She had been looking all along for a friend, and it took her a while to discover that...no one would ever be that version of herself which she sought to reach out to and touch with an ungloved hand. There was only her mood and whim, and if that was all there was, she decided to turn the naked hand toward it, discover it and let others become as intimate with their own selves as she was.
Chapter 2

The Black Sheep of Society:
Rebellion and Conformity in Sula

Morrison's second novel, Sula, is the story of the physical, mental and emotional quest, growth and development of two black girls - Nel and Sula - who are intimate childhood friends. They live and grow up together in the Bottom - the black district of Medallion, Ohio. The friendship and closeness that brands them inseparable during adolescence is, however, broken once the two mature and begin living life according to individual priorities. In the article entitled "The Mellow Moods and Difficult Truths of Toni Morrison" Marilyn Sanders Mobley writes that "when Nel takes the traditional road of marriage and family and Sula chooses the more unconventional road of college and the single life, Sula...becomes Morrison's meditation on race and power, mothering and family, individual identity and community responsibility."1 Mobley seems essentially to be saying that Morrison uses the diverse lifestyles of Nel and Sula to reflect upon the politics of race and power that inform American culture and do not allow women to thrive - regardless of the choices they make. Nel represents the good that conventionalism implies. She is committed to family values and also

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1 Marilyn Sanders Mobley, "The Mellow Moods and Difficult Truths of Toni
feels a certain responsibility toward the community. Sula, on the other hand, stands for the unconventional that is interpreted as evil. She derides the institution of marriage and the family, and does not care about the community at all. Nel selects all the options considered proper by the black community, whereas Sula makes random choices that scandalise and horrify the residents of the Bottom. Unfortunately, however, neither achieves the happiness or wholeness of being she aspires for. This chapter seeks to show that Sula's race, class and gender consciousness develops as a consequence of her rebellious attitude and Nel's because of her conformity, and it is mostly because of these varying predilections that the two grow up separate, apart and incomplete. Both Nel and Sula develop the way they do because of their diverse backgrounds, the influence and expectations of society, and as a reaction to what they see and hear during the course of their initiation into the Bottom community. In terms of social obligations, Nel delivers what society expects, but Sula does not - yet both are equally unhappy. One becomes a victim of her circumstances because of her passive nature, and the other becomes a pariah because of her tendency to rebel and retaliate. In Sula, Morrison takes the readers step by step through the emotional trauma surrounding the black

American woman, and provides a comprehensive perspective on the implications of growing up black and female in America. The book demonstrates that women remain the black sheep of society - regardless of whether they rebel against established norms and traditions or conform to them.

Though Sula is the central character of the novel, it is Nel who is introduced first. To understand Nel's upbringing, however, it is important to first understand the psyche, background, and parentage of her mother, Helene Wright. Helene's mother, Rochelle, is described by Morrison as a "Creole whore" (Sula 29) working at Sundown House in Southern Ohio. Helene is rescued from this atmosphere by her grandmother who takes her to New Orleans, and brings her up "under the dolesome eyes of a multicolored Virgin Mary, counseling her to be constantly on guard for any sign of her mother's wild blood" (29). She also arranges for her to marry her nephew, Wiley Wright, a ship's cook, and settle in Medallion, Ohio. In this town, Helene slowly becomes a righteous pillar of the Bottom community - one of their most decent citizens who behaves with poise and propriety on every occasion. She determines never to let her mother's shadow fall on her own child,

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and thus brings Nel up according to the strictest patterns of obedience and good moral behaviour. Morrison writes that "under Helene's hand the girl became obedient and polite. Any entusiasms that little Nel showed were calmed by the mother until she drove her daughter's imagination underground" (30). At this point, Nel is not allowed to have an independent mind or character of her own. Her personality is curbed and dominated by her mother. She is forced to accept Helene's views of right and wrong, and disallowed any opinion of her own. Nel's initial awakening, therefore, comes only when she travels to New Orleans to attend the funeral of her great-grandmother. While boarding the train, she and her mother step into the "white" compartment by mistake. When the conductor upbraids Helene, she apologises profusely, but he is unmoved, and speaks with unwarranted harshness. Nel then watches her mother in shock and horror as she, "for no earthly reason," smiles "dazzlingly and coquetishly at the salmon-colored face of the conductor" (34). With a sinking feeling, Nel notices the attitude of the other passengers in the compartment, including two black soldiers, turn from disinterestedness to disbelief as they look absolutely "stricken" (34) by this sudden show of vulgarity. This is the beginning of Nel's initiation into the race and sex politics of the time. Right in front of her eyes, she watches her mother turn into a
lady of disrepute - silently but surely condemned by other members of the coach. Nel's first movement away from the closed Bottom community thus brings about a serious disjunction of her self. Even before the journey begins, the mother-daughter bond is first shaken then severed. It is almost as if Helene has unwittingly passed on to Nel her own legacy of distancing herself from her mother because that mother is viewed as imperfect, flawed and no longer worthy of emulation. As long as they lived within the narrow confines of the black community where one view hardly diverged from another, Nel saw her mother as an epitome of virtue and morality. With her exposure to larger society, however, comes a shattering of this ideal image which also brings with it fear that she too might turn into a loose woman or "custard" (36). She wonders if she will be able to resist the onslaught of racist and sexist insults - especially since she has just seen her mother fail at it. At this time Nel is only ten years of age, but as she travels on this fateful journey, something inside her matures and leads her to actually make a decision about herself, thus marking the emergence of a certain independence in her character. She determines that, unlike her mother, she will never give anyone an opportunity to objectify her. "It was on that train, shuffling toward Cincinnati, that she resolved to be on guard - always. She wanted to make certain that no man ever looked at
her that way. That no midnight eyes on marbled flesh would ever accost her and turn her into jelly” (36). Nel’s early awakening comes as a result of race and sex related issues - how black and white men look at black women and what it means. Her resolve to be on “guard” at all times mutates into a certain reticence when she reaches adolescence.

This trip, related to an actual family death, thus signifies also the death of Nel’s former, subdued self. After returning to her house, her perspective on familiar things changes. Morrison writes, “she had gone on a real trip, and now she was different” (42-43). She is different because she has been offered a preview of the reality of racism and sexism. At the same time, she has also been exposed to a certain hypocrisy inherent in her mother’s character. She has been in a house where death resides, and where the aura of prostitution lingers. She returns a changed person and, back in her own room, stares into the mirror, whispering to herself, “I’m me. I’m not their daughter. I’m not Nel. I’m me. Me....Each time she said the word me there was a gathering in her like power, like joy, like fear…” (43). Since Nel had always been repressed and dominated by her mother, she had never felt the force of her own personality before. After this trip, however, she luxuriates in the awakening of her own consciousness - and the joy that she feels
because she has discovered the power that lies within her self - the ability to be a distinct, separate being with the scope of exploring her own individuality. Though this self-exploration marks something positive in terms of the development of a certain independence in Nel's character, it also signifies the early breaking of her ties with her African past - manifested in her separation from Helene. Significantly, this is also the time that she makes friends with Sula - gently defying her mother's previous instructions.

Morrison declares that Sula and Nel "felt the ease and comfort of old friends" because "each had discovered years before that they were neither white nor male, and that all freedom and triumph was forbidden to them," and so "they had set about creating something else to be" (72). She implies here that black women in white America are bound by the constraints of race and sex, and have only limited scope to explore their options. Against such a background, the beginning of Nel and Sula's friendship marks an important phase in the initial development of their race and gender consciousness. This is the time that they are growing physically as well, and both share and discover with each other the fearful and exciting thrill of being looked at suggestively by men. On their way to the ice-cream parlour, even Nel seems to forget, for a moment, her initial resolve to be "on guard." When the two are
together, they are able to explore their own emotions and feelings without interference from the outside world. "In the safe harbor of each other's company they could afford to abandon the ways of other people and concentrate on their own perceptions of things" (75-76). The friendship is significant to their development as individuals because it allows them to ignore both black and white ideologies, and see the world with unprejudiced eyes. In Sula's company, Nel is able to emerge out of the cocoon created by her parents, and assert herself to a certain extent, while Sula ceases to bother about such things as the shape of her nose or the texture of her hair. It is almost as if each fills an unrecognised void in the other's life. Together they complete the circle of their personalities and become, as several critics have asserted, two sides of the same coin. Their union, however, is never quite complete or whole because somewhere along the road to adulthood the cord of their friendship breaks, and leaves each dangling in a void of her own creation. Jane Bakeman claims that "the personalities of Sula and Nel, could they have been merged, would have amounted to one whole person. Just as their friendship is essential to their well-being as children, so would their learning from one another's faults have made them adult women capable of well-being."^ This comment implies that if

^Jane S. Bakeman, "Failures of Love: Female Initiation in the Novels of Toni...
Nel and Sula had given their friendship a chance to flourish, the development of their sensibilities would have been more positive since they could have learned from each other's mistakes, and supported each other through difficult times. Ashraf H. A. Rushdy too has written in support of this thesis - contending that both Sula and Nel require "an element the other possesses for her completeness."4 This means that each girl has certain traits that the other lacks, and the coming together of these would benefit both and enrich their personalities. These opinions are strongly endorsed by Morrison as well. In an interview with Robert Stepto, she says "if they had been one person, I suppose they would have been a rather marvelous person. But each one lacked something that the other had."5 If Nel's and Sula's personalities had merged, the combination would have resulted in the creation of a balanced person. Each girl would then have been better able to cope with the stress of living within a community that is both influenced and suppressed by a male dominated white world. This failed merger suggests that the existing conditions of American society are not conducive to a total


integration of the black self which remains fragmented throughout. Even though the friendship is headed toward eventual failure, however, during childhood, at least, Nel and Sula enrich each other’s lives emotionally, and do not feel the absence of other people.

Their friendship is, however, soon to be tested. When Sula accidentally overhears her mother telling her friends, “I love Sula. I just don’t like her. That’s the difference” (78), the words hit her like lightning, and kill something within her. It would be worthwhile to mention here a point critics have so far overlooked or chosen not to comment upon: though Sula soon joins Nel downstairs, she does not mention a word about this episode to her. She has thus, subconsciously, begun to separate herself emotionally from the other part of her self, Nel. Sula’s overhearing her mother’s words marks the beginning of the development of her peculiar consciousness. It is from this point onward that her life changes drastically, and gives way to the next episode which seems to follow as a natural corollary to the first. Nel and Sula go to a little clearing by the river where they idly pull out blades of grass, and peel fallen twigs which they use for digging holes in the earth. After a while both merge their holes, and fill them up with little pieces of trash like cigarette butts and bottle caps. Then they replace the mud and cover the mound with the pieces of grass they
had earlier pulled out. Morrison describes it so: "carefully they replaced the soil and covered the entire grave with uprooted grass" (80). The word "grave" is of crucial significance here because their act of digging it and covering it up together foreshadows the accidental drowning of Chicken Little, and their combined responsibility for it. It is, however, Sula, who bears the strongest burden. She has just discovered that her mother does not like her, and a boy has just slipped out of her hands to meet a watery grave. These two incidents mark a crucial phase in her further development as an individual. According to Morrison, "the first experience taught her that there was no other you could count on; the second that there was no self to count on either" (156). At the age of twelve, Sula has learnt a cruel and bitter lesson - that one has to live without the support of either a self or any other dependable being. (The mother-daughter bond is severed once again and, like Nel, Sula too experiences an early estrangement from the primal nurturing source - thus growing up alone and without guidance). She carries the burden of this knowledge around for the rest of her life, and it is ultimately this which is responsible for her alienation from society, and her introspection into her own self to find out what she is all about. Her mother's words kill all feelings of love within her, and Chicken Little's drowning, after an
initial period of dread, cleanses her heart of all fear. These two experiences, and her reactions to them, set the tone for her eventual initiation into society - fearless and with no love lost for anybody except Nel.

The next death that Sula is involved in is that of her own mother - Hannah - whose body leaps up in flames as she is lighting the yard fire. Her grandmother Eva’s contention is that Sula simply stood and watched her mother burn to death - “not because she was paralyzed, but because she was interested” (104). Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi claims that she reacts in this manner because she has been taught to do so by Nel after the Chicken Little episode. Another way of looking at it, however, is that Hannah is already dead for Sula, so her physical presence or absence no longer makes a difference. Such a reaction to her mother’s death, therefore, is not unrelated to the events that have preceded it. The year is 1923, and Sula is thirteen years old.

The next chapter begins with the year 1927, and a wedding - Nel’s. (The time gap seems to have no particular significance except perhaps as a literary device used to show the transition from adolescence to adulthood, from the melancholy of the funeral to the joy of a wedding). Sula plays an active role in organising the
wedding, and makes perfect arrangements for the ceremony. Nel gets married to Jude - the tenor of Mount Zion's Men's Quartet, and a waiter at the Hotel Medallion. Even though Jude had chosen her for marriage because he liked her best amongst all the girls who came to church to hear him sing, his reasons for getting married were different. He

needed some of his appetites filled, some posture of adulthood recognized, but mostly he wanted someone to care about his hurt....And if he were to be a man, that someone could no longer be his mother....Whatever his fortune, whatever the cut of his garment, there would always be the hem - the tuck and fold that hid his raveling edges; a someone sweet, industrious and loyal to shore him up....Without that someone he was a waiter hanging around a kitchen like a woman. With her he was head of a household pinned to an unsatisfactory job out of necessity. The two of them together would make one Jude. (109-110)

Jude had failed to be hired as a road builder because the authorities had only selected white men for the job. This had hurt his self-

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esteem considerably, and he wanted to “take on a man’s role anyhow” (109), so he proposed to Nel. Behind his decision lay a desire to be cherished and pampered, to feel important, ‘manly’ and empowered - because by rejecting him for employment, white society had essentially stripped him of his feelings of self-worth as a man. He gets married only because his ego needs a boost. He chooses Nel because he is confident that she will tend carefully to all his hurts and pains, and thus give him the feeling of well-being that society has so far denied him. Bakerman contends that “Nel’s marriage...is limiting rather than defining.... [Her] life-long search for conformity is the result of her mother’s training...The marriage...is doomed both through her own and her husband’s lack of self-worth.” The relationship between Nel and Jude is not a nurturing one because it satisfies only his ego instead of enriching him spiritually, and it does not contribute to her growth at all - signifying, rather, the complete take-over of her personality by his, and the end of her existence as an independent individual with thoughts, ideas, feelings of her own. Ironically, however, Jude's attentions had first appealed to her because she felt that he saw her as an independent being - as someone separate from Sula. “Nel’s response to Jude’s shame and anger selected her away from Sula.

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7 Bakerman 552.
And greater than her friendship was this new feeling of being needed by someone who saw her singly" (111). In a way, Jude's attentions initially flatter her ego and boost her self-esteem too. She enjoys being viewed as a person in her own right - rather than as a part of Sula. After the marriage, however, she seems to be responsible for giving Jude a personality - for making him feel like an important man rather than a useless waiter - but her own stands completely effaced at the altar of love and matrimony. The relationship, therefore, undoes all that the journey to Cincinnati had done. It kills the feelings of enthusiasm and independence that the trip had inspired in her, and negates all that her friendship with Sula had stood for. It converts the confidence of “I’m me” to the mistaken conviction that ‘I’m Jude.’ Maureen T. Reddy writes that “the marriage of Nel and Jude demonstrates the crippling effects of several types of oppression: Both are victims in the racist war against black people...Both have internalized the racist and sexist attitudes of the white capitalist society that says that one’s value as a man is determined by one’s work and by that work’s economic rewards...and that one’s value as a woman is determined by one’s ability to attract a man and then to provide that man with children.”

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8 Maureen T. Reddy, “The Tripled Plot and Center of Sula,” Black American
his colour does not allow him to get the kind of work that he wants, yet he has been taught to believe that a worthy man is one who has a certain proper job which provides him with lush economic dividends. Nel is also a victim of gender-based white supremism because the dominant culture has taught her that a woman can be successful and whole only if she has children, and a husband at the head of the family. She feels satisfied only for a while, therefore, but when Jude leaves her, and her love for the children stales (“like a pan of syrup kept too long on the stove...leaving only its odor and a hard, sweet sludge, impossible to scrape off” [210]) she has no sense of self to turn to.

Nel’s marriage to Jude also marks a physical separation between her and Sula who leaves town on the night of the wedding, and returns ten years later - in 1937. The marriage symbolises the encroachment of the traditional white view upon a territory that Morrison depicts as essentially black - the intimate friendship between two African American women. She suggests that Nel allows the marriage, with its false sense of security and completeness, to nip a potentially life-giving friendship in the bud. Of the period, stretching from 1927 to 1937, the author only mentions that Sula went to college, and travelled around the

country - but provides no details. Her return to Medallion is "accompanied by a plague of robins" (117) - an unhappy and unfortunate omen for the superstitious residents of the Bottom. She comes back richly attired, and becomes an object of every black person's stare. She calmly takes up residence at her old home as if she had never been away. Eva asks her to get married, and have babies, to which she replies, "I don't want to make somebody else. I want to make myself" (121). This answer reflects Sula's defiant nature, her defensiveness, and her sense of being an incomplete person. She feels that she still she does not have a self, and wants to delve deep into her psyche and consciousness to either find one or create it. When she looks for a self she is essentially looking for some sort of meaning to life - a meaning that she feels can come to her only from within. She must determine who she is and what she wants from life. Her education, and exposure to the white world have clearly not given her the answers she seeks. From her behaviour and actions, the reader can only assume that she is looking for a self-sufficient personality that does not need the support of family, community or friends to define itself. Her views do not match with Eva's, and as youth clashes with old age, modernity with tradition, both have a major fight, after which Sula packs Eva off to the home for the aged - much against Eva's will.
and to the consternation and condemnation of the entire Bottom community. Shortly after this incident, she goes to visit her old friend, Nel, but though their meeting is full of joy and laughter at first, the friendship does not have a chance to renew itself fully. Sula's venture into white territory has distanced her from Nel who has remained within the parameters of black society. Ironically, however, this black community has passed on to her the values that it has absorbed from the dominant culture, whereas Sula returns from the white world after having rejected the options provided by it. Nel's initiation into black-absorbed white values is most clearly illustrated in the way she reacts when she discovers Jude and Sula in a compromising position in her own house. She feels that "now her thighs were truly empty and dead too, and it was Sula who had taken the life from them and Jude who had smashed her heart and the both of them who left her with no thighs and no heart just her brain raveling away" (143). Such a reaction demonstrates that she subscribes to the traditional theory that her body and soul have no worth unless they are cherished, admired and appreciated by a man. Unlike Sula, Nel needs the support of a man and a woman to survive - the support of a husband and a friend, and when these are denied her, she is devastated. Sula had never expected such a reaction from Nel, but it makes her realise that she and Nel are
“not one and the same thing” (153). She is unable to distinguish between their teenage years when they compared boyfriends - and these years of adulthood when Nel wants to keep Jude all to herself. Clearly Sula understands only the sanctity of friendship - not of marriage. “Nel was the first person who had been real to her, whose name she knew, who had seen as she had the slant of life that made it possible to stretch it to its limits. Now Nel was one of them” (154). Sula had felt close to Nel because she thought that they shared a unity of vision combined with the spirit of adventure, and could explore various facets of life together. After the episode with Jude, however, she gauges that Nel now fits into the role of victim - joining the other residents of the Bottom who see themselves as casualties of Sula’s evil. Bakerman traces the reasons behind the breaking of this friendship to Nel’s initial resolve on the journey to New Orleans. She writes that “Nel’s individual initiation hardens her so that when the final terrible test of her friendship with Sula comes, she turns her back on love and affirmation and finds refuge in that hardness - and in isolation.” Bakerman blames Nel for being unforgiving and refusing to understand the motive behind Sula’s act. Even though there is no moral justification for what Sula did, Nel owed it to their friendship and to her marriage to try to

9 Bakerman 549.
talk things over with her friend and her husband. Had she allowed the channels of communication to remain open she would perhaps have been better equipped to work through her pain, and to uphold the values that she considers so sacred. Just as Helene had once demolished her own values by smiling at the white conductor, so Nel forgets all about forgiveness and charity during these trying times when both her friendship and marriage are at stake. In spite of her best efforts to obliterate it, her mother's hypocrisy finds its way into her heart too.

When the residents of Medallion find out that Sula has sent Eva to Sunnydale, they call her a "roach." When they hear that she has taken Jude and already ditched him for other people, she becomes a "bitch." The fact that Shadrack is civil to her also goes against her. The final accusation that brands her an outcast and seals the bond of hatred between her and the residents of the Bottom is the men's assertion that she sleeps with white men - the most unforgivable act a black woman can commit. Cynthia Dubin Edelberg argues that Sula's ten year absence from the Bottom has taken her into the white world, and educated her in its values. This is the main reason that accounts for her ostracism by the people of the Bottom. "Sula's education and experience in the white man's world alienates her from the community at large as well....Sula
slept with white men, so they said, and they ostracised her.”10 This comment reflects the Bottom’s prejudice too. They view Sula unsympathetically and with hatred because she breaks the rules of the black community - betrays it, in essence, by associating sexually with men from another race. It is ironic, however, that the black community never sees, at such times, its own subconscious absorption of the white world view. The residents finally brand Sula a devil because of the various “things” that begin to happen whenever somebody comes in contact with her directly or indirectly. A little boy named Teapot falls down the steps and sustains a fracture as he returns from Sula’s house, and a man chokes on the chicken bones he is sucking just as Sula passes by. The residents also object to her total disregard for tradition - manifested in coming to church suppers without proper clothing, and picking at the food given to her - not even commending its quality. They find even her physical appearance damning - the fact that she does not show her age, has lost no teeth, has no bruises, and no rings or pockets of fat on her body. They recall that gnats and mosquitoes never used to settle on her. They observe and find it queer that she does not belch when she drinks beer. Sula, however, is unaffected by her unpopularity. In Morrison’s words, she

10 Cynthia Dubin Edelberg, “Morrison’s Voices: Formal Education, the Work
lived out her days exploring her own thoughts and emotions, giving them full reign, feeling no obligation to please anybody unless their pleasure pleased her...hers was an experimental life - ever since her mother's remarks sent her flying up those stairs, ever since her one major feeling of responsibility had been exorcised on the bank of a river with a closed place in the middle. She had no center, no speck around which to grow....She was completely free of ambition, with no affection for money, property, or things, no greed, no desire to command attention or compliments - no ego. For that reason she felt no compulsion to verify herself - be consistent with herself. (153)

Due to her two major childhood experiences, Sula has grown up bereft of the concepts of love and responsibility. Due to a lack of the former, she is unable to nurture friends or relate to other people and participate with them in their joys and sorrows. Due to a lack of the latter, she is unable to make a commitment to the community - or to her own family - demonstrated by her callous attitude toward Eva. Even though she has travelled widely, she has no desire to settle

down anywhere and acquire property or other material possessions. This indicates a certain restlessness in her character and highlights her causal attitude toward life. Because of her early, harsh initiation into relationships, associating with other people is not important to her anymore. Other than the boredom she has experienced in all the cities she has been to, her relationships with men have been extremely disappointing too. She discovers that

they taught her nothing but love tricks, shared nothing but worry, gave nothing but money. She had been looking all along for a friend, and it took her a while to discover that a lover was not a comrade, and could never be - for a woman. And that no one would ever be that version of herself which she sought to reach out to and touch with an ungloved hand. There was only her own mood and whim, and if that was all there was, she decided to turn the naked hand toward it, discover it and let others become as intimate with their own selves as she was. (156)

It is unfortunate that whenever Sula seeks love or friendship, she is always disappointed. Her relationships with men make her realise that they can never be a meaningful part of her life because they are interested only in the materialistic aspect of love, and do not
give her the respect she craves - a recognition that she is an individual too, and has the right to share their thoughts and feelings. The only person she truly wants to unite with is Ajax because he talks to her and listens to her speak. She is attracted to him because she feels that he recognises her as an individual. Ajax's rejection of her, however, indicates that for Sula, recognition can come from only one person - Nel, the other half of her self. As long as the two fail to unite, her quest for the "other half of her equation" will fail too. Her constant disillusionment with other people compels her to turn inward, to seek out her own self, to discover the very essence of her being. She thus becomes an aggressive introvert - one who flaunts her disregard for society, derides the company of others, and is proudly self-centred.

Morrison writes that Sula's craving for the other half of her equation was the consequence of an idle imagination. Had she paints, or clay, or knew the discipline of the dance, or strings; 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. (156)

This comment implies that Sula has no specific materialistic goals toward which to aspire. She has a place to live, enough money to take care of all her needs, and no mouths to feed. Since she never socialises with anybody, she does not even have to lend her mind to the problems or dilemmas being faced by other members of the Bottom community. She, therefore, finds her mind completely idle - and the proverbial devil's workshop. She becomes, in Morrison's words, "dangerous." This part of her nature is manifested first in her sending Eva to the nursing home, and later in her sleeping with Jude and the husbands of almost all the other women in town.

Cedric Gael Bryant explains the reason for the community's adverse, often fearful, reaction to Sula's actions. He writes that "the 'danger' she poses to the community lies in the power to engender chaos by changing the terms that the community uses to define itself. Ultimately, it is change that the community in this novel most fears."\(^{11}\) Bryant suggests that Sula challenges the community's definition of itself, and its interpretations of good and bad. Her actions offer the Bottom perspectives it has never known before. He explains further that when Sula entices the husbands away from their wives, both men and women are compelled to

\(^{11}\) Cedric Gael Bryant, "The Orderliness of Disorder: Madness and Evil in Toni
forego their sense of superiority. He observes that Sula “is an outsider who steals into the community and takes away its comforting, albeit chauvinistic, sense of identity; and she robs men of their masculinity while in the act of giving them pleasure.” This means that Sula’s behaviour leaves the Bottom community feeling helpless and flabbergasted. Even though the men would like to lord it over her, they have lost the moral right to do so because they have already succumbed to the pleasures of a physical relationship with her. Sula, however, always maintains a safe distance between herself and other people. Part of her recklessness and lack of desire to mingle with the community, stems from her inability to (what she calls) “lie,” i.e. “she could not say to those old acquaintances, ‘Hey, girl, you looking good’ when she saw how the years had dusted their bronze with ash, the eyes that had once opened wide to the moon bent into grimy sickles of concern” (157). She has no friends or acquaintances because she shuns the hypocrisy that accompanies etiquette. She is unconcerned about society’s reaction to her behaviour because she does not care about the consequences.

When Sula falls terminally ill, only Nel comes to visit her out of a sense of duty. They see each other after a gap of three years, and Nel is still bitter about having lost Jude for good. Morrison says
that she came because now, "virtue, bleak and drawn, was her only mooring" (177). In one of their last conversations, Nel tells Sula "You can't do it all. 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" (181). To this, Sula replies, "I'm a woman and colored. Ain't that the same as being a man?" (181). Nel asks Sula what she has to show for her life. Sula says, "I got my mind. And what goes on in it...I got me" (182). When Nel tells her that that's lonely, Sula says, "Yes. But my lonely is mine. Now your lonely is somebody else's. Made by somebody else and handed to you. Ain't that something? A second-hand lonely" (182). This conversation draws out the difference in the thinking of these two women. Nel holds the traditional view that a woman, especially a coloured one, is bound by convention. Sula, on the other hand, feels that being black and female is not limiting at all, and that such women are equally capable of doing all the things that men can do. Sula tells Nel that the loneliness that she feels has been created because her husband has left, and therefore indicates her weakness as a person. Whereas her own loneliness, she explains, is deliberate and self-created - and therefore shows her strength - her determination to survive alone and unassisted by society. This
indicates that for a woman her self is more important than anything else. Referring to her relationship with Jude, Nel asks her, "...why didn't you think about me?....I was good to you, Sula, why don't that matter?" (184). Sula replies that "being good to somebody is just like being mean to somebody. Risky. You don't get nothing for it" (184). It is here that Morrison indicates the ambiguities of good and evil, and implies that the difference lies in interpretation. The boundaries of both merge, and it is difficult to distinguish a good act from an evil one. That is why, as Nel, disgusted, is about to leave the house, Sula hurls the final question at her, "How you know....About who was good....I mean maybe it wasn't you. Maybe it was me" (186). This is a radical statement. Morrsion implies here that traditionalism and conformity are not necessarily right or good, and the community is mistaken if it views them as such. She suggests that a break from the hypocrisy of convention in pursuit of ones own identity or self can be equally ennobling. As Nel walks out, disgusted, Sula ruminates, "...so she will walk on down that road,...thinking how much I have cost her and never remember the days when we were two throats and one eye and we had no price" (187). With these words, in the final moments of her life, Sula pays a tribute to her friendship with Nel even as she recalls its finer moments.
In 1965, twenty-five years after Sula's death, Nel goes to the old people's home to visit Eva, and is astounded when she blames her for killing Chicken Little. Nel says that it was Sula who did it, and Eva replies, "you. Sula. What's the difference? You was there. You watched, didn't you? Me, I never would've watched" (214). Eva implies that Nel aided and abetted the crime because she "watched" without attempting to help or save the little boy - just as Sula once watched her own mother burn without rushing to her aid. The larger implication, however, is that Nel and Sula are one. After this revelation, and a few more disturbing words, Nel leaves the nursing home. On the way back she recollects the day that Chicken Little had slipped into the water. She now wonders why, at the time, she had felt good about it. A certain self-awakening dawns on Nel. "Now it seemed that what she had thought was maturity, serenity and compassion was only the tranquillity that follows a joyful stimulation. Just as the water closed peacefully over the turbulence of Chicken Little's body, so had contentment washed over her enjoyment" (216). This is a time of revelation for Nel. Her complacence and confidence regarding her own good self and Sula's evil self are shattered. She realises that exonerating herself from Sula's crimes or misdemeanours is like blaming one hand for a wrong deed and excusing the other - because both are part of the
same body that responds to one mind, acts with one will and conforms to the same set of values. It is this feeling that leads her to the cemetery where all the Peace women, including Sula, are buried. As she stares at the graves she realises that all her feelings of pity and goodwill for Eva had been a waste. After all of Eva's accusations, she is able to understand why Sula had never liked her grandmother and had put her in a nursing home. Nel walks out of the cemetery with thoughts of Sula. The pieces of her broken life suddenly seem to come together, and she realises how much she misses Sula. Bakeman writes that it takes Nel very long to "realize that the great loss she has suffered is really the destruction of their friendship, the one chance they had to learn to be full, complete women."\textsuperscript{12} She knows now that the sense of incompleteness and frustration that she had been experiencing all these years had not been a result of her separation from Jude but rather the consequence of her estrangement with Sula. In Jude's company, her own personality had dwindled, whereas with Sula it had flourished. Her bonding with Sula had been of a somewhat spiritual nature but her union with Jude had satisfied only their egos and physical needs. Nel has finally come to understand the truly black point of view - as opposed to the false, (supposedly black)

\textsuperscript{12} Bakeman 553.
Bottom values she had hitherto adhered to. The white world-view is obliterated as she realises that a man cannot give her the completeness she desires. It can come only from a recognition of her own integrated self - the self that she has lost in losing Sula. When Nel realises this and looks up at the trees, whispering Sula's name, she is really calling back a lost part of her own self. As if in answer to her call, "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" (220). This is reminiscent of the childhood summer that she and Sula had spent together when they were twelve years old and a little boy had drowned at their hands. Nel feels Sula's loss and absence strongly and, referring to her old friend, says "we was girls together" (221). This statement best sums up Sula and Nel's relationship. That they were girls together implies that they grew up together, each learning and sharing with the other the lessons of love, sex, race and womanhood that life taught them. As young girls, their experiences were similar at times, different at others, but always brought them closer to each other and sealed the bond of friendship between them so that they became almost one. Karla Holloway asserts that Nel's "long lonely cry...is a cry directed towards the womanhood that she has sacrificed, towards the bonding with her feminine potentia - her
nature - characterised through her friend Sula, from whom she turned away. It is Nel's cry that signals the spiritual epiphany of this novel; her voice awakens its soul." When Nel finally realises the extent of her devastation because of Sula's absence from her life, she admits to herself what she had evaded for all of her grown up years - that she is only half a person without Sula because Sula gives her completeness and makes her whole. Maxine Lavon Montgomery observes that "the novel's circular narrative structure - beginning with the creation of the Bottom, ending with Nel's symbolic rebirth - indicates the possibility of recovering one's lost selfhood." Montgomery implies that even though Nel's personality and consciousness have been repressed because of the indirect effects of racism and sexism, there is hope that she can salvage her individuality by recognising the things that are really important. She must first begin to view herself as an individual in her own right and develop a feeling of self worth which exists regardless of whether she has a man or not, and regardless of whether society views her as a success or not. This feeling of wholeness of being

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must come from within her. An integral part of this self awakening has to be Nel's acknowledgement of Sula's crucial role in the development of her personality. This is witnessed when Nel cries Sula's name out loud. Morrison writes that the cry "had no bottom and...no top, just circles and circles of sorrow" (221). The cry indicates that Nel has finally accepted Sula's presence as integral to her own, and her absence as a missing part of her own self. This ultimate realisation lends meaning to Nel's existence and reconciles her soul with Sula's. The cry is unconfined and sorrowful because Nel has just realised her loss and resents the missed opportunities of being with Sula - opportunities that would have helped both of them to grow as complete human beings. She cries for the spiritual and emotional wholeness that could have been hers and Sula's had they maintained their unique friendship. In mourning Sula she mourns, essentially, a lost part of her own childhood, her own personality, her own self.

In *Sula*, Morrison demonstrates that the development of a black woman's consciousness of her race and gender is a long drawn out process which begins in the experiences of childhood, and later mutates into different behavioural patterns - like those represented by Sula and Nel. Each woman's consciousness of her race, and the subsequent quest for her own identity, is determined by the politics
of colour and gender. As in all of Morrison's other novels, there are no major white characters in *Sula* either. The book, however, conveys very subtly that all the events that unfold in the novel are an indirect consequence of the fact that the people to whom they happen are all black and suffer the way they do because they are victims of racism and sexism in a male dominated white world. Apart from these significantly detrimental effects on individuals, white oppression has permanently tarnished the Bottom community as well. By cheating them on account of the land that has been given to them, the oppressors have essentially robbed them of a decent way to make a living. The poverty arising out of this act has affected not only the self-esteem of the community but also the relationships within families - for example that between Eva and her children.

Referring to Morrison's "nigger joke," Timothy B. Powell writes that the

anecdote is an insightful testimony as to how blacks have been manipulated by the white logos. The black slave is disenfranchised of the fertile valley land that should rightfully be his, not because of his ignorance but because of the duplicity inherent in the white man's logic and language, that controlling power which the white
man wields in the form of the logos....the dominance of white society has not been halted by the eradication of slavery or the advent of civil rights, since neither of these actions dispels the primacy of logocentrism in Western civilization....although Sula is a novel centered around black people and black culture, the power of the white logos is still very much in evidence.15

Powell's contention is that the white Euro-centric view of life is so thoroughly ingrained into American culture that there is no escape from it. Even if a community is all black - like that of the Bottom - it continues to be influenced and dominated by white values because no alternative world view has ever been allowed to flourish. By wielding the power of the logos, white supremacists have tried to control the destiny of the minority culture. This is best exemplified by the white farmer's act of giving the worst kind of barren land to the black slave in exchange for his labour by convincing him that it is the best available land - the bottom of heaven. Even though slavery has been abolished, and the civil rights movement has been accepted, the black population continues to be enslaved to the white one because it has to live and judge itself

15 Timothy B. Powell, "Toni Morrison: The Struggle to Depict the Black Figure on the White Page." Black American Literature Forum 24 (1990): 753-754.
according to the criteria presented by the dominant culture. Powell further goes on to compare *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*, arguing that “both novels describe a search for wholeness in the shadowy periphery of a society dominated by the white logos....Pecola and Sula’s quests for identity are of ironic proportion, with no heroes, no victories, no redemption.”¹⁶ Pecola’s and Sula’s pursuits of wholeness are ironic because the cultural background against which they take place is itself incomplete. The black community that Morrison depicts in *Sula* exists in the greater shadow of the white community, and appears incapable of lending sustenance or support to any of its members. There are no redeeming, stable, black characters here (no Mrs. MacTeer, no Pilate, no Baby Suggs) who represent the richness or advantage of the African heritage, and can acquaint the girls with it - especially since their own mothers are conspicuously absent from their lives. According to the author, therefore, Pecola’s and Sula’s quests becomes merely a pathetic show of madness and stubbornness respectively. As if in agreement with Powell, Jacqueline de Weever observes, “Morrison’s novels depict the helplessness of Pecola and Sula before the ambiguities and paradoxes of their lives. Both suggest that the struggle to establish identity in a world which does not acknowledge

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¹⁶ Powell 754-755.
one's existence is sometimes lost." This observation suggests that the black woman does not even exist for white society, so her struggle to create an independent self - which will be recognised and respected as such - is negated. This thesis has, however, taken a more optimistic view. It proposes that both Pecola and Sula are somehow ennobled by their quests because they represent millions of other women who have embarked on similar journeys. Sula, especially, has gone one step ahead of Pecola. She holds on to her beliefs until the very end of her life, and dies a sane woman. She becomes a contemporary tragic heroine because she voices the concerns of women at odds with society, women in search of a self, women who shun the hypocrisy of convention to claim their own genuine identity and values. Her *hamartia* is manifested in her stubborn independence and refusal to connect with other people. Morrison has said in an interview, "I thought she had a serious flaw, which led her into a dangerous zone which is, and it really is dangerous, not being able to make a connection with other people." Though Sula is aware that she has shunned the community much as the community has shunned her, she


understands just before her death, that the people who deride her at present will ultimately gain the knowledge that she has gleaned in her quest for selfhood. This is the realisation that society will ultimately accept women like her and understand their need to create a strong, independent, whole self which will be able to withstand cultural and emotional onslaughts from all quarters. She explains this (in her usual contemptuous, tongue-in-cheek, exaggerated manner) to Nel in her dying speech, "It will take time, but they'll love me....When Lindbergh sleeps with Bessie Smith and Norma Shearer makes it with Stepin Fetchit...and every weathervane on every barn flies off the roof to mount the hogs...then there'll be a little love left over for me. And I know just what it will feel like" (185). Sula dies confident that she has forged the way for other women like herself in traditional society which will ultimately come to accept and appreciate the quest for individuality. Morrison indicates, however, that the black woman's search for selfhood must also pay respect to the family and community - always keeping the African ethos in mind. This is most strongly communicated through the last lines of the book which imply that if Sula and Nel had allowed their friendship to burgeon through adulthood, each would have found the completeness she was looking
for, and would have been at peace with herself and the community. Sula’s struggle is ultimately meaningful because Morrison creates in her a character who foreshadows minority women of the future. These are women who will emerge out of repressed or strict backgrounds and learn to combine the quest for self with respect for the community even as they integrate modern culture with their ethnic backgrounds to create well-developed personalities capable of both material and spiritual success - no matter how adverse the circumstances of their lives.