Chapter II

Children as Subalterns: The Bluest Eye, Sula and Song of Solomon

In Toni Morrison’s first three novels—The Bluest Eye, Sula and Song of Solomon, one finds several characters who keep themselves engrossed in finding and asserting their existence against a background of political and social pressures. This engagement of the characters in pursuing their otherwise marginalized selves involves multifaceted techniques of Morrison’s narrative art. In the three novels in question, apart from other things, flashbacks abound. Not only do her protagonists’ histories find their way into the plots of the novels, but the past lives of the minor characters return to haunt us time and again. Occasionally we find the characters reminisce in their own voices in mid-conversation which, as a matter of fact, is a forceful tool in the technical armada of the novelist. Nonetheless, more often than not an omniscient voice interrupts the narrative to tell and interpret a character’s personal history. These frequent forays into the past, maintains Valeria Smith, “impart to Morrison’s novels a kaleidoscopic quality, a temporal density, and an extraordinary breadth of focus.”

Flashbacks and shifts in subject are the formal counterparts of Morrison’s thematic concerns. She seems to suggest that the narrative process actually leads to self-knowledge because it forces an acceptance of the past. This helps her characters understand who they are and what their lives mean when they can tell stories about how they came to be. The narrative voices also help us to recognize and organize their perception and understanding
concerning the individual characters and their category. This categorization as such, while keeping in mind their social, economic, political and psychological background, helps one understand the degree to which an individual suffers in the society and is made an ‘other.’ How the process of ‘othering’ takes place and to what extent it torments and bewilders the subjugated characters reveals a lot about the forces responsible for that. The marginalized or the subaltern in Morrison’s first three novels can broadly be distinguished into those who are turned subalterns on the basis of the sex, age, education, and profession.

In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison challenges America's complacent belief in its benevolent self-image through representations of children who experience race, class, and gender oppressions. She is not the first African-American author to use images of childhood to undermine cherished conceptions of national identity. In his 1845 slave narrative, Frederick Douglass condemns American democracy and Christianity through detailed accounts of his own childhood as a slave. Morrison, however, centralizes childhood more deeply than her predecessors. Anticipating the currently emerging field in childhood studies, Morrison puts the concept of childhood itself under scrutiny. In *The Bluest Eye*, a child provides the primary voice through which the reader hears; it is the primary lens through which the reader sees, and the object of the reader's gaze.

In her critical work, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Morrison comments on thematics of innocence that typically define Americanness in literature. She asks, “What are Americans always so
insistently innocent of? Different from? As for absolute power, over whom is this power held, from whom withheld, to whom distributed?”

It seems that in *The Bluest Eye* Morrison first explored this question and the implications of its answer, long before she explicitly asked it. Through Pecola and her two friends who witness her exploitation both psychological and sexual, the novel implicitly emphasizes the connection between thematics of childhood innocence in American culture and an ideology of national innocence.

The highlighting of such oppressive images of childhood also promotes superficial and ahistorical conceptions of the United States. As a conscious and responsible artist, Morrison contrasts these images with child-characters painted as intimate extensions of long familial, socio-economic, and national histories that contradict the innocent ideal. Throughout the novel, Morrison shows us the counter-hegemonic potential of reimagining childhood in the context of history. She portrays children as victims, activists, recorders, and even oppressors—all as a way of demythologizing the innocent past.

Before exploring the representation of the subaltern in this novel, an historical estimate of the nation requires brief yet serious mention. With the publication of *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison confronted another tense political climate, publishing her first novel during the transition between a waning Civil Rights Movement and the backlash that emerged against it. Morrison faced the repercussions of civil rights legislation in their infancy, but the nation's anxiety about questions of race, class, and gender equity continued to evolve, creating the neo-conservative paranoia regarding ‘reverse discrimination’ and
immigration that continues even today. By the 1990s, the growth of such conservatism ushers in what Henry Giroux calls “organized forgetting,” a phenomenon where Americans look nostalgically back to a "mythic" pre-Civil Rights Era.\(^3\)

Popular representations of American youth have grown increasingly dark since the days of Frankie Avalon, however. According to Giroux, this phenomenon reflects an ongoing crisis in American society and democracy, yet he explains that Hollywood's images of troubled youth also blame the victim, silencing child-figures by ignoring the socioeconomic contexts that produce suffering. While acknowledging the loss of childhood innocence, such representations preserve its ideal by suggesting that children themselves have ruined childhood. In contrast, Morrison lets her child-characters speak while critically invoking their socioeconomic contexts. Instead of blaming the children for their own suffering, she blames their families, their community, and, ultimately, their nation.

Morrison situates her narrator, Claudia, and her protagonist, Pecola, on the cusp of the ‘mythical’ post-war period. The novel begins in 1940, a time when Michael Rogin contends that Americans had begun to look beyond the domestic worries of the Depression to define America's role in a growing international conflict. According to Rogin, domestic concerns about ethnicity and class dominated American politics from 1870 to the New Deal, but World War II “provided the occasion for the emergence of the national security apparatus.”\(^4\)
Conversely, in a war-time setting that barely acknowledges the looming threat of military conflict, Morrison subordinates national and international matters to local interests. In the small towns of Morrison's midwestern United States, concerns about how to keep children warm, fed, and healthy supersede questions about the nation's role in an escalating conflict abroad. Furthermore, while 1940 marks the eve of both war and economic recovery in American history books, it also marks the year Richard Wright's *Native Son* kicked off an angry protest movement against racism.

Morrison captures this underrepresented aspect of American history. Thus, when 1970s America had already begun to assemble nostalgic myths about suburban life during and after World War II, Morrison focuses on family, education, and popular culture to expose childhood innocence as a pervasive ideology that simultaneously perpetuates and mystifies the harsher realities of white nationalist hegemony. In a wrenching narrative of childhood without innocence, she evokes the forgotten domestic tensions that simmered in the 1940s and boiled over in the 1950s.

*The Bluest Eye* unravels profiteering reveries at every turn. While offering a sharply different version of 1940s family and childhood, Morrison suggests that familial pathologies do not simply spring from individual shortcomings. The poverty and suffering of Morrison's Breedlove family symbolizes America's brutal history of racial persecution in the United States. The Breedloves emerge from a history of what Gurleen Grewal calls a "race-based class structure of American society that generates its own pathologies."
Pin-Chia Feng argues that, in the fragments, the narrator acts out Claudia's rage, dismembering the white narrative as Claudia dismembers her white baby dolls. Similar to Claudia's pile of plastic body parts, Morrison creates a jumble of words that together symbolize the incoherence of America's mythic homogeneity. While compressing words and sentences, however, she also dissects the stories, separating their standardized elements into isolated and unintelligible phrases like “SEEFATHERHEISBIGANDSTRONG” and “SEEmOTHERISVERYNICE.”

In “SEEFATHER,” Cholly endures a life marked by powerlessness from his birth. After suffering familial abandonment and sexual humiliation, Cholly says he feels “small, black, helpless.” (BE: 119) Vanessa Dickerson argues that Cholly is a “naked father,” an emasculated figure who is incapable of accumulating wealth or playing the patriarch. Morrison emphasizes such powerlessness when Cholly accepts a new couch that arrives broken in half, but she seals his fate in a scathing critique of American meritocracy when he literally dies in the workhouse, forever trapped in a cycle of working poverty.

Morrison, through the plight of Cholly in the American socio-political system, does not scathingly abuse the oppressive forces that have marginalized the African Americans but keeps the fire simmering so that America realizes and ponders over the sad plight of this community. Unable to assert his distinctive identity that co-exists with his ethnic identity, Cholly tends to imprison himself in the cage of his mind that gets rotten and ruined impelling him to assert himself by raping his own child repeatedly. How the mind gets
vitiated and what it can venture, nonetheless, remains a question which reverberates throughout the fictional world of Morrison. The fact, as it remains, is that the subaltern find themselves unable to speak for/of their rights for equality, justice and egalitarian notions attached to humanity at large.

Similarly, the “SEEMOTHER” section articulates Pauline's feelings of worthlessness. The ninth of eleven children, Pauline grows up in a “cocoon” where she develops a “general feeling of separateness and unworthiness.” (BE: 88) When she loses her tooth while emulating Jean Harlowe at the movie theater, Pauline gives in to the intraracial prejudice of Lorraine, Ohio's Northern black women and “settle[s] down to just being ugly.” (BE: 98). At a time when Americans associate fatherhood with upward mobility and motherhood with beauty, Cholly and Pauline fall far short of America's patriotic ideal for parents.

Through Cholly and Pauline, Morrison suggests that parents who emerge from histories of oppression might reproduce that degradation within the family unit. Instead of providing for and protecting his family, Cholly burns down the insular domestic space that should have symbolized not only his family's, but the nation's affluence and security. Similarly, Pauline feels no patriotic obligation to nurture the offspring that, to her, reflect her own ugliness. Instead, having learned that a white family's servant wields far more power than a black family's mother, she spends all of her time working as a domestic for the Fishers, where “power, praise, and luxury were hers.” (BE: 101)
Notwithstanding what Cholly does and let s his daughter suffer the agony of her own oppressed existence, Pauline’s somewhat less dramatic life is also a sad tale of the demise of innocence and understanding. Her character is more puzzling than her husband’s who acts brutally just to assert his existence while destroying the innocence of Pecola, finally leading to her derangement. She is an orthodox wife who would not listen to and believe her daughter who sought to open her heart before her mother and let her know her plight. The subaltern psychology is what shapes, rather, mars their lives as they are unable to expose their inner selves before the white hegemony that has kept them repressed for centuries in America.

Morrison connects the lives of children to the joy, suffering, and coping of their parents. She offers a gendered response to Pauline's abandonment when she pairs Pecola with her brother Sammy. In the post-slavery tradition of his wandering father and grandfather, Sammy runs away at least twenty-seven times by the age of fourteen. Conversely, "restricted by youth and sex," Pecola stays home and "experiment[s] with methods of endurance" (BE: 38). Furthermore, Sammy's escape leaves her alone to emulate the Dick and Jane standard that according to Deborah Cadman, creates the Breedloves' feelings of worthlessness (BE: 76). When Cholly recognizes his own failures in Pecola's unhappiness, he feels an accusation that fills him with guilt.

Instead of serving as a moralizing force, Pecola's abject presence provokes Cholly to rape her in what Lothar Bredella argues is "the pain of a love which can only be expressed destructively.” 9 Through Cholly's inability to
express love constructively, Morrison paints a picture of black fatherhood so incapacitated that it sacrifices its children to save itself. Likewise, when the sight of Pecola's abused body on the kitchen floor incites Pauline to beat instead of comforting her daughter, Morrison portrays a similarly affected motherhood, suggesting that histories of suffering not only debilitate parents, but turn them from nurturers into oppressors.

The suffering that has incapacitated the parents of Pecola speaks about the psychologically injured mind of the characters that becomes, in the poststructuralist tradition, the ‘site’ of conveying sub/unconscious cultural constructions. They have been silenced and nullified for so long a period that the African Americans find themselves dumb to speak against the oppression they have been suffering in the US. The long ‘othering’ of the subjugated ethnicity on account of their difference of race is a characteristic feature in the US that the subaltern need to address. Morrison, in her narratives, exposes the pseudo-intellectual background of white America and challenges, though implicitly, the stance that the marginalized communities adopt in the US.

Morrison joins a tradition of concerned African-American writers that ranges from ex-slaves such as Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs to twentieth-century intellectuals such as Malcolm X, bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins, and Angela Davis. Like many of her contemporaries, Morrison looks beyond the reading curriculum; she presents teachers who explicitly thwart the education of their black students. Morrison highlights the racial aspect of his argument with representations of teachers who reinforce existing hierarchies by
consistently favoring lighter students. In Lorraine, Ohio, schoolteachers favour Maureen Peal, “a high-yellow dream child” who “enchanted the entire school.” (BE: 52) Stewing over how teachers “smiled encouragingly” when they called on Maureen, Claudia complains that such favoritism makes her and Frieda feel “lesser.” (BE: 52 -53). Similarly, Pecola notes that her teachers “tried to never glance at her, and called on her only when everyone was required to respond.” (BE: 40).

Pecola looks to Hollywood for standards of female beauty and, thus, power. Having never seen “Imitation of Life,” she idolizes Shirley Temple, a depression-era icon whose childhood frivolity conveyed hope to the struggling nation. Despite the common theme of orphanhood in Temple's films, titles such as ‘Curly Top’ (1935) and ‘Little Miss Broadway’ (1938) preserve childhood innocence by reducing adversity to a plot device. Presaging the moralizing and harmonizing role that children supposedly played for their families during the Cold War, Temple's characters, Elizabeth and Betsy respectively, pull themselves up by their bootstraps. They both charm wayward (and wealthy) bachelors into marrying financially bereft women so that the happy couple can adopt their orphaned matchmaker. These child -characters understand that their power resides in the childish sex appeal of blonde hair and blue eyes.

Like Dick and Jane, Temple's characters exist in a state of innocence, only brushing with larger socio-economic and historical contexts. They operate, therefore, like Pecola's racist schoolteachers, implicitly blaming darker victims who must endure rather than transcend their own suffering. Morrison
highlights the power of such blame when Pecola begins to menstruate shortly after drinking three quarts of milk from a Shirley Temple cup. While nursing herself to maturity on Temple's standard of female beauty, Pecola cultivates a self-loathing that prompts her to ask Claudia and Frieda, "how do you get somebody to love you?" (BE: 29). Since edicts like Temple's 'just smile' occlude the oppressive histories that might otherwise explain Pecola's loveless family, Temple offers Pecola no one to blame but herself.

When Claudia compares Maureen's long beautiful braids to lynch ropes, Morrison offers a chilling metaphor that portends the stakes raised by the corporeal differences between Peola and Pecola. Unlike the light Peola, Pecola inhabits a dark, unabstracted body. Berlant calls the body's visible qualities, the parts that resist abstraction, "surplus corporeality" (BE: 112) Burdened with such "surplus," society can "see" and thus, reject Pecola. Morrison articulates Pecola's struggle between visible body and visible subject when the immigrant grocer, Mr. Yacobowski, registers a total absence of human recognition while looking at her. The scene also emphasizes the connection between American consumerism and subjectivity by showing how Pecola's corporeality, like her father's, interferes with her role as a consumer. Finding nothing "desirable or necessary" about trying to "see" Pecola, Yacobowski intimidates her into silence, asking, "Christ. Kantcha talk?" (BE: 42). As Yacobowski proves his own whiteness through exclusion, Morrison suggests that Americans stir the nation's melting pot over flames fed by silenced black bodies.
Pecola rejects her place as a non-consumer, praying every night to rid herself of her surplus corporeality. When she lays in the darkness of her parents' store-front home and whispers to God to make her disappear, she tries to force her body to disappear in nothingness. Although little parts of her body faded away, she ultimately fails because her eyes remain. Pecola says, “They were everything. Everything was there, in them.” (BE: 39) More than the physical evidence of her surpluses, Pecola's eyes represent her consciousness, her ability to see the ugliness she associates with blackness. Without the ability to ‘see’—or without the ‘c’—Pecola believes she can be Peola; she hopes to enact her own blue-eyed, white-faced version of blackness. Paradoxically, for successful abstraction, Pecola must endure self-erasure and blindness, a self-lynching that Furman calls, the “awful safety of oblivion” or childhood innocence.10

In *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola's pregnancy and psychosis represent extreme consequences of racism. By weaving Pecola's story into a web of very different but interconnected narratives, however, Morrison suggests that the erasures of abstraction occur in layers, rather than as an absolute. Claudia, who despises Shirley Temple, minimally resists the self-effacing impetuses that seduce Pecola. In contrast, with lighter skin, greater economic stability, and long familial and pedagogical histories that promote assimilation, Maureen, Geraldine, and Soaphead all suppress their ‘surpluses.’ To complicate matters, however, Morrison dissociates their abstraction from the hoped-for empowerment of citizenship. Instead, all of these characters endure varying
degrees of powerlessness while also suffering a devastating lack of familial or communal intimacy. Through their social and political bankruptcy, Morrison suggests that self-abstraction offers nothing more than a false promise to black Americans.

Further, since Morrison arranges these peripheral characters in separate but inextricable stories that defy linear narration, she simultaneously culminates multiple and contemporaneous histories in the specter of Pecola's demise. The protagonist of each subplot participates in Pecola's oppression. To defend herself against Claudia and Frieda, Maureen denies her own blackness in a taunt that crushes Pecola. She calls all three girls “Black and ugly black emos.” (BE: 61) Similarly, when Geraldine finds Pecola in her home, she suppresses the eruption of surplus corporeality that Pecola symbolizes by ordering the “nasty little black bitch” out of the house. (BE: 75) Finally, to preserve the illusion of his own power, Soaphead persuades Pecola that he has given her the blue eyes she desires. As these characters variously label, degrade, and define Pecola's body so as to disavow the realities of racism in their own lives, Morrison suggests that they mirror the work of a nation that ironically invests in the ideology of childhood innocence at the expense of its children.

With these overlapping narrative circles, Morrison's literary form shows how seemingly isolated experiences of oppression can interconnect and compound each other to corrupt individuals as well as their families, communities, or nations over time. As adults like Geraldine and Soaphead
Church unwittingly cooperate to create a Dick-and-Jane-style innocence within their individual and communal lives, Morrison puts insight into the eyes of a child who already recognizes the perils of such aspirations. Claudia holds the entire town responsible for Pecola's tragic end when she says, “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.” (BE: 159) Since love, according to Claudia, “is never any better than the lover,” even those who loved Pecola, especially Cholly and his legacy of powerlessness, could not save her. (BE: 159)

While Morrison clearly indicts African-American communities for their acceptance of oppressive ideologies, Claudia goes further, implicating the nation in Pecola's demise when she explains, “I even think now that the land of the entire country was hostile to marigolds that year. This soil is bad for certain kinds of flowers” (BE: 160). Furthermore, Claudia explains her unwillingness to let Temple's version of innocent American childhood go unchallenged. Through the mouth of a child Morrison tells us that no good can come from innocence or nostalgia. Claudia aligns the former with the devastation of rape when she says, “Our innocence and faith were no more productive than [Cholly's] lust or despair” (BE: 9). She criminalizes the latter when she shows that America's nostalgia for past wartime patriotism or postwar bliss masks a desire for a time when community and nation refused to "see" the destruction of little black girls like Pecola.
In the early 1970s, when Giroux suggests nostalgia for wartime America first emerges, Morrison critic Sara Blackburn defensively complains that Morrison is far too talented to remain only a marvelous recorder of the black side of provincial American life. She advises Morrison to “address a riskier contemporary American reality ... and take her place among the most serious, important, and talented American novelists.”  

In Blackburn's narrow view, Morrison should write about white people and their prosperous nation, not black people and their struggling town. By bringing nationally recognized child-figures to a small Ohio town, however, Morrison connects local and national. Additionally, in the contrast between Pecola's demise and Claudia's survival, Morrison suggests that childhood experiences might encompass anything from blind and silent victimization to insightful narration and resistance. With such a revelation, Morrison leaves the ideologies of innocent childhood and benevolent nation standing with Pecola at the local garbage heap. She suggests that childhood innocence is neither a reality nor an ideal. Instead, she asks us to consider it apart from children, to explore what other, seemingly unrelated investments we might have in preserving it.

As in *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula* also depicts the growth and development of female characters. In the first, Pecola must bear the consequences of her community's internalized racism, and she is driven to madness. To find hope in *The Bluest Eye*, the reader must focus on the female narrator who grew up with Pecola, and who has survived. *Sula* also examines female identity, but with less vulnerable heroines. Whereas Pecola's isolation leads to her doom, Sula Peace
and Nel Wright live in stable families and form a friendship that supports their growth into womanhood.

Moreover, Morrison's examination of the environment for this friendship, the black community, is much more nuanced and complex than in *The Bluest Eye*. Though it has tragic elements, a simple term such as tragedy cannot accurately represent the wide range of experience depicted in *Sula*. Above all, *Sula* concerns persistence — of women's friendship, of individual growth, of spirit. There is, nonetheless, the existence of oppressive forces that seek to subjugate and deform the psychic energy of the marginalized people. In *Sula*, Morrison takes into account those forces and their negative and deep impact on the silenced group in the US.

*Sula* portrays the friendship of Nel Wright and Sula Peace in the context of their community, called the Bottom. The Bottom was an African American settlement in the hills above Medallion, Ohio, until it was bulldozed for a golf course. Before presenting critical events in the life of the Bottom from 1919 to 1965, the narrator meditates on the meaning of this community's life and death. Patrick Bryce Bjork writes that:

*It is a neighborhood of a recent historical past, and therefore 'The Bottom' and its habitants assume, like the narrative itself, a mythological quality. They and their environment appear drawn from the rich tradition of black folktale and legend, which also serves another purpose: Unlike *The Bluest Eye*, the inhabitants of "The Bottom" are not often prey to the extreme seduction of a dominant culture. Instead they*
are presented as having a world of their own, and thus the delimiting of an external gaze and the valorization of black values and traditions further emphasize Morrison's singular concern for black life.\textsuperscript{12}

Although \textit{Sula} is arranged in chronological order, it does not construct a linear story with the causes of each new plot event clearly visible in the preceding chapter. Instead, \textit{Sula} uses juxtaposition, the technique through which collages are put together. The effects of a collage on the viewer depend on unusual combinations of pictures, or on unusual arrangements such as overlapping. The pictures of a collage don't fit smoothly together, yet they create a unified effect. The pictures of \textit{Sula}'s collage are separate events or character sketches. Together, they show the friendship of Nel and Sula as part of the many complicated, overlapping relationships that make up the Bottom.

Morrison, who wrote her master's thesis on two modernists, Faulkner and Virginia Woolf, uses juxtaposition as a structuring device in \textit{Sula}. Though relatively short for a novel, \textit{Sula} has an unusually large number of chapters, eleven. This division into small pieces creates an intended choppiness, the uncomfortable sense of frequently stopping and starting. The content of the chapters accentuates this choppy rhythm. Almost every chapter shifts the focus from the story of the preceding chapter by changing the point-of-view character or introducing sudden, shocking events and delaying discussion of the characters' motives until later.
In "1921," for example, Eva douses her son Plum with kerosene and burns him to death. Although the reader knows that Plum has become a heroin addict, Eva's reasoning is not revealed. When Hannah, naturally assuming that Eva doesn't know of Plum's danger, tells her that Plum is burning, the chapter ends with Eva's almost nonchalant "Is? My baby? Burning?" Not until midway through the next chapter, “1923,” does Hannah's questioning allow the reader to understand Eva's motivation. Juxtaposition thus heightens the reader's sense of incompleteness. Instead of providing quick resolution, juxtaposition introduces new and equally disturbing events.

Different plot events become important depending on what a reader chooses as the central theme of a novel. *Sula* offers several choices: the functioning and death of the Bottom, three generations of women in the Peace and Wright lines, the growth and development of Sula and Nel as individuals, the friendship of Sula and Nel, and the relationship between Sula and the Bottom. The character Sula unifies these thematic concerns, as the title suggests. Two factors heavily influence Sula's development: her friendship with Nel and her relationship to the rest of the Bottom. In turn, Sula is a defining force in the community and a continuing influence on Nel. (Even after Sula's death midway through the novel, Nel's character develops because of Sula.) Sula has a triple plot: the life of the community, the development of Sula, and the growth of Nel.

*Sula* begins with a wide focus. The novel starts by telling us of the death of a neighborhood, the Bottom. We then learn of its origin and the social
conditions (slavery, racism) that created it and always affected it. *Sula* next presents the stories of Shadrack, Helene Wright, and Eva Peace. On the realistic level, Helene governs the Wright household (where Nel grows up) and Eva governs the Peace household (where Sula grows up). These major figures symbolically represent different forces active in the Bottom. The first plot developments thus delineate the environment for Sula's and Nel's lives.

Succeeding chapters present events critical to forming Sula's experimental personality, in the immediate context of the Peace household and in the larger context of the Bottom. The first event is Sula's meeting Nel; the second, the girls' involvement in the death of another child, Chicken Little; the third, Sula's overhearing that her mother does not love her.

Sula and Nel provide one another with support crucial to establishing and maintaining their identities in somewhat hostile contexts. Nel escapes her mother's stifling conformity to middle-class norms in the less conventional Peace household. With Nel, Sula experiences the sense of order and control not present in the Peace home, as well as the love that her mother cannot offer her. In a wider context, the girls' friendship originates in their separate discoveries of being “neither white nor male” and realizing that “all freedom and triumph was forbidden to them.” (S: 52) Nel and Sula thus join forces to affirm for each other the personal worth that the surrounding racism and sexism deny. When Nel and Sula silently agree to keep their involvement in a playmate's drowning a secret, their reliance on each other is confirmed. For each, the other is the only person who knows her completely.
This reliance on each other in the novel reveals the hidden patterns of the evils that surround the characters. Their reliance, moreover, is a way to escape or face the negative forces that make the African Americans a subjugated lot. Their psychology and the behaviour consequent upon that is within the process of ‘othering’—a nullifying force that turns them into subalterns unable to seek their independent self in relation to their community and the society in general.

Sula's connections to Nel and to the community weaken in chapters "1923" through "1941." Nel's path first diverges from Sula's in "1927," with her decision to marry Jude Greene. Sula leaves town directly from the wedding reception. When she returns ten years later, the reader sees that Sula and Nel have continued on different paths. In "1937," Sula and Nel represent two modes of being. Nel accepts usual social roles rather than identifying and acting on her own feelings. Her opposite, Sula consults only her own feelings and disregards all community expectations. Confrontations between these ideas of how to live generate most of the rest of the plot.

The first confrontation occurs by accident (when Nel walks in while Jude and Sula are having sex); the second, by Nel's design (when she visits Sula's deathbed). The third confrontation surprises Nel and is likely to surprise the reader too because it takes place many years after Sula's death, during Nel's visit to Eva in the nursing home.
On Sula's return in "1937," Nel realizes how much she has missed her friend's humour, originality, and emotional support. She does not join in the community's condemnation of Sula's sexual freedom and independence. (Sula insults the town by sleeping once and only once with each of its willing men.) When Nel finds Sula having sex with Jude, however, she too condemns Sula. After Sula is rumored to have slept with white men, she becomes a complete outcast. "1939," the last chapter focused mostly on Sula, shows her inability to maintain a stable, mature connection with a man even when she loves him. Nel sees Sula only once after their rupture, when the thirty-year-old Sula is dying. The visit simply renews their disagreement over values. Sula dies alone.

All the incidents relating to the sexual behaviour of Sula throw light on her psychologically vitiated mind (if one thinks her so) which further raises questions on how it has happened. This is neither accidental nor a planned gesture to seek relief from the burdens of racial and social oppression nor is it an escape from the harsh reality that surrounds and spoils people like Sula. The unorthodox sexual behavior of Sula is in fact an attempt of 'becoming,' and an effort to unbind herself from the shackles of a community that has continually hindered her assertion. This may be taken as a revolt against the ethics of the society that tends to guide and generate an inferiority complex in African Americans. Her sexual relationship with a white man which has ostracized her is a gesture to completely forget her blackness and create a new identity that has whiteness in it. For Sula, Paula Gallant Eckard asserts, “sex becomes a means to assert herself and to defy social convention.” 14 She seduces her best
friend's husband and is accused of the worst degradation of all: sleeping with white men. However, sex also enables Sula to experience a range of emotions not easily accessible to her: joy, sorrow, misery, loneliness, and “her own abiding strength and limitless power” (S: 123). McDowell views Sula's sexuality as “an act of self-exploration” that is linked to creativity and freedom from the “social definitions of female sexuality and conventions of duty.” In this regard, Sula is particularly like Eva, who rejects the constraints of marriage and limited definitions of female identity. Eva nonetheless tries to foist marriage and motherhood on Sula, telling her: “When you gone to get married? You need to have some babies. It'll settle you” (S: 92). Sula rebels against these conventional female roles, which, says McDowell, “restrict if not preclude imaginative expression.”

Although Sula's death occurs in the middle of the novel, she retains her importance as the unifying force of the narrative. Sula's essence remains after her death when the reader overhears her thought, “Wait'll I tell Nel.” (S: 149) When she dies, the plot dealing with her development is finished, and her direct involvement with the plot is suspended until the very end. However, her death directly affects the other two plot strands. "1940" and "1941" show respectively Nel's and the Bottom's self-destructive responses to Sula's death. Deprived of both friend and husband (Jude has left), Nel denies her deepest feelings of loss and grief. She lives an emotionally empty life for the next twenty-five years. A considerable part of the community makes an analogous choice to reject its connection with Sula, with similar results. When a significant part of the
Bottom celebrates Sula's death, it dies in the collapse of the tunnel on National Suicide Day. The death of Sula leads to the literal death of almost a third of the Bottom, and foreshadows the death of the neighborhood.

Unlike the neighborhood, Nel finally recognizes the centrality of Sula to her self. In "1965," Nel visits Eva in a nursing home. Eva brings up Chicken Little's death, an event Nel has not thought of in years. Eva disturbs Nel by accusing her of having participated as much, and therefore being as responsible, as Sula is. On her way home, Nel passes Shadrack, who witnessed the whole incident. Then she feels a breeze, which she identifies as Sula's continuing presence. For the first time, she realizes that she has been grieving, not for the loss of Jude, but for her loss of Sula. Understanding what Sula's death has meant to her completes Nel's growth because it restores her to an authentic, honest life of feeling. Nel's cry of grief for Sula closes the book.

Sula in effect is the relation between the habitants of the Bottom. She becomes what others are not, and others are seen in relief against her and distinguished by their difference from her. Sula not only inhabits the space that provides moral distinction but also is both a means of distinguishing others and a means of bonding others together; she is used by others to externalize difference, which she keeps beyond the bounds of those whose security lies in their consistency. They hold together insofar as they can use Sula to contain the differences that would otherwise divide them.
Sula relates to people in the Bottom because she is an excuse for them to band together and because she is a standard against which they acquire relative value. She functions as she remembers Ajax functioning for her: as a presence who “pulled everything toward himself” and gave things a center. (S: 134) But she remains an "absence of a relationship" in that what collects around her are negations: what others are not and do not want to be. Sula is the figure constructed by others in patterns of collection and containment, a figure on which their gossip and their imaginations can focus their own negation. She is a center, a mass, of negation. For this reason, when she dies people are glad to be rid of her. But they have achieved a more stable order through her. The symbolic order in which persons are fitted into distinct roles depends here on the rejection or abjection of somebody beyond the bounds of distinction. Once Sula is gone, therefore, chaos occurs. Patricia McKee writes in this connection:

Sula's place in the Bottom, then, is a place of absence: she is identified as evil and as what others are not; she is seen as having no place there. Sula places absence in another sense too: as the location of evil and the reference point for others' negation, she takes the place of evils that are absent from the Bottom, specifically those of racism practiced by white people. Identifying Sula as evil allows characters to contain both good and evil within their midst and thereby to avoid making any reference to the white people outside the Bottom. Insofar as they can confine evil to Sula, characters use her to contain their anger at those evils they are powerless to remedy.17
Sula is a specifically African-American female bildungsroman, that is, a novel about the growth of a character into adulthood. Because of its genre, then, the development of Sula's plot consists of the development of its characters. Sula continues the innovation in the genre of the bildungsroman that The Bluest Eye began. Like the preceding novel, Sula shows two girls rather than concentrating on the single character of the traditional bildungsroman. As in The Bluest Eye, only one of the pair survives and continues to develop. Sula carries this innovation further, however because it divides its attention much more evenly between the pair.

In The Bluest Eye, Claudia has only a minor role in Pecola's life and serves mostly as a witness (by narrating Pecola's story). On the other hand, Sula shows the girls' importance to each other as fundamental. Traditionally, the bildungsroman ends when the main character's most important development has taken place. In the nineteenth century, the bildungsroman focused on young female characters' paths to marriage. The Bluest Eye violates our expectations of the bildungsroman by arresting its main character's emotional development when she is only twelve. Like several other twentieth-century works, Sula constructs another variation by showing Nel's marriage not as the sign of her maturity, as in the nineteenth-century works, but as a sign of her immature willingness to submerge herself in another's identity. (Sula does not damn marriage as an institution; it merely presents this marriage as built on wrongheaded ideas.)
Although *Sula* maintains the focus on the internal workings of the black community that *The Bluest Eye* began, it widens the scope of the earlier work. *Sula* shows both primary and secondary characters as more affected by events outside the daily context of the small town setting. Although little is made of Eva's or Sula's travels—not bound by the Bottom's conventions, they need not leave it to imagine other ways to live—a trip to the segregated South is necessary for Nel to conceive of a situation that her mother cannot control. For everyone except Sula, excursions outside the black community are not chosen but instead mandated by external forces. Shadrack and (Eva's son) Plum are both drafted for World War I. After Boy-Boy abandons her, Eva must leave the Bottom in search of a way to earn a living for herself and their three children. These excursions away from the community do severe, permanent damage. Both Shadrack and Plum are psychologically destroyed. Eva returns with only one leg.

Chapter 111 of the novel is concerned with the psychological harm done to individuals by white racist culture. It shows this same damage to individual men, through its portrait of Jude Greene, but it traces the damage to specifically economic oppression. Not only Jude but the whole of the Bottom yearns to have a profitable part in building America, symbolized by the construction of the tunnel. The Bottom has been promised participation in this venture, and when whites renege on the promise, the Bottom's rage leads to the attack on the tunnel, its collapse, and many deaths.
*Sula* works with larger structures in another way too. In the histories of the Peace and Wright households, Morrison presents three generations of women. In each, the traits of the grandmother reappear, with different manifestations, in the granddaughters. As part of her attempt to escape the shame she feels for her mother's prostitution, Helene Wright tries to make her daughter conform to perfect middle-class respectability. Nel and the reader find Helene's mother, Rochelle, much more appealing than Helene, however. The presence of the rebellious, independent Rochelle in Nel's background makes Nel's interest in Sula more credible. In the same way, the Peace household contains a triad: Eva, Hannah, and Sula. As with the Wrighs, the second generation does not have much influence on the third, because Eva's independence is reincarnated in Sula. These groupings of three generations are the first expression of Morrison's interest in characterization beyond immediate households. Morrison's next novel, *Song of Solomon*, extends this interest. There, knowledge of past generations constitutes a necessary part of a person's identity. Later, *Beloved* expands the importance of the past still further, making it a considerable, almost controlling force in the present.

Because *Sula* concerns the life and death of a neighborhood and of individuals like Sula, the novel naturally explores what constitutes a healthy, viable community or a sound individual. These are related concerns because individuals and communities always influence each other. In Morrison's world view, individuals are irrevocably part of communities, regardless of whether either side acknowledges it. *Sula* analyzes the health of the Bottom by its
treatment of individuals, especially those who, like Shadrack, Tar Baby, or Sula, don't fit its social norms.

Besides examining the relationship between the conventional and the unconventional on the large community scale, *Sula* explores it on the smaller individual level, through the friendship of Nel and Sula. Concentrating on females, the novel asks what makes a girl or woman strong and whether strength is sufficient to make an individual psychologically healthy. Morrison considers Sula to be essentially a new world black and new world woman when she asserts:

I always thought of Sula as quintessentially black, metaphysically black, if you will, which is not melanin and certainly not unquestioning fidelity to the tribe. She is new world black and new world woman extracting choice from choicelessness, responding inventively to found things. Improvisational. Daring, disruptive, imaginative, modern, out-of-the-house, outlawed, unpolicing, uncontained and uncontainable. And dangerously female.  

Although Morrison’s observations have the benefit of hindsight—they are taken from a 1989 essay and *Sula*, Morrison's second novel, was published in 1973—they outline and respond to a distinct cultural group. Sula chronicles a community in which black women dominate public and private life, narrating, as Mae Gwendolyn Henderson notes, the "intracultural/racial sites from which black women speak.” Yet Morrison's point in her description of her protagonist supersedes questions of gender and race.
Since Sula Peace is conceived outside of the constraints ordinarily felt by women in her community (Sula, alone, is "dangerously female"), her status as woman is only a small part of how she perceives herself and, ultimately, how she is perceived by readers. The same goes for race. While the near-absence of whites in the novel forces a recognition of difference within race, Sula's blackness, as Morrison defines it, also transcends race altogether. Sula is simply too much of an enigma to be truly representative of either group.

Maggie Galehouse, stressing Morrison’s stance, opines:

Sula's "new world black" is more than moxy and melanin: it is Jazz-inspired, something individual, fundamental, and internal, manifesting itself in a resistance to existing social mores and a cultivation of the untried and the unknown. In many ways, Sula goes as far as Morrison's Beloved in describing the extent to which one woman's rejection of every available social script generates tangible, even fatal, public tension.20

In Sula, Morrison has little interest in passing moral judgments on characters. Just as The Bluest Eye complicates our understanding of an evil action by declaring that Cholly rapes his daughter from twisted love, so Sula makes easy judgments impossible, and perhaps, any judgment beside the point. The mark above Sula's eye may be useful as an indication of the novel's approach. Depending on what they think of Sula at the time, the townspeople variously see this mark as a snake, a rose, a tadpole, or Hannah's ashes. Clearly, moral judgment depends on one's own angle of vision and preconceptions. The
The novel presents several extreme examples of individual decisions that damage others, Eva burning her son Plum, for example, or Sula having sex with Jude. The novel encourages the reader to consider what if any limits should restrain individual action.

At the same time, it presents these shocking actions within specific contexts. By the time Eva kills Plum, she has already been established as a self-sacrificing mother. (She probably gets the money to support her children by sacrificing her leg.) Later, she nearly dies in her attempt to rescue her burning daughter, Hannah. Eva's moral character remains a complex issue. Morrison repeatedly complicates moral questions in this way. When Sula has sex with her friend's husband, her motivations are not what we might initially have assumed. The novel therefore indicates that simple moral judgments will be based on incomplete or incorrect information.

Although she talks a conservative game in regard to motherhood, Eva lives quite experimentally. Rather than take a low-paying job that would force her to spend all her time away from her children, she literally sacrifices a part of herself. Having left her children with a neighbor for eighteen months, Eva returns to Medallion with enough money to support them -- and with only one leg. Rumor says that she lost the leg to a train, and that her money comes from insurance compensation. Later, when Hannah catches fire in a barbecue accident, Eva almost dies hurling herself out of a second-story window to try to help. Eva's willingness to sacrifice for her children follows traditional
expectations, but the sacrifices themselves lie outside all conventional roles for women.

Eva explicitly rejects the more sentimental aspects of conventional motherhood. In answer to Hannah's question about whether she ever played with them, Eva sarcastically asks if she was supposed to be playing ring-around-the-rosy when her children had worms. Eva has apparently managed well enough to disguise the worst of their circumstances from this youngest child because Hannah continues to prod. Eva's angry rejoinder shows the cost of mothering for poor women: "talkin' 'bout did I love you girl I stayed alive for you" (S: 69). Some parts of the traditional role, Eva implies, require middle-class money.

Eva sets some limits on self-sacrifice, however. In the most dramatic example, she burns her son Plum rather than accept his drug addiction and its consequences. Having returned from the war a heroin addict, Plum steals from the whole household to buy drugs. Explaining her decision to kill him, Eva says, "Being helpless and thinking baby thoughts . . . and messing up his pants again . . . I had room enough in my heart, but not in my womb . . . I birthed him once. I couldn't do it again" (S: 71). Eva considers that adult children have no right to enjoy the unquestioning self-sacrifice that mothers perform for infants.

In *Sula*, like other postmodern novels seeped in the sub/unconscious of the characters, one cannot ignore the importance of ‘gaps’ an implied reader has to fill to become an actual reader. These ‘gaps’ which are the result of the
slippage of words or the unconscious burden on the characters are invariably linked to the ‘othering’ of the characters. Rachel Lee explores the relationship between the slippage of words and the informing voids (desires) of Morrison's Sula and shows how this is indirectly related to the oppressed psyche of the characters. Though all of Morrison's novels play upon the variability of language, the critic argues, *Sula* especially throws into disequilibrium that exemplar dichotomy, good and evil, and by extension all Manichean systems which undergird traditional linguistic and ethical orders. By bringing to light the relativity of meaning, *Sula* broaches the subject not only of semantic integrity (how we can convey what we mean) but also of epistemological integrity (how can we know anything since there is no objective perspective and no objective essence or truth to know). Lee emphasizes:

While the aforementioned questions bristle under each of Morrison's texts, in *Sula*, Morrison offers to her readers a main character who telescopes that scandal of epistemology. How can we understand or know Sula, who is not only egoless or without a self (and hence undeterminable) but who also is unable to know anything herself?  

This inability of Sula to know herself and others surrounding her is deeply attached to the oppressive forces in the society that have undermined her existence and have attempted to ‘silent’ the otherwise assertive figure. Sula, Nel, and Eva, in fact, are the products of the pressures they have been forced to bear and become vehicles in the process of ‘silencing’ them. Their outward
rejection of the society and individuality is a result of the failure of their assertion of self in the society that would look down upon them.

The same thematic strands of *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula* are carried on successfully in her next novel *Song of Solomon*. Though Morrison has exploited the myth of Solomon to designate the character’s continual search for his roots, the novel also has reverberations of crises of one’s individuality within and outside the ethnicity he is a part of. One should not, at the same time, forget the narrative techniques that Morrison has employed in her novels. Apart from other things which are not contextual in the present context, Morrison employs stream of consciousness and interior monologue, which remind the readers of the fascinating Faulkner and Woolf, to work and map out the slumbering sub consciousness of her characters jostling between past and present.

Morrison, however, does not think there is similarity between her and Faulkner. One can practically hear the irritation in her voice when she stated in a 1983 interview with Nellie McKay, “I am not like James Joyce; I am not like Thomas Hardy; I am not like Faulkner. I am not like in that sense.” Morrison has elsewhere said, "I'm not sure that he [Faulkner] had any effect on my work" and "I don't really find strong connections between my work and Faulkner's.” However, Morrison has also expressed praise and admiration for Faulkner's work, particularly for his unique style.
Morrison once described *Song of Solomon* as “my own giggle (in Afro-American terms) of the proto-myth of the journey to manhood” so she freely admits that this novel deliberately alters the idea of the masculine quest. The tale reveals the past through multiple layers of meaning, and Milkman reconstructs history based upon the various versions of it that he hears.

The two-part novel opens in 1931 in a town near Lake Superior with the mysterious, bizarre suicide flight from a hospital roof of Mr Robert Smith, a black insurance agent dressed in a blue costume with white silk wings. On one hand, the symbolic and thematic significance of this leap to death by a commonly named minor character is apparent: it causes the early birth of the uncommonly named black protagonist, Mason ‘Milkman’ Dead in the historically for-whites-only Mercy Hospital, which the blacks sardonically call No Mercy Hospital. On the other hand, the mystery and horror of this event and the fact that “that Mr. Smith didn’t draw as big a crowd as Lindberg had four years earlier,” despite having announced it two days before, are even more richly exploited metaphorically and metonymically by Morrison.

The densely woven, arabesque texture of this opening scene includes the trivia of the daily lives of the absent poor and the anecdotal humour of black names (Not Doctor Street, No Mercy Hospital, and Lincoln’s Heaven) which wryly reveal cultural and social differences between white and black townspeople. Even the mysterious song of the strange black woman wrapped in an old quilt adds to the above mentioned differences.
cautioned of the theme that life is precious and that many dead lives and faded memories are buried in the names of places and people in the country.

*Song of Solomon* is “most ambitious and Gothic,” maintains Bernard W. Bell, in which Morrison puts Milkman through historical reconstruction. But she gives him far more to work with and allows him to make a more informed decision. Milkman's community also provides him with more reliable sources of information, and from that community he gets a much more solid sense of the past, in various ways. Milkman's first confirmation comes from Circe. When he visits her, she fills in many of the blank and confused areas of the family history that he has begun to assemble based on Pilate's and his father's partial revelations. From her, Milkman learns the names of Sing and Jake Dead, and that someone "dumped" the elder Macon's body in Hunters Cave after his original shallow grave eroded. (SS: 244) Susan Byrd later significantly verifies and augments this information. She confirms that the full version of Sing's name is indeed Singing Bird, identifies Sing's adopted brother (Susan's father) as Crow Bird, and verifies the names of Jake, Ryna, and Heddy.

Moreover, Susan clears up Milkman's misconception that Jake was the only son of Solomon and explains the legend of the flying African. Although one might argue that these multiple verifications also derive from a human memory subject to the same sort of error and partiality that Quentin distrusts, Morrison provides yet another level of verification in the actual song of Solomon. The song functions as an oral history, one much more vital than any written historical record or artifact, because it continues to live. When Milkman
finally discerns the significance of the song, he becomes “as eager and happy as he had ever been in his life” as all the pieces fall into place and the historical story finally fits into the living story of the song. (SS: 304) Furthermore, Morrison illustrates Milkman's accommodation to this oral history when she forces him to rely on memory to record the song; in this scene, the written word remains conspicuously absent.

In Morrison's fiction, a powerful sense of historical black presence makes visible a micronarrative of myth and 'rememory' that was previously suppressed. Morrison's signature narrative aim is to evoke black historical presence out of its chronologic al disappearance, or absence. In her germinal essay “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation," Morrison explains her fictional project as evoking the presence of an ancestor because, as she perceived in examining black fiction, “it was the absence of an ancestor that was frightening, that was threatening, and it caused huge destruction and disarray.”

For that reason she wished to make her art expressive not only of her individual self but also of the tribe, alluding thereby to the collective wisdom gained from black ancestral experience. As she noted:

[T]he novel is needed by African-Americans now in a way that it was not needed before.... We don't live in places where we can hear those stories anymore; parents don't sit around and tell their children those classical, mythological archetypal stories that we heard years ago.
In *Song of Solomon*, Morrison has employed characters and incidents that have mythical dimensions. Milkman Dead and his quest for his roots is a clear sign of the dissatisfaction and anguish that one can witness in African Americans suffering pangs of racism. Going back to one’s ancestral roots, to Africa, to its blues and *Jazz*, to its stucco rhythm and to take pride in this is a phenomenon that became a practice for all the marginalized blacks living in America. Such practices remind one of the overwhelming experiences of Harlem Renaissance of 1920s and its enthusiasm. This going back to roots, in fact, exposes the emptiness of America so far as living conditions for the blacks are concerned, and the richness of Africa that gives them strength to muster courage and fight back the Jim Crow America.

An informed reader, nevertheless, finds Milkman not to be oppressed in terms of financial position. He is actually a rich man and has not suffered racial discrimination on account of his race and features. He, however, is a psychologically burdened man incapable of associating himself with his race and America as a whole. The vacuum that one finds in his mind is related to his quest for fulfillment and assertion of his individuality. This forces him to hanker after his ancestor Solomon to get a unique identity with him and hence feel unburdened.

Early in *Song of Solomon*, Milkman describes his mother as “too insubstantial, too shadowy for love.” (SS: 75) As a result, he has never thought of her as “a person, a separate individual, with a life apart from allowing or interfering with his own.” (SS: 75) Milkman's attitude later changes drastically,
and a large part of his understanding evolves from his learning not simply to hear but to listen and, more importantly, to understand. During their conversation in chapter ten, Circe tells Milkman, “You don't listen to people. Your ear is on your head, but it's not connected to your brain.” (SS: 247)

Milkman appears to take this admonition to heart because shortly thereafter he begins to treat people quite differently. During the hunt in Shalimar, Circe's lesson takes hold as Milkman realizes the self-centered nature of his attitude and begins to see things from the viewpoint of others. For instance, he thinks, “why shouldn't his parents tell him their personal problems? If not him, then who?” and muses that Hagar “had a right to try to kill him” for the way he betrayed her (SS: 276–77). In the dark of the hunt, Milkman searches for self-knowledge, and “the thoughts came, unobstructed by other people, by things, even by the sight of himself.” (SS: 277) When Milkman begins to listen in response to Circe's criticism, he finally begins understanding people instead of simply objectifying them.

The change that we find happening to Milkman has its roots in his humanitarian perspective. Deeply shaken and having gone through the torments of oppressive forces in the society, Milkman became insensitive to suffering humanity. He would not take into consideration the problems and sufferings of others surrounding him but his own. This self-sufficient, self-absorbed and selfish kind of attitude, in fact, is the product of the racist America involved seriously as to how to create ‘others’ and then nullify them. Milkman is ‘dead’ to others and becomes aware of the pain and anguish of others when he wakes
up from the slumber of his racial apathy and attaches himself to larger humanity.

In preparation for the impending connection to his distinctly oral history, Milkman begins to listen carefully to the hunter's signals, sounds he likens to "what there was before language. Before things were written down" (SS: 278). As he begins to reflect upon his own life with greater clarity, the import of what Guitar earlier said about the peacock becomes clear: "Can't nobody fly with all that shit. Wanna fly, you got to give up the shit that weighs you down" (SS: 179). In the dark of the hunt, Milkman begins to give up the metaphorical shit that weighs him down and prepares for his own upcoming flight. As Marilyn Sanders Mobley notes, Milkman begins to respond to "the very voices he had been conditioned to ignore under the discipline of patriarchal hegemony."  

As he learns to hear those voices, the ones Circe taught him to listen for, he becomes capable of the sort of reciprocal behaviour that he displays with Sweet in the bath scene. This capacity for genuine feeling and reciprocity ultimately culminates in the connection that he feels to Pila te at the novel's end. And Morrison gently guides her readers through a similar process by forcing them to shed their dehumanizing tendencies as Milkman sheds his. Morrison spoke of this when she said in an interview with Thomas LeClair:

I feel that I do play to the gallery in *Song of Solomon*, for example, because I have to make the reader look at people he may not wish to
look at. You don't look at Pilate. You don't really look at a person like Cholly [Breedlove].

However, Morrison forces her readers to look, to humanize characters they might otherwise consider defective or even monstrous. In doing so, she extends her literary resistance to dehumanization to her readers and forces them, as she does Milkman, to recognize the humanity of others.

Milkman engages in a battle with time but he fares more successfully. Until he learns something of his history from his father and Pilate, the future and, by implication, the past do not exist for Milkman; rather, as Morrison writes, “the present did extend itself” (SS: 35). As Milkman becomes aware of his past, he comes to realize first that “You can't do the past over” (SS: 76) when his father tells his version of the events surrounding Ruth's father's death, how he supposedly found Ruth lying next to her father's newly dead body, naked “as a yard dog, kissing him” (SS: 73).

Milkman becomes angry when this knowledge of the past threatens him, for the first time, in a personal way. He seethes with resentment because his father came to him “with some way-out tale” to explain the high level of animosity between himself and Ruth (SS: 76). In short, Milkman initially resists engaging with his past in any critical, meaningful way, and by chapter eight, he actually runs from it when he feels the need to “beat a path away from his parents' past, which was also their present and which was threatening to become his present as well” (SS: 180).
However, after Circe teaches Milkman how to listen and hear, and the "shit" that weighs him down begins to fall away, Milkman stops running and begins to cultivate an understanding of his past. Morrison charts this constructive change by employing Milkman's watch as a symbol of it. When he realizes that Grace failed to give his watch back to him during that initial visit with Susan Byrd, he remarks, “Damn...I'm losing everything” (SS: 294). Milkman then determines, “a watch was not worth worrying about. All it could do was tell him the time of day and he really wasn't interested” (SS: 295). After the second meeting, during which Susan confirms many of Milkman's speculations about his family history, she offers to get his watch back for him and he replies, “Never mind” (SS: 325).

Milkman's leap toward Guitar at the conclusion of *Song of Solomon* might, at first, seem a willful act of self-destruction; however, Morrison pointedly constructs Milkman's leap as another submissive triumph. Rather than defying fate, Milkman submits to whatever consequences his landing might hold. And readers can logically assume that Milkman will likely emerge victorious from the encounter with Guitar because Pilate's earlier prediction, "Ain't nothin goin to kill him but his own ignorance", has thus far held true (SS: 140).

By the end of the novel, Milkman has overcome much of that ignorance and has become empowered through his connection to his African heritage. However, Milkman can only obtain this power through submission. When he takes his leap, which symbolically connects him to the ancestral Solomon, he
definitively embraces this knowledge of his heritage. That acceptance also extends the earlier lesson that Milkman learned about time to include the future. As he jumps, Milkman reflects that he now knows what Solomon knew, "If you surrendered to the air, you could ride it" (SS: 337).

Milkman's ride, with all its attendant cultural and historical associations simply must, on some level, represent his submission to whatever destiny awaits him. His fate, though, ultimately becomes irrelevant because he acquires, along with the knowledge of his past, a connection to his ancestors that renders true, final death—an impossibility according to the African religious beliefs which inform that ancestral knowledge. Like Solomon, Milkman will presumably one day survive, even thrive, indefinitely as an ancestor himself.

*Song of Solomon*, an alert reader finds, is “not the story of the transcendence of the aftershocks of slavery; on the contrary, it tells the tale of their discovery and conversion into a workable cultural heritage.” 31 By detecting the echoes of a past not their own, readers, like Milkman, can reweave the text of slavery from the perspective of the present. Morrison makes clear that the textualization of slavery encompasses simultaneous remembering and forgetting, but also creates the grounds for new forms of communication. The novel's association of the "Dead" with both letters and family names draws attention to the fact that communication in *Song of Solomon* is primarily figured with or through death.
The nuclear family that surrounds Milkman, however, seems highly problematic. Macon Dead simply cannot provide the sort of emotional support that his son requires. Morrison provides Milkman with an alternative familial figure of authority in his aunt, Pilate. Her influence most usefully guides Milkman as he quests after the specifics of his history, possibly because Morrison makes her representative of that history. She introduces him to the knowledge that allows him to "fly" and, as John N. Duvall notes, this kind of flying involves “the ability to transcend self and self-love.” Pilate, then, teaches him this lesson by establishing a connection with his past, and in her powerful role as guide, she stands in stark opposition to Macon Dead.

Pilate exists as part conjure woman, part rebel, and part original woman. Like the Eve of the creation story, she has no navel, and Circe further establishes that Pilate “borned herself” when she struggled free from her dead mother's womb after Circe had given up any hope of saving either mother or child (SS: 244). Morrison's characterization of Pilate is a living embodiment of antiquity, a traditional African ancestral figure who embodies that tradition as a cultural custodian, and, as Joyce Irene Middleton remarks, a “culture bearer” in the tradition of the African griotte.

Such a view of Pilate as the bearer of culture and history might seem unwarranted because, after all, Milkman gains most of his historical knowledge from other sources. However, Pilate teaches him more about how to interact with that history than simple facts ever could. She instructs him in the lessons about responsibility that he must learn before he can understand both other
people and his heritage, lessons she learned from her father's ghost when he appeared and told her, “You just can't fly on off and leave a body” (SS: 147).

For years, Pilate drags around the bones of a man whose death she feels accountable for (readers later learn that they are actually her father's bones) in homage to the debt she thinks she owes him. This belief also extends to Pilate's relationship to society, because unlike Morrison's other pariah characters, Pilate feels a social responsibility and connection; she does not possess the brand of absolute freedom that characterizes Sula or Cholly Breedlove. Pilate's notions of responsibility temper the myth of the utterly free flying African in ways that significantly affect Milkman's understanding of his own obligation to others and to history. Gay Wilentz shows that Morrison “is quick to remind us that the man flying away leaves people behind, most often women and their children”.

Morrison does this, in part, by constructing Pilate's life as the antithesis to Solomon's flight. Because Pilate knows that you ‘just can't fly on off and leave a body,’ she learns to fly within her body by freeing her mind and soul. When she dies, Milkman finally realizes that he loved her because “without ever leaving the ground, she could fly” (SS: 336). As he cradles her dying body, Milkman realizes that Pilate taught him how to fly in a similar fashion by teaching him how to appreciate and interact with his familial legacy. He assumes control of that history and demonstrates both his mastery of it and debt to it by acknowledging his responsibility to Pilate when he revises her "Sugarman" lament into a tribute for her, the "Sugargirl" he continues to sing
for even after she dies, his voice rising “louder and louder as though sheer
volume would wake her” (SS: 336).

*Song of Solomon* marks a turning point in her exploration of the theme
of isolation. The readers can see Morrison working though the problems she
associates with isolation in her first two novels, in which abusive, emotionally
distant fathers and communities simply refuse to acknowledge the ugliness of
the reality that exists in their midst. In *The Bluest Eye*, neither an entire
community nor a single family, trapped by Cholly's domination, can save
Pecola Breedlove. In Morrison's second novel, the community of Medallion
refuses Sula a similar salvation in this life, though Morrison intimates th    at she
likely achieves it in the next one. *Song of Solomon* finally shows the readers a
protagonist who becomes intimately connected to a communal and historical
knowledge and grows through that relationship. In this novel, the readers can
see Morrison working towards the powerful communal saving force that will
later rescue Denver, and perhaps even Sethe, in *Beloved.*
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16. Deborah E. McDowell, p. 84.


