hannah asks Eva if she ever loved her children (67). Arguing that Eva must distance herself to deal practically with her children's survival, Gillespie and Kubitschek reason that "the knowledge that she made herself live in order that they might live should suffice without softer manifestations of love" (35); with existing for her children as her definition of love, Eva replies to Hannah's question about loving them with, "'No, I don't reckon I did. Not the way you thinkin'!'" (67). Although few of the people of the Bottom are nurturing parents by traditional standards—they have neither the time in their struggles to nurture nor the knowledge how to—the women have an indomitable will to survive and this they leave to their daughters.

While the men typically flee to save themselves, the women often assume traditionally masculine traits as if to compensate for the male absence. As a result of assuming these traits, the women do not meet traditional expectations of mother as nurturer, nourisher, and home-maker while they take care of the family as they see fit. The Peace women assert independence and some degree of self-reliance—traditionally masculine traits—but despite these attempts, they cannot provide the balance which stable
As it is not surprising to discover in a world created by an African-American feminist, the women of the Bottom are the backbone of the community while the men are seldom interesting and often ineffectual because they are riddled with self-destructive tendencies. In another reversal of gender roles in Morrison's fictional world, the men, at best, offer a sexual presence which the women use to fulfill only their prurient desires. The men, as Morrison's descriptions of them reveal, seem more handicapped by the world's oppression, or are just tired of fighting it: Eva's husband, Boyboy, as if influenced by the white's derogatory term suggested by his name, flees the responsibilities of fatherhood and returns to Medallion only to flaunt a new girlfriend; the deweys, who "remained boys in mind" (84), never establish their own identities, let alone mature or grow; Helene Wright's husband is constantly "lake-bound" (19); Plum and Shadrack escape reality in concocted dreamlands; and Jude Greene marries Nel Wright so "the two of them together would make one Jude" (83). Because these men are unnurturing, unreliable and incomplete, the Peace women adapt their needs to what the men can provide, craving masculine sexual or physical fulfillment and not expecting anything more. These women seem to strive for physical completion unaware that a deeper sense of self must come from within. By having her female characters attempt to modify their expectations in relation to the men around them, Morrison suggests that the women of the Bottom have more successful techniques for survival, but that they narrow the chances for completion by accepting less from themselves and others than will lead to self-awareness or community.
Nel and Sula also adapt their needs to something which can be fulfilled, for they look to each other to satisfy their internal void. In response to their "distant mothers and incomprehensible fathers" (52)—Nel's father is "in port three days out of every sixteen" (17) and Sula's is dead—the girls, even before meeting, become the embodiment of each other's hope of someone with whom they can share dreams to keep their profound loneliness in abeyance (51). They find in each other the qualities they lack in themselves, as if by communion of their traits they can create one person. Morrison reveals in her creation of Nel and Sula as "two sides of the same person" that she created them incomplete (Spillers 51-2). As opposites, the girls will take vastly different routes to obtain self completion, but as opposites, and therefore extremes, neither of the girls' methods will succeed alone.

Morrison establishes the girls as opposites from their parallel descriptions to the dark plants of the beginning, "a familiar plant and an exotic one" (Afro-Am. 25); to the meanings of their surnames: "right" and "peace"; to their differing shades of skin—"Nel was the color of wet sandpaper"; Sula, "a heavy brown"(52)—to their antipodal homes, Nel's home offers "oppressive neatness" and Sula's is "woolly" (29). The girls are both opposites and doubles, but share the consanguinity of the Bottom. These "solitary girls" (51) and only children, "unshaped, formless things" (53), begin their lives plagued by the incompleteness of their homes and community, hungering for personal and emotional nourishment, and they find some fulfillment in each other.

As both female and black, Nel and Sula long ago discovered "that all freedom and triumph was forbidden to them" and "they had set about creating something else to be"
(52). Through their symbiotic relationship, the girls "use each other to grow on," finding in each other a foundation of meaning, and providing each other "the intimacy they were looking for" (52). Nel and Sula's efforts are hindered, however, by their unnurturing parents and especially by the women who gave birth to them; each will grow to enact "to an extreme degree the meaning of adult womanhood that her mother has shown her" (Reddy 38). While Morrison is not against single motherhood per se, she believes a careful balance is established when a female character has "the best of that which is female and the best of that which is male, and that balance is disturbed if it is not nurtured, and if it is not counted on and if it is not reproduced." She asserts that "the disability we must be on guard against for the future" is "the female who reproduces the female who reproduces the female" (Rootedness 344); by producing this exact scenario in the Peace women, Morrison undertakes an exploration of the problems her characters will encounter with such ancestry while establishing near impossible odds for her characters to succeed with such a background.

Nel and Sula are disadvantaged by this matriarchal heritage and, in their mothers' preoccupations with self-preservation, deprived of the knowledge of how to attain spiritual, intellectual or moral growth which would inform their personal development. So instead of concerning themselves with self-development, Nel and Sula focus on observing outside experience. They hold as their reason for living "a mean determination to explore everything that interested them" (55) and they live their lives outside any moral code by watching, sometimes by acting, but never by building anything. Although Nel and Sula find in each other sustenance enough "to abandon the ways of other people
and concentrate on their own perceptions of things" (55), Morrison argues that because they also must be part of community, their separateness will not protect them from the hardships they will endure. While Sula argues later that she "wants to make herself," as Dorothy H. Lee explains, self-development for Sula is an impossibility, for she is "preoccupied with experience for its own sake and with gratification of whim regardless of the feelings of others" (352). Morrison's narrator aptly describes Sula's dilemma:

had she anything to engage her tremendous curiosity and her gift for metaphor, she might have exchanged the restlessness and preoccupation with whim for an activity that provided her with all she yearned for. And like any artist with no art form, she became dangerous. (121)

Sula lives in a town devoid of creative outlets, and while she rebels against this community and its values, she also suffers as a product of it. If the community had the resources to inspire Sula or to engage her curiosity, she may have had a chance at success. Because Sula has no "way of creating herself" (Reddy 37), that is, attaining an understanding of self to sate her all-consuming void, her desires materialize, in typical Bottom style, as a force which destroys all she tries to achieve. While trying to protect herself from some intimidating Irish boys, for example, Sula maims herself, slicing off the tip of her own finger in a display of her will (54). With this inversion of self-protection, Sula illustrates Eva's formula for survival: better to harm yourself or your own than have an outside influence deprive you of your security. Sula echoes her grandmother's amputation and her mother's role reversal in out-scaring the boys, but neither of these ploys can help Sula attain self-fulfillment. Because neither Sula nor the other characters in the text achieve self through these physical means, Morrison suggests
that her characters must go beyond mere physical contrivances to attain a wholeness that will bring with it satisfaction and self-awareness.

These attempts at attaining physical wholeness prove unsatisfactory when characters need something much deeper. Morrison evokes this frustration in her description of Nel and Sula's adolescent awakenings during a teeming summer season. The girls become "skittish, frightened and bold," a dangerous brew, and in this indefinite emotional state they breach the unmendable barrier of innocence and find experience and all the despair it contains (56). The spark which ignites this flammable combination and hurls the teenagers into experience is Hannah's flippant remark, "I love Sula. I just don't like her" (57), which her daughter overhears. In "bewilderment" and overwhelmed by "dark thoughts" (57), Sula rushes off to join Nel at the river where they enact a figurative sexual experience, execute a symbolic burial, and accidentally drown Chicken Little, a young boy of the Bottom who comes to the river to play.

Morrison's sexually suggestive language in the girls' play at the river makes obvious the girls' desire for sexual experience and kindles their ache for physical fulfillment. Their shared "stick" play simulates the stages of sexual union from nakedness to a post-coital revulsion which Sula's future behavior will re-enact:

they stroked the blades [of grass] up and down, up and down. Nel found a thick twig and, with her thumbnail, pulled away its bark until it was stripped to a smooth, creamy innocence. Sula looked about and found one too. When both twigs were undressed Nel moved easily to the next stage and began tearing up rooted grass to make a bare spot of earth. . . . Nel poked her twig rhythmically and intensely into the earth, making a small neat hole that grew deeper and wider with the least manipulation of her twig. . . . Together they worked until the two holes were one and the same. When the depression was the size of a small dishpan, Nel's twig broke.
With a gesture of disgust she threw the pieces into the hole they had made. Sula threw hers in too. (58)

They fill their hole with "all of the small defiling things they could find" then "covered the entire grave with uprooted grass" (59). The description of the girls' disgust at the broken twig after they have dug their hole suggests that sexual intimacy will be, for them, a futile and unsatisfactory attempt at filling their internal void, even though Nel and Sula do not realize it at this time.

Although Hannah attained the illusion of physical wholeness through sexual intercourse, she is still a static figure as her palindromic name suggests, uninterested in her own daughter, troubling to find self-indulgent physical satiety rather than self-discovery. Hannah is content to satisfy herself by gratifying her sexual needs as well as those of the community's men. But Nel and Sula are dissatisfied by this experience at the river and gripped by "an unspeakable restlessness and agitation" (59). While in this unsettled state, the girls glimpse Chicken Little's inopportune approach. Sula, in a playful swing, unwittingly sends Chicken Little soaring into a "closed place in the water" (61). As the girls freeze in surprise and repeatedly look at the "closed place" which reminds them of "something newly missing" (61), the reader must wonder why they do not call for help, or try to save the victim of their folly. Traditional morality does not apply here, however, for God is absent in Sula, save for the farmer's reference to him in the "nigger joke" and Eva's incredulous invocations to God (when she has assumed his role), and the Bottom and its citizens are immured in a moral vacuum. Some semblance of satisfaction, but no moral consequence, comes from their joint participation in
watching and experiencing Chicken Little's death. Later, Sula watches her mother burn in the backyard, not out of shock, "but because she was interested" (78). Sula, having no creative or productive outlet for her restlessness, stoops to murdering a child and observing the preventable death of her mother in her quest to fill her inner void and find gratification.

From the secret rite of passage at the river observed only by Shadrack, the girls rush headlong into adulthood, prepared or not. Although they choose vastly different paths as adults, Nel and Sula both end up in the Bottom—Nel because she never leaves, and Sula because nowhere else will have her. Morrison explains,

> my own special view is that there was no other place where she could live. She would have been destroyed by any other place; she was permitted to 'be' only in that context, and no one stoned her or killed her or threw her out. (Rootedness 343)

The Bottom, thriving on hardship because it gives the community something against which to unite, allows Sula to exist. Morrison argues that no other place would tolerate Sula's non-traditional beliefs and amorality, and for that reason, Sula needs the Bottom and the acceptance she believes, mistakenly, that she will find in Nel. Nel, whose mother tried to protect her by squelching any of her enthusiasms "until she drove her daughter's imagination underground" (18), was "too bound by convention to undertake a journey" (Stein, 147). She remains in the Bottom, marrying Jude Greene not out of love, but because she feels needed by his desire to find himself in her. Following her mother's example, she allows her personality to become submerged in Jude's (Middleton 371). Unsatisfied in his job of bussing tables in Medallion and frustrated by his unfulfilled
hopes of doing a man's work and having a hand in building the New River Road, Jude marries Nel so that in their union he can enact some adult role. Although Morrison respects marriage as a loving partnership, she condemns it as a vehicle for attaining completeness. Morrison proves the marriage between Nel and Jude to be another device for individual self-completion by the characters' hopes of finding the self in the partner. The desire to assert individuality through union proves a failure, for one personality is subsumed by the other, and when pressured by outside influence, in this case, Sula, the marriage dissolves.

While Nel assumes the conventional and submissive female roles of wife and mother, Sula avoids them by adopting the typically more masculine courses of conduct, traveling and exerting independence. She escapes by embarking, notably immediately after Nel's wedding, on a ten-year journey that will deposit her back in the Bottom in the midst of a plague of robins. By choosing a ten-year absence for Sula—male epic wandering time—Morrison emphasizes that her heroine "is a masculine character. . . . She will do the kind of things that normally only men do. . . . She's adventuresome, she trusts herself, she's not scared" (Stepto int. 26-27). By assuming traditionally masculine traits, Sula transcends stereotypical female struggles and engages in a personal search as epic in size and scope as the male heroic quest. Yet, Sula's seemingly masculine independence is unfeminine and therefore unacceptable to her community. Nel, as a voice of this community, later reprimands Sula for her actions, telling her, "You a woman and a colored woman at that. You can't act like a man. You can't be walking around all independent-like, doing whatever you like, taking what you want, leaving what you don't"
While Nel speaks the truth as the community sees it, Sula rejects these traditional rules of seniority to live by her own code: she retorts, "You say I'm a woman and colored. Ain't that the same as being a man?" (142).

Morrison shows the obstacles in the way of Sula's search to be nearly impenetrable because Sula breaks down traditional roles and expectations for women and ignores societal codes of behavior. The community will judge Sula as unnatural and abnormal not only for her immoral acts by the community's standards, but also because she refuses to assume the expected female roles of wife and mother (Middleton 375). For women to reject their feminine traits and society's traditional roles, as Sula does, is not the course to self-completion, nor is the answer in accepting unquestioningly the societal expectations of wife and mother, as Nel does; instead, Morrison suggests that women can marry and bear children as long as their personalities and aspirations do not become subsumed by the roles they choose to accept or that are forced upon them by community.

Sula returns, nevertheless, having rejected these prescribed roles for women, but as a result, she must face the community's disapproval. Sula's grandmother asks her soon after she arrives on her grandmother's doorstep, "When you gone to get married? You need to have some babies. It'll settle you" (92), but Sula is still bent on her unrealized goal of creating herself. She will seek self-completion in the Bottom not caring whom or what she hurts in her quest, and she will fail for her selfish and isolated attempts. Although Nel has raised a family in the interim, she welcomes Sula and the false sense of wholeness which she provides for Nel, feeling like her friend's return is "like getting the
use of an eye back, having a cataract removed" (95). Nel feels it is Sula "whose past she has lived through" and with whom she feels revitalized (95).

During the ten years of Sula's absence, however, Nel has looked for fulfillment through traditional means and has absorbed the moral standards of the community; she "is the community" in Morrison's eyes, and her station in life as wife, mother and even community forestalls any chance for self-exploration (Stepto 14; emphasis his). By freezing Nel's personal development in her marriage and motherhood, Morrison suggests that women's personalities and individual quests can become subsumed and suffocated by their familial roles. As Deborah E. McDowell argues, Morrison, like other female writers, in the case of Nel and Jude, "equates marriage with the death of the female self and imagination" (154), and her descriptions of Nel and Jude's marriage reveal some of its consequences: Nel's love for Jude "had spun a steady gray web around her heart" (96) while Nel had become one of the women who had "folded themselves into starched coffins" (122). Nel, instead of focusing on self-development and branching out in travel and self-exploration as she planned in childhood, becomes, like a great immobile tree encircled by vines, the "center around which Jude and the children grow" (Reddy 38). It takes Sula, an independent female rejecting such stultifying roles, to remind her of her former perspective of a little girl desiring greatness, enthralled with her own identity in the mirror.

Sula returns with her thirst for self unquenched, though, and in her search, she becomes the embodiment of her forebears' most negative traits. Sula cannot succeed in her search armed with the strategies of her predecessors; her methods destroy the
structures of family and what exists of true community around her instead of edifying the person of Sula. Morrison shows the impossibility of harmony between Sula's search and the community's values with the effect of Sula's return: the symbolic death of the robins, the harbingers of spring and the earth's rebirth, announces to Medallion the presence of something evil that must be overcome, but which, in the tradition of the Bottom, must not be destroyed. Morrison explains that in the symbol of the robins, she sought to create "a natural distortion. . . . and something that was both strange and common. A plague of robins is very strange, but aberrations like that in nature are not" (Bakerman int. 36).

While Sula embodies both the strange and the common, she also represents evils that the community, again, will have to overcome. The community views Sula's acts of sexual wantonness and familial destruction as great challenges to it, and it will adjust to Sula in an attempt to survive these community-perceived evils.

During her search, Sula breaks down the codes of the community of which she is a product without establishing concern or responsibility for the residents, and she, like the community in its isolation, becomes destined to fail. She, like Hannah, sexually experiments with the husbands of the Bottom, beginning with Nel's Jude. Morrison shows the damaging effects of this behavior, for rather than leaving these men secure in their masculinity as Sula's mother did, Sula systematically rejects each lover in her search for self-fulfillment, "trying them out and discarding them without any excuse" (115). With her wanton actions, Sula succeeds in denuding of worth not only her sexual partners, but also their wives. Her exploits tear down the carefully observed, if not spoken, rules of the offended community, and as the community strives to keep itself
intact, these careless, solipsistic exploits will prove fatal for Sula.

Sula's transgressions against her friend Nel and the sacrament of marriage create an unbridgeable rift in their longtime friendship and leaves Nel bereft of feeling. Morrison veers away from her "valley man" narrator in this section to reveal Nel's devastation at this betrayal in a powerful internal monologue (Afro-Am. 24). In a reaction which reveals a vulnerability analogous to her mother's on their trip to the Sundown House, Nel mentally entreats Jude,

...if only you had not looked at me the way the soldiers did on the train... I just stood there seeing it and smiling, because maybe there was some explanation, something important that I did not know about that would have made it all right. (105)

Having relied on Jude for some semblance of completeness with the nurturing role she provided him, Nel now sees her loneliness exposed in her empty thighs--thighs that have loved one man, birthed three babies and represented her womanhood:

...and what am I supposed to do with these old thighs now, just walk up and down these rooms?... They will never give me the peace I need to get from sunup to sundown, what good are they, are you trying to tell me that I am going to have to go all the way through these days all the way, O my god, to that box with four handles with never nobody settling down between my legs... (111)

The "nourishing" and "rooted and bearing" Nel, symbolized by the blackberry bush at the novel's beginning, has lost the false sense of purpose that she found in being a wife and mother, and a gray memory-ball of string and fur threatens to destroy her. By focusing on Nel's thighs--a purely physical part of the whole woman--Morrison creates a metaphor for the incompleteness of Nel's life and dreams, an incompleteness perhaps ensconced and retained within the gray ball that haunts her.
Sula, too, is troubled by the episode between her and Jude, but for the reason that Nel reacted as other women would have, not as she and Nel used to, and Nel's reaction "saddened her a good deal" (120). Traditional roles and morality Sula did not expect from Nel, for she recalls it was "in the safe harbor of each other's company they could afford to abandon the ways of other people" (55). Sula returned to Medallion mainly for Nel, the one she "had clung to . . . as the closest thing to both an other and a self, only to discover that she and Nel were not one and the same thing" (119). Sula realized in her lonely wanderings that "she had been looking all along for a friend" (121), and drifts back to Nel and Medallion to escape the prevailing boredom of her travels. Sula, not understanding the ways of marriage and having no example to teach her, believed that in girlhood they had shared so much that Nel would not mind sharing Jude. Now that Sula has destroyed their friendship, she must depend on the one thing that brings her some sort of pleasure; and she, like her mother, depends on sex to bring her temporary fulfillment. Sula gathers from lovemaking a way of feeling and maintaining power, of achieving a moment of invincibility:

During lovemaking she found and needed to find the cutting edge. When she left off cooperating with her body and began to assert herself in the act, particles of strength gathered in her like steel shavings drawn to a spacious magnetic center, forming a tight cluster that nothing, it seemed, could break. (123)

Morrison shows the deficiency of sex for providing Sula fulfillment and joy, for sexual climax erodes into "the death of time and a loneliness so profound the word itself had no meaning" (123). Sula looks to herself, then, for the gratification which temporary pleasure from another cannot provide. In this private ritual of self-discovery after sex,
Sula then "met herself, welcomed herself, and joined herself in matchless harmony" (123), but this resolute independence cannot survive in Medallion, promote true community, or engender self when sheltered from others. Morrison proves that Sula cannot attain wholeness in isolation; she must be both individual and part of a true community or family.

From this protective haven, Sula, like Nel, falls victim to the appeals of a man and loses part of herself in her attachment. The man who unwittingly lures Sula into possessiveness—a trait previously alien to her—and hastens her demise is Albert Jacks, known to her by the heroic moniker "Ajax." Ajax showed Sula the interest that Hannah had denied her; by relating to her, he could "make her want something she had never been interested in before, which was a permanent relationship" (Stepto int. 18). Sula's internal monologue during intercourse with Ajax reveals not only her possessive, destructive desire to strip Ajax to his base material, but also her innate tie to the Bottom in her search for permanence. Sula needs rootedness just as the Bottom does in its displacement. She imagines rubbing away the fine blackness of Ajax's skin to discover gold leaf gleaming beneath the surface; underneath the gold will appear a layer of alabaster, and beneath that, what she seeks in a quest parallel to the Bottom's quest for fertility: "loam, fertile, free of pebbles and twigs" where she will "put my hand deep into your soil, lift it, sift it with my fingers, feel its warm surface and dewy chill below" (130-31).

These images of fertility subconsciously revealed in a moment of passion reflect a deeper need in Sula than she herself would admit, and which would be fatal for her. She
yearns for rootedness, procreation, and nurturing maternal instincts, but simultaneously unveils her latent fear of these feminine traits in the water imagery of her passage. She thinks to Ajax, "I will water your soil, keep it rich and moist. How much water to keep the loam moist? And how much loam will I need to keep my water still? And when do the two make mud?" (131). Her fear is that she will lose herself in him--becoming "mud"--and when she slips into a nurturing role consoling Ajax with, "Come on. Lean on me" (133), he leaves her for freer ground. Sula dies soon after his disappearance, but having kept at bay for most of her life the feminine traits of possessive love and nurturing instincts that finally weaken her.

Sula's rejection of traditionally feminine roles precludes any chance of creating a balance which can lead to self-discovery. Sula fears feminine roles such as that of mother, which entails bringing forth another life that will be dependent upon her for all its needs, including nourishment from her own body. Morrison illustrates Sula's abhorrence for motherhood through her character's distaste of milk. Through this important symbol in her works of nurturing or the need for it, Morrison exposes her heroine's fear of what Sula perceives as motherhood's intrinsic danger of being used and consumed by another person. While Nel offered Jude "milkwarm commiseration" (103), Pecola Breedlove drank three quarts of milk in a day (Bluest Eye, 23), and Sethe struggled to reach her nursing baby with her own milk (Beloved, 16), Sula tells Ajax upon receipt of his offering of blue bottles of milk, "I don't like milk" (124). Having been denied nurturing in the Peace household, Sula can neither accept nor administer it, and it is significantly absent in her home. Under Sula's depraved residence at Carpenter
Road, for example, the pantry becomes devoid of nourishment, "empty now of flour sacks, void of row upon row of canned goods, free forever of strings of tiny green peppers" (125), and she leaves Tar Baby and the deweys to fend for themselves. By abandoning the ancestor--placing Eva in a nursing home and allowing her mother to burn--and neglecting the family, Sula cannot succeed in her search; she abandons those bonds which Morrison believes are essential to understanding and attaining self.

Morrison's symbolic descriptions of Sula's inability to nourish and her desire to reach the elemental, fertile mixture at Ajax's core reveal a starvation in Sula which parallels the Bottom's. Promised as "rich and fertile," it was in this hilly land that "planting was backbreaking," and "the soil slid down and washed away the seeds" (5). Without nourishment and cultivation, Morrison suggests, neither a character nor a community can overcome the obstacles before it. Sula and Nel, while not conscious of it, struggle against obstacles rising from the hardships and pressures of the community as well as their heritage as unnurtured children. Although any parent or family member could provide a warm and nurturing home, this is an impossible feat for an absent father or a preoccupied mother.

Sula, born of a line of women struggling against the Bottom's wrath, reveals in her subconscious search her closeness to the earth of her origin, but she dies without acknowledging it. Rejected by both her community and by her mother who didn't like her, Sula, likewise, rejects them. But by doing so, Sula makes a fatal error. These entities, for Morrison, form the kernel around which the individual can develop and create an idea of self. She believes if "you kill the ancestor you kill yourself . . . . Nice
things don't always happen to the self-reliant if there is no conscious historical connection" (Rootedness 344). So Sula, who has no chance from the outset, in her all-consuming quest, mistakes creating herself and forming her own identity with obtaining freedom and independence.

Sula maintains this fierce independence and refuses to rely upon anyone else for aid even in the depths of her illness. Although Sula shows no remorse over Chicken Little's death, watching her mother burn or taking her best friend's husband, her illness at a young age and its symptoms suggest a subconscious awareness of her wrongs. In one example evocative of Hannah's burning, Sula wakes from a dream "gagging and overwhelmed with the smell of smoke" and unable to "fight the taste of oil at the back of her tongue" (148), but this manifestation of haunting memory will not alter Sula's resolve. When Nel pays a visit after three years of hating her enemy, Sula's stubbornness has not waned. At Nel's insistence that Sula must be lonely tucked away in Eva's bedroom, Sula declares, "Yes. But my lonely is mine. Now your lonely is somebody else's. Made by somebody else and handed to you" (143). With this reminder of her own loneliness and strengthened by her hatred of Sula and her implacable stubbornness, Nel finally confronts Sula about sleeping with Jude. Sula's response reveals her need for completeness at whatever the consequence; she replies: "Well, there was this space in front of me, behind me, in my head. Some space. And Jude filled it up. That's all. He just filled up the space" (144).

One of the problems in Sula's quest, identified by Dorothy H. Lee, is her paradoxical need for independence while she desperately searches for another person--
Nel, Jude, Ajax—to grant her completeness; she cannot have both, and finding failure in each separately, she looks within herself for intimacy (350). While Nel and the community view Sula's actions as immoral, Sula acts in the only ways she knows how: methods rooted in and unbalanced by her matrilineal descent. Even though her actions deny a traditional affection or affinity for the people she involves in her life, she, in her own unconventional way, loves Nel, as her dying thoughts show. In a strange awareness just after the moment of death, Sula reveals her desire to continue to share everything with Nel. She smiles, "'Well, I'll be damned,' she thought, "'it didn't even hurt. Wait'll I tell Nel'" (149). Nel, even in her hatred for her former friend, reveals the same desire to share with Sula; puzzled by the ball of fur which plagues her, she decides she would have to ask somebody about that, somebody she could confide in and who knew a lot of things, like Sula, for Sula would know or if she didn't she would say something funny that would make it all right. (110)

Morrison reveals in these passages that despite Sula's claims of independence and self-sufficiency and Nel's abhorrence of Sula, her heroines seek the very human need of companionship to share and interpret the problems and profound moments of both life and death. Morrison shows that these women need the balance and security of friendship and true community, but they have lost the means of attaining it: Nel spends most of her life looking to others rather than to herself for fulfillment, while Sula turns exclusively within.

After Sula's death, the town turns out for her funeral, although it is unresponsive during her illness. Disgusted by Sula's betrayal of her friend and her possession and
rejection of its husbands, it feels great relief at her death. At these offenses the people of Medallion labeled her "roach" (112), but a far worse offense to the Bottom, and as previously noted, to Morrison, was Sula's rejection of the ancestor. When Sula installed Eva at Sunnydale nursing home, the townspeople responded by renaming her "bitch" (112). When the rejected men of the Bottom said she committed the unforgivable act, "slept with white men" (112), the townspeople recalled strange incidents and rumors surrounding Sula and changed their label for her to "witch." The people of the Bottom have always interpreted Sula and the strange birthmark over her eye however it best suited them: while Nel perceives the black mark over Sula's eye as a stemmed rose (52), Jude sees it as a copperhead (103), Shadrack sees it as a tadpole, "the mark of the fish he loved (156)" and the town sees it as "Hannah's ashes marking her from the very beginning" (114).

With the town's redefinition of Sula as witch, she performs for the Bottom a vital role in its own need for completeness; she becomes what Trudier Harris calls "the measure of evil for the community, their catch-all explanation for natural and unnatural occurrences" (64). The Bottom's identification of its very own witch has a profound effect on the town, for

once the source of their personal misfortune was identified, they had leave to protect and love one another. They began to cherish their husbands and wives, protect their children, repair their homes and in general band together against the devil in their midst. (117)

The townspeople could feel good about themselves compared with Sula's anti-familial, evil ways, just as the community of The Bluest Eye feels superior to Pecola Breedlove
and her internalized ugliness. They, too, avenge themselves on a loathed person in order to attain what they perceive as self-worth. As the narrator of *The Bluest Eye* confesses, "All of us—all who knew her—felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her. We were so beautiful when we stood astride her ugliness" (205). Societal scapegoats such as Pecola and Sula are enormously important parts of community, for they instill in the people around them the illusions of completeness and primacy in their respective towns. As Morrison explains, these characters, like the personal contrivances for wholeness they employ, become for the community a "device for order and self esteem" (Rootedness 352). These "devices," however, are just that: they are ploys outside the self which grant only temporary satisfaction rather than an internal search which leads to self-development and place in the community. Morrison suggests that these devices are futile, for the self-esteem and assurance which they seem to create vanish with the disappearance of these scapegoats. The "order" in the Bottom, for example, disintegrates with in-fighting after Sula's death.

Once Sula, their scapegoat, vanishes, the town again becomes aware of its incompleteness, despite its original relief at her death. Sula, like Shadrack, was an accepted part of the Bottom, and with her death, a falling away, a dislocation was taking place. Hard on the heels of the general relief that Sula's death brought a restless irritability took hold. . . . Other mothers who had defended their children from Sula's malevolence (or who had defended their positions as mothers from Sula's scorn for the role) now had nothing to rub up against. The tension was gone and so was the reason for the effort they had made. (153-54)

With Sula's absence, the people of Medallion forget their united protectiveness and
return to the divisive measures of meanness and resentment to deal with familial troubles. Because Morrison created the Bottom to function as a character in *Sula* (Rootedness 341), this town, like its people, feels and reacts to the void left by Sula. Following Sula's burial, the Bottom symbolically expresses its loss with a freezing rain that creates misery in the Bottom, ruining holidays, killing fowl and spreading diseases—a response much worse than the dying robins at Sula's return.

Morrison, with Sula's death and the opening paragraph of this work, foreshadows the destruction of the Bottom, for tied to its citizens, its fate is inextricable from and parallel to Sula's (Harris 57). In the most severe reversal of the novel, Morrison has the town destroy itself on what seems the prototypical image of progress and hope for future: the New River Road tunnel. Working on the tunnel has been the goal of many of the Bottom's men; it was supposed to provide prosperity by bringing in "trade from cross-river towns" (81), and it would have provided the men with a needed morale boost. Despite their physical ability and hunger for work, however, the men of the Bottom are constantly overlooked, and this rejection fosters negative energy which Morrison suggests coheres into a tremendous destructive force.

On National Suicide Day 1941, the blacks of the Bottom finally have an opportunity to avenge themselves on the bridge that dashed their hopes and crippled their pride. They turn to destruction as the extreme result of having been denied the opportunity to create, and on January third, hundreds of the towns' residents follow Shadrack and his bell and rope on, ironically, the first day that he loses hope that his call to death would benefit anyone. This time, though, the residents of the Bottom follow
Shadrack, not because they harken to his cry, but because his parade offers "a respite from anxiety, from gravity, from the weight of that very adult pain that had undergirded them all those years before" (160). In their eagerness to destroy their broken promise by tearing apart the hated bridge, hundreds lose their lives as they tumble into the river and pull others with them in their scramble to escape the frigid water's pull.

Overcome by emotion and defenseless in their frenzied rush to achieve their mission, the paraders let their guards down and plunge to their deaths in another elemental sacrifice. Having struggled for daily existence and battled the odds intrinsic to the Bottom, the townspeople are finally devoured by the empty promises of the "nigger joke" and the New River Road bridge. Morrison fatefully ends this section by enacting Shadrack's seemingly preposterous idea (Harris 68), but with the success of his quest to escape the mystery of death, Shadrack can only observe the spectacle in shock, endlessly tolling his bell. Shadrack's appearance conducting the people to their deaths at the novel's end symbolizes the black people's failed attempt to survive the world created and entrammeled by whites. Morrison's novel, beginning with Shadrack's attempt to endure his war-born trauma, comes full circle with his observing the destruction of the town created out of a white man's promise. Through this framing device, Morrison can comment on her characters' difficulties being raised in such a world and prove the community's origins to be its demise.

Those who survive the bridge's collapse or who refuse to participate in Shadrack's parade move out of the Bottom, again displaced by whites, this time in the whites' desire for the hills that offer a river view and the promise of a golf course. Nel is one of few
residents who choose to remain in the Bottom, and although the town seems better economically, she reminisces over the past. When Nel pays a visit to Eva Peace at Sunnydale while fulfilling her churchly duty of visiting the elderly, she stirs the old woman's memory of Nel's kinship to Sula and accuses Nel of killing Chicken Little. For the first time, Nel realizes that with the little boy's death had come a feeling of contentment and that she, like Sula, had watched his drowning with interest. With her remorse for her involvement in Chicken Little's death, Nel becomes the first Bottom resident to evince true concern for fellow citizens, and her renewal can begin.

Nel had been carrying around with her for twenty years the dirty ball of dust and string that appeared after Sula's betrayal and that evoked the shared secret of Chicken Little's death (Harris 83). She had continued to live, love her children and carefully avoid viewing directly this haunting ball, but when she passes Shadrack on the street late in both their lives it begins to stir. Seeing Shadrack, the sole witness to Chicken Little's drowning, Nel recalls Sula in poignant remembrance. In this cathartic moment, Nel's frightening ball containing the memory of their adolescent summer and the loss of innocence by the river disperses; "leaves stirred; mud shifted; there was the smell of overripe green things. A soft ball of fur broke and scattered like dandelion spores in the breeze" (174). At this moment Nel realizes that it was Sula, not Jude, whom she was missing for all these years. Her mournful cry reaches out to Sula with its echoes of childhood and adult pain, releases her from her stagnating role of wife, mother and abandoned woman, and signals the beginning of Nel's rebirth. Because Nel accepted these societal norms, her cry is both purgative and remorseful. She knows that she
married and bore children, not out of love, but out of the personal need for fulfillment she failed to pursue on her own.

Morrison creates Nel as her one hopeful character in Sula, for by freeing Nel of the memories of her roles in life which seem to entrap her, and allowing her to realize her human need for companionship, Morrison endows Nel with the capability of attaining completion and the understanding of self that she denies to her other characters in their misguided searches. In Nel's revelation, "All that time, I thought I was missing Jude," and then in her plaintive cry which she has been unable to release, "We was girls together... O Lord, Sula, girl, girl, girlgirlgirl" (174), Nel mourns not only the loss of her friend but, more importantly, the hopeful idealism which accompanied their girlhood and which could have shaped her differently had she not assumed the false community's values. With this epiphany that she misses Sula and their adolescence and not Jude, Nel transcends both the community's code of morality to which she has always adhered and the stagnating role of abandoned wife she had assumed with Jude's leaving. Morrison explains that Nel's devices for living, like Sula's, are extreme and therefore destined for failure: "living totally by the law and surrendering completely to it without questioning anything sometimes makes it impossible to know anything about yourself" (Stepto int. 14).

Although she is too old to begin her search anew, Nel may now come to some understandings of self which her submissive former roles had denied her. Believing that "hell is change" (108), Nel had been settling for mere survival in the Bottom since she began living for others' fulfillment, including marrying Jude because he needed her.
Later she sought survival by avoiding the gray fur ball that lurked at the corner of her eye. By confronting her emotions and reconciling herself to the loss of her friend, Nel destroys the insidious gray ball that has plagued her since Jude's departure; she affirms her will to live for self, while understanding her need for community. For this search to succeed, says Morrison, one must move "toward self-fulfillment, and the consequences of that fulfillment should be to discover that there is something just as important as you are" (Memory 390); Nel has the opportunity to succeed because she comes to realizes the profundity of her relationship with Sula, but her search, according to Morrison, is "just beginning" (Stepto int. 14).

In many of her works, Morrison explores the dilemma of "how to survive whole in a world where we are all of us... victims of something" (Bakerman int. 40; italics hers). In Sula, Morrison searches for the right equation for her characters, mostly female, to succeed in finding not only physical wholeness, but also a sense of self to guide and inform each individual character's life and grant it completion and permanence. Although few in the Bottom endure and survive the hardships of a community formed from a "nigger joke," those who succeed, like Eva Peace and Shadrack, create their own designs for survival by controlling and manipulating their surroundings. Morrison shows that for the women of Medallion even to initiate this search, they must transcend the traditional roles of the female; marriage and birth in and of themselves do not grant the satisfaction of finding self. Sula, for example, succeeds in rejecting these traditional roles early on, but she fails to find satisfaction in self alone; Nel, on the other hand, finally realizes these socially-prescribed roles have halted her
plans for her own life and she resumes hope after she has outgrown them. None of
Morrison's characters establishes a balance between community and self understanding;
without this balance, Morrison suggests, self completion is impossible.

The characters who can search for the individual self while acknowledging the
importance of community and the ancestor are rare in the Bottom. Through the character
of Nel, the only one to see herself as both an individual and as part of some larger
community, Morrison suggests that in order to achieve completeness her characters must
be armed with a knowledge of their origins. Paradoxically, however, it is a knowledge of
origins that enables the self to transcend traditional roles. Although "tradition" and
"origin" seem similar in their evocation of all that has come before, "tradition," as
Morrison uses the term, suggests the unchanging repetition that perpetuates the Bottom's
most negative traits, while the term "origin" suggests the roots of a person's beginning.
The characters in *Sula* who follow tradition as a means of attaining wholeness simply
repeat their predecessors' behavior, but this limiting and defining repetition prevents
characters from attaining an understanding of self. Those characters with an
understanding of their origins—knowledge of their parentage and place of birth, and an
acknowledgment of the common tie they share with others of their circumstance—can
establish a foundation upon which to build self-understanding and community and
transcend the limits of tradition.
NOTES


BIBLIOGRAPHY


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The author was born April 3, 1967 in Lynchburg, Virginia. She graduated from Douglas Southall Freeman High School in Richmond in 1985, and in 1989 she received a B.A. from James Madison University in Harrisonburg, Virginia. After teaching high school English for five years in the Virginia Beach Public School system, the author entered the College of William and Mary's Master of Arts in English program in June, 1994. Pending approval of her thesis, The Search for Completion in Toni Morrison's Sula, the author will receive her degree in May, 1996.