

THE NEGATION OF THE OTHER IN THE NOVEL *SULA* BY TONI MORRISON

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Abstract

This analysis corresponds to an analytical and interpretative essay on the negation of the other in the novel *Sula* (1973) by Toni Morrison, one of the most important African American writers. In *Sula*, the author explores the concepts of good and evil as she provides characteristics of the African American culture and black identity. The characters' main struggle is their quest for achieving an authentic identity within this sexist and racist society that constricts their lives and dreams with moral standards. This essay attempts to demonstrate through this novel how human beings find self-destruction by attempting to destroy others, those who have different views of life and the world. The analysis focuses on the most important aspects of life proposed in this book: self-awareness, identity, friendship, traveling, the community, and heritage, which condition one's vision towards the other and nurture, at the same time, one's whole identity. As a major conclusion, there is no success for a society that judges and isolates the individuals who want to become authentic and attempt to break the constrictions of moral prejudices. For each member of the community is essential in the balance of it.

Keywords: *Sula*, Toni Morrison, selfhood, self-discovery, self-development, self-knowledge, self-awareness, self-destruction, wholeness, identity, authenticity, personal identity, social identity, black identity, modern black woman, African American culture, African American literature, African American woman, friendship, community, good, evil, the other, traveling, heritage, ancestor.

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1. Introduction

Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1973) narrates the story of a fictional black community called the Bottom, a neighborhood located in the town of Medallion, Ohio. The novel sets the community during the years 1919 to 1965, an epoch that evokes a historical context characterized by wars and conflicts such as World War I and II, the beginning of Cold War, the Civil Rights Movement, and the war in Vietnam. Thus, the characters from the novel are constantly exposed to different conflicts that divide the United States, moreover the hostile legal, economic, and social war against black people.

Among these political and socio-economic situations, Morrison focuses on the duality that leads the characters to their own destruction, which implies that misunderstanding the other, or negating the other, obstructs one's real self-knowledge. Thus, the book explores the social preconceptions about what is good and what is evil, and how these preconceptions delimit black people, more specifically, how they affect black women.

Toni Morrison has become one of the most important African-American writers, the first African-American woman to be awarded a Nobel Prize. She considers herself as a voice for black women, third-world, and Caribbean women. Evidently, Morrison's influences correspond essentially to her African heritage proved by myths, superstitions, folklore and cosmology. Other significant influences on Morrison's works correspond to William Faulkner and Virginia Woolf. On the one hand, the characters in both Faulkner's and Morrison's novels are always victim of racism and the oppressive system that whites have imposed. On the other hand, Morrison and Woolf treat through their writings the

meaning of being a woman in a sexist society dominated by men, as well as their attempt to be aware of living with the contradictions between social demands and personal fulfillment. The novels' characters of both writers struggle in their quest for identity, and express the importance of self-knowledge.

Although intellectuals and critics have tagged *Sula* as an African American book, a lesbian novel, a feminist book, and even as a war or antiwar novel, Morrison rather offers a modern black woman's view of life, the world, and her own personal identity. Through *Sula*, Morrison certainly demonstrates her compromise with women and the affirmation of the African-American identity.

Accordingly, this analysis treats the conflicts developed in the book that explore, on the one hand, the possibility of achieving selfhood and personal fulfillment within a restrictive society with constricting values and preconceptions. On the other hand, the possibility of understanding the other, and recognizing him/her as part of the self. The analysis proposed corresponds to an analytical and interpretative essay in order to evidence how the negation of the other leads to the negation of the self in this novel. Therefore, it develops the analysis according to the principles of the critical approaches known as the New Criticism, Sociological Criticism, New Historicism, and Feminist Criticism.

In the first part of the essay, the analysis focuses on the two main female characters – Sula Peace and Nel Wright– and the aspects that jeopardize their friendship, as well as their relationships with others, and how these relationships jeopardize at the same time, their own identities and lives. In the second part, the essay focuses on the role and the importance of the ancestors in the characters' lives. Subsequently, the essay analyzes the main male characters: Jude, Ajax, and Shadrack, and how their relationships affect the

female characters, how they jeopardize the women's identity, but complement them at the same time. Then, the analysis focuses on the community, assuming it as another character that also struggle to find, explore, and recognize one own identity. The last part corresponds to the conclusion. The essay explains that all characters complement each other, since one is the reflection of the other, and each one is part of the self. Thus, everybody belongs to one whole world, and everyone plays an important role in order to contribute to the balance of the whole community.

2. Toni Morrison's Biography

Toni Morrison has become one of the most important writers of the African-American literature, and was the first African-American woman to be awarded a Nobel Prize. She was actually born as Chloe Anthony Wofford in Lorain, Ohio, on February 18, 1931. She grew up in a black working-class family which belonged to the black community of Lorain. Her parents, who worked as cultivators of plants, moved to Ohio to escape the racism of the south of the country. As a child, Morrison spent her days reading books and listening to his father telling folktales of the black community, transferring, in this way, his African-American heritage.

When Morrison was still very young, her parents fell behind with the rent of the house where they lived, so the landlord set fire to the house while they were in it. The reaction of the family was laughter. Since that, Toni Morrison learned how to take one's integrity back: to distance oneself from the act and take one's life back. For Morrison, great minds reflect gravity and humor at the same time. And this is reflected in her works, as she stated: "My project rises from delight, not disappointment."

With eighteen-years of age, Morrison enrolled Howard University in Washington, D.C. She graduated in 1953 with a major in English. At that time, she decided to change her name from "Chloe" to "Toni", because people found "Chloe" too difficult to pronounce. Then, she continued her master at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, and graduated in 1955. Her thesis focused on the theme of suicide in the works of William Faulkner and Virginia Woolf.

Subsequently, Morrison started to work as an instructor in English at Texas Southern

University, Houston. But she returned to Howard in 1957, this time, as an English teacher. In this same year, she met Harold Morrison, a Jamaican architect, who became her husband a year later. In 1961, their first son was born. Afterwards, Toni joined a group of writers at the campus, and she began to write short stories.

But in 1963, she decided to leave Howard, and traveled to Europe with her husband and son. There, she divorced Harold, and returned to the United States with their first son and pregnant of their second. In 1964, she moved to Syracuse, New York, with her two children to work as a textbook editor. Eighteen months later, she was transferred to the New York headquarters of Random House where she edited books by black authors such as Toni Cade Bambara and Gayl Jones.

Lately, in 1970, she debuted as a novelist with *The Bluest Eye*. The novel was based on the short stories she wrote with the writers' group at Howard. With her first novel, she caught the attention of critics and a wider audience for her epic, poetic and rich depictions of the African-American life. In 1973, Morrison publishes her second novel *Sula* which was nominated for the National Book Award. *Sula* explored the concepts of good and evil through the friendship of two black women who grew up together. This novel won the National Book Critics Award. Her third novel *Song of Solomon* came out in 1977. This book was the main selection of the Book-of-the-Month Club and the first novel by a black writer to be chosen since Richard Wright's *Native Son* in 1949.

In 1981, Morrison became a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Furthermore, she published her novel *Tar Baby*. But she won more literary awards such as the Pulitzer Prize with her novel *Beloved* that came out in 1987. *Beloved* was inspired by the true story of a black American slave woman, Margaret Garner, who escaped with her

husband from a Kentucky plantation. When the slave masters overcame them, she killed her baby in order to save the child from the slavery she had managed to escape.

Then, Morrison became a professor at Princeton University in 1989. Three years later, she published her novel *Jazz* and her book of essays "Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination." In the next year, she won the Nobel Prize in Literature. Morrison's next novel was *Paradise*. "The book coalesced around the idea of where paradise is, who belongs in it," Morrison said in an interview with *The New York Times* (January 8, 1998).

With the company of her youngest son, Morrison introduces her works in children's literature: *The Big Box*, *The Book of Mean People* (2002), and *The Ant or the Grasshopper?* (2003). In 2003, she also introduced her novel *Love*. Thereafter, Morrison explored other forms of arts such as writing the libretto for *Margaret Garner*, an American opera about the tragedy of slavery through the true life story of one woman's experiences. The opera was performed at the New York City Opera in 2007.

By 2008, Morrison returned to the genre of novel with *A Mercy*. Her latest novel *Home* was published in 2012. In the same year, Morrison again explored the opera, this time with the director Peter Sellars and songwriter Rokia Traoré. The work was inspired by William Shakespeare's *Othello*, and the premier took place in London in the summer of 2012.

As she has stated herself, Morrison represents a voice for those who are not just black and female, but also third-world and Caribbean. Through her works, she establishes a link to the roots of black history as it serves to preserve this culture. Her work implies a social responsibility as an artist, as she declares: "My work requires me to think about how free I

can be as an African-American woman writer in my genderized, sexualized, wholly racialized world" (*Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, 1992).

3. Antecedents

As a college student, Toni Morrison studied extensively the works of William Faulkner and Virginia Woolf. Morrison reveals how much they influence her works as she uses shifting and fragmented narratives.

William Faulkner (1897-1962) grew up in Oxford, Mississippi. He was raised in an old white southern family, but it was a black maid who actually took care of him and taught him about black culture. His stories reflect the progress and decadence of the South, as well as the subject of racial prejudice and moral judgment. The characters in both Faulkner's and Morrison's novels are always victim of the racism and oppressive system that the whites have imposed.

Now then, Morrison and Woolf (1882-1941) thematize through their writings the meaning of being a woman in a sexist society dominated by men, as well as the attempt of being aware of living with the contradictions between social demands and personal fulfillment. The characters in both writers' novels struggle in their quest for identity, and express the importance of self-knowledge.

However, McDowell (1980) points out that talking or writing about black women writers and black lesbian writers have always been a taboo or a dangerous topic. In fact, black women and black lesbians as well as Third World women have had a negligible place in the universe of literature that makes them almost invisible. This is due to the racist and sexist political systems that have always profit white women writers, white men writers, even black men writers. McDowell (1980) asserts that "white female and male scholars have excluded the work of Black women writers from literary anthologies and critical

studies” (p.167). As examples of this chauvinism, Patricia Meyer Spacks’s *The Female Imagination* (1975) only focuses on women in the Anglo-American literary tradition, and Robert Stepto’s *From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative* (1979) does not include any Black women writers either.

For the last decades, black feminist critics have been more preoccupied for establishing principles in black women literature in order to constitute an identifiable literary tradition. They have created common approaches in their writings in order to reflect the political, social, and economic realities they have been obliged to live. Nevertheless, according to McDowell (1980), there is no precise or complete definition of black feminist criticism. Therefore, in order to interpret, describe and analyze any text of black literature, it is essential to take into account some general characteristics of the African-American literature and its roots.

During the first decades of the XIX century, free blacks of the North started to meet up to read together texts and documents written by their slave ancestors during the XVIII century. They form what is called the African American literary societies. Thus, reading became a way to obtain knowledge, and writing became a means to assert their identity. The members of the African American literary societies realize of how important literacy and education are to fight racism and slavery.

Phillis Wheatley, an African slaved in Boston, wrote *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, the first African-American book in 1773. With this book, she claims equality of social, political and religious rights for blacks. She also demonstrates that black poets can be as capable as white poets to create art. In 1789, Olaudah Equiano, a British citizen slaved in America, publishes *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah*

Equiano; or, Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself. He becomes along with Wheatley, a pioneer of the African American literature and slave narrative.

William Bells Brown publishes the first African-American novel called *Clotel; or, The President's Daughter* in 1853. In 1859, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper publishes *The Two Offers*, a novel that represents the beginnings of the African American women's fiction. Then, Harper, Sutton E. Griggs, and Charles W. Chesnutt turn the novel into a social analysis instrument to question racial prejudices and stereotypes. Later, William Edward Burghardt Du Bois, professor of Sociology at Atlanta University, publishes *The Souls of Black Folk* in 1903, becoming in this way one of the most influential authors in African American literature in the XX century.

In the 1920's, the African-American literature experiences what is known as the Harlem Renaissance, a black artistic movement that encourages many African-American writers such as Alain Locke, Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, Rudolph Fisher, Zora Neale Hurston, and Jean Toomer to confront traditional white aesthetic standards, and to affirm at the same time, a black literary identity.

However, after the Great Depression in the 1930's, African-American writers found what is known as Urban Realism, a critical literary style more political, social, and realistic. Thus, writers such as Richard Wright emerge to dominate African-American literature until the 1950's. In 1953, James Baldwin publishes his first novel called *Go Tell It on the Mountain* creating a new form to reflect African-American consciousness in literature. Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* (1956) and *Another Country* (1962) become the first African-American novels that speak openly about homosexuality and bisexuality, positioning this author as one of the most important African-American writers of mid-century for

challenging moral and conventional standards, and reflecting, in a new way, the personal insights of the black community in America.

According to Hurston (1934), drama is a constant in the Negro's universe: "Every phase of Negro life is highly dramatized" (p.31). But this is "unconsciously for the most part of course" (p.32). As it is developed, the black culture in literature is also reproduced through poetry and music between the dialogues and dreams.

Another very important characteristic in Negro expression is "the will to adorn," and this is commonly expressed by metaphor and simile. This signifies "the Negro's greatest contribution to the language" (Hurston, 1934, p.32). Thus, African-American women writers enrich literature by employing poetry and metaphors through the textual voices, "storms and hurricanes that have psychically disruptive potentials, trees that are serene and knowledgeable" (Holloway, 1990, p.391).

Also, Holloway (1990) mentions other characteristics of the contemporary African-American literature. She explains that contemporary African-American writers employ recursive structures of language in literature that accomplish a reflective and reflexive posture at the same time, creating polyphonic literary texts. This implies that "the textual characterizations and events, the settings and symbolic systems are multiple and layered rather than individual and one-dimensional" (Holloway, 1990, p.388).

The presence of ancestors and the links to the past and traditions are also essential elements of the African-American literature. These ancestral voices that may appear in the texts as people, spirits, or voices in dreams, exist to instruct, guide, assist, and stabilize the lives and destinies of the protagonists. As the African-American literary texts are constructed in lineation with the past, traditions, and folklore, they value and affirm

pluralism, which means that a text has plural voices that share the traditions and reflect it in literature. In this way, the Other finds definition and place, which is after all, the unconscious voice, the differing self.

4. Theoretical Framework

The analysis proposed corresponds to an analytical and interpretative essay in order to evidence how the negation of the other leads to the negation of the self in the novel *Sula* by Toni Morrison. This work does not attempt to be part of a specific or particular theory; it rather finds support on different theoretical bases applied both to the structural and contextual level of the novel.

Thus, the critical approach applied to the analysis of the structural level corresponds to New Criticism. According to Ransom (1941), this approach was formulated in the United States between the 1920s and the 1930s. During the twentieth century, it dominated literary criticism in colleges and universities of the country. By using this approach, this analysis seeks to demonstrate how the different elements of the book are related to the central idea. This kind of unity is called organic unity in which “the complexity of a text is created by the multiple and often conflicting meanings woven through it. And these meanings are a product primarily of four kinds of linguistic devices: paradox, irony, ambiguity, and tension” (Tyson, 2006, p. 138). Thus, *Sula* is filled of ironies, dreams, paradoxes and metaphors that evidence the struggle, the conflicts, and the complexities of the characters in their process of achieving an authentic identity and self-awareness.

In terms of the contextual level of the novel, the theoretical framework consists basically in understanding how rich is its content in terms of social conflicts of both the time in which the novel was written and the symbolic world the novel describes, also the expression of the culture to which the book is subscribed. Therefore, Historical Criticism,

Sociological Criticism, New Historicism, and Feminist Criticism are the critical approaches applied to this level.

Historical Criticism assumes literature as a contributor and creator of history. In order to understand *Sula*, it is necessary to understand the social, cultural and intellectual context in which the novel was produced, and thus, the importance and effects on the readers. Since the book depicts a community called the Bottom, Sociological Criticism understands literature as part of the process of history because it involves social groups, social institutions and movements, illustrating social attitudes and tendencies. This approach focuses on how literature influences in human actions or human interactions, and how historical events influence literature.

Since the main characters of this novel are two black women who reflect how oppressive, sexist and racial their rule system is, the Feminist Criticism serves to identify and analyze the content level of the novel. It aims to explore political and ideological principles. It assumes literature as a means to reflect and influence human behavior. Particularly, American feminism attempts to recover forgotten texts written by women in earlier times when they were not recognized or accepted as writers. It also concerns about the cultural values that are implicit in the way women are portrayed in literature in particular times and places.

For the last decades, black feminist critics have been more preoccupied for establishing principles in black women literature in order to constitute an identifiable literary tradition. They have created common approaches in their writings in order to reflect the political, social, and economic realities they have been obliged to live. Nevertheless, according to McDowell (1980), there is no precise or complete definition of Black Feminist

Criticism. Therefore, in order to interpret, describe and analyze any text of black literature, it is a must to be informed first about black literature, black history and black culture in general.

Similarly to Feminist Criticism, New Historicism concerns about the way power is distributed and used in different cultures. Thus, literature reflects basic cultural patterns and forces in cultural and social change. New Historicism attempts to discover the ideological commitments in texts, and the way literature represents history and culture, since all types of texts are involved in a culture, and somehow they evidence its values. This approach also attempts to analyze the way a text demonstrates its intellectual, epistemological and ethical system of which any text is inherent.

Taking into account the principles of New Historicism and Feminist Criticism, the theoretical framework also includes a general research of black culture and black history. Since *Sula* covers the years from 1919 to 1965, and as it was previously mentioned, it is important to take into account some general aspects of black history.

According to D.L. Chandler (2012), most of the ancestors of African-Americans arrive to North America as slaves in 1619. In 1808, the U.S. congress bans the importation of slaves from Africa. But in 1857, The U.S. Supreme Court contradicts the congress' decision, and dictates that this institution has no right to ban slavery in the country. The slave-holding states of the south form the political Confederate States, and attempt to establish an independent political system, different from the anti-slavery government. The northern states which form the Union and represent the U.S. government declare the Confederacy as illegal. Then, in 1861, the civil war begins. In 1863, President Lincoln

issues the Emancipation Proclamation, and declares freedom for all persons held as slaves within the Confederate states.

In 1865, the Confederacy loses and the civil war ends. Thus, the U.S. government ratifies the decision of prohibiting slavery. However, according to Head (2013), many members and leaders of the Confederate Army found an organization called the Ku Klux Klan with the purpose of defending white nationalism, using violence against blacks and immigrants in 1866. In 1871, President Ulysses S. Grant takes action against the Ku Klux Klan by interfering and suspending under law the Klan's operations. Many of the Klan's members are arrested.

In 1909, a group of African-Americans with the help from European Americans create the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) to fight for equal civil rights for blacks, and end with racism. In 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court declares that racial segregation in schools is unconstitutional. Three years later, Martin Luther King founds a civil rights group called the Southern Christian Leadership with Charles K. Steele, and Fred L. Shuttlesworth. In 1964, President Johnson signs the Civil Rights Act that prohibits all kinds of discrimination.

In 1970, the blacks are allowed to vote since those who are born in the country are finally recognized as American citizens. Thus they start to be elected in the congress; they build schools, and start to run businesses. Nevertheless, the rejection towards African-Americans continues, and despite all their achievements, they still suffer discrimination and segregation in North America. (Rudd, Hanes and Hermesen, 2014).

5. The Negation of the Other

The story of *Sula* (1973) by Toni Morrison takes place between 1919 and 1965. These years include the aftermath of World War I, the World War II, the beginning of Cold War, the Civil Rights Movement, and the war in Vietnam, setting the novel in a context of several wars and conflicts against nations, and in a hostile legal, economic, and social war against black people that racially divides the United States. Within this context, Morrison creates a small town called Medallion, Ohio, which mirrors the situation of the black community at that time. Using mysticism and surrealism, the book tells the interconnected stories about a neighborhood called the Bottom, about two girls named Sula Peace and Nel Wright, and about a mad ex-soldier called Shadrack.

Regarding the theme of the negation of the other and the preconceptions of good and evil, Tennessee Williams (as cited in Kazan, 1988) said: “There are no 'good' or 'bad' people. Some are a little better or a little worse but all are activated more by misunderstanding than malice. A blindness to what is going on in each other's hearts.” This statement evokes the duality that leads the characters to their own destruction, since the book implies that misunderstanding the other, or negating the other, obstructs one’s self-knowledge. Intellectuals and critics have tagged *Sula* as an African American novel, a lesbian novel, a feminist book, and even as a war or antiwar novel. But as its author has outlined, the book explores the social preconceptions about what is good and what is evil, and how these preconceptions delimit black people, and more specifically, how they affect black women.

However, rather than proposing a model of a black woman, or an ideal woman, Morrison offers a modern black woman's view of life, of the world, and of her own personal identity. To this extent, the conflicts developed in the novel explore, on the one hand, the possibility to achieve selfhood and personal fulfillment inside a restrictive society with constricting values and preconceptions. On the other hand, they explore the possibility of understanding the other, and recognizing him as part of the self.

It is not Morrison's intention to propose the way modern black –or non-black- women should think, act or live. What she suggests is that if individuals see their own convictions in the other, they will certainly construct a better humanity, less hostile, less oppressive, and less individualistic. Based on that assumption, the novel offers a consideration of the importance of identity, friendship, traveling, the community, and heritage, which are important aspects of life that condition one's vision towards the other and nurture, at the same time, one's whole identity.

Nel, Sula, and Shadrack –the principle male character– represent that kind of people who struggle to find, explore, and recognize their own identities. Their mistake is that they consecrate their lives to accomplishing this by rejecting any kind of real engagement with the others. They fail to realize that it is essential to rely on others in order to create a balanced identity, and to transcend, which means to establish meaningful relationships that last and create a link to the past, present and future for other generations in the community.

The two main female characters –Nel Wright and Sula Peace– are related to the conventional roles of good and evil. Wright is cast as a righteous person. While Peace longs for liberty and rest. Nevertheless, each woman is the reflection of the other. Although they adopt different life styles, their personalities complement each other. Nel sees in Sula the

tendencies she gave up in order to carry out a life that honors her surname. Yet Nel has the depth that Sula lacks in order to find the “speck around which to grow” (*Sula*, p.103).

As a child, Nel was more inquisitive and dreamed of an adventurous life. But as she grows up, she gives up this personality to welcome the traditional role of respectable woman, marriage and motherhood. Conversely, Sula lacks direction, order and balance in her life. Sula becomes an independent, strong-willed, adventurous, inquisitive and self-centered woman determined to live freely in a world that is hostile to black women (Banyiwa-Horne, 1985).

Paradoxically, the extreme characteristics of Sula and Nel make them antithetical but highly attracted to each other. Stein (1984) defines the novel as a story of modern heroism conceiving Sula and Nel as heroines. She mentions that these women represent the hero and the villain who eventually switch their roles suggesting that the heroine has her own evil, and the villain possesses heroism too. In this sense, the villain becomes the hero's alter ego. They both have powers that the other lacks, and although they assume different roles or paths, they both share the same target: Power. They both desire more power and control. Thus, one cannot exist without the other. They need each other to justify and give meaning to their own existence. Just as good and evil need each other to give the world a balance, and to make humanity understand the meaning of war and peace.

Furthermore, another substantial characteristic of the book corresponds to the complex duality of the characters, which is that the characters in the novel require each other in order to find wholeness and self-definition (Domini, 1986). However, the characters fail in their search for a well-balanced identity, and the main reason they fail is that they negate each other by rejecting any kind of real engagement with the other.

Nel and Sula do not represent one woman with two different personalities. Or one perfect human being divided into two bodies. Sula and Nel are two different women who offer the other the missing parts needed to build an authentic and balanced identity. According to Morrison, Nel and Sula together could be one ideal woman, which means that everyone needs to have a little of Nel and a little of Sula, or better, everyone needs to learn from both in order to develop an integral identity. She also emphasizes that betraying the other implicates betraying oneself.

Morrison also points out that *Sula* explores questions of good and evil. Likewise, she explores matters such as racism and black cosmology. As the characters emerge in the story, they present their perspectives of their black identity. For instance, for Shadrack, recognizing himself as a black man helps him to find direction in his life during his post-war period. He contemplates the place he belongs to and where he has to go. Although Nel and Sula are aware of their identity as black girls with social limitations, they establish a meaningful friendship with its own values in order to feel safe from social prejudices.

As they grow up, Sula and Nel redefine their perspectives about being a black woman. On the one hand, Nel thinks that marriage and motherhood are the pillars of a respectable black woman. On the other hand, Sula rejects any sort of limitations to explore and live freely from the community's moral standards, avoiding the traditional roles of women. Contrary to the men in the book who believe that "a Negro man had a hard row to hoe in this world" (p.103), Sula shows herself optimistic and proud of her black identity when she says: "everything in this world loves you. White men love you ... It looks to me like you the envy of the world" (p.104). With her experience abroad, she has created another point of view towards her race. At the same time, she challenges the white society's

discrimination by assuming it as a form of expressing envy towards the blacks, because, as she interprets it, behind the whites' envy, there is love and respect for the blacks' bodies and their strength (p.103).

The novel implies that traveling is a key step in the process of developing one's personal identity. Leaving home to meet other people, explore different cultures, see other horizons, and return provides new viewpoints and interpretations about oneself, others and life. It provides the opportunity to broaden one's mind and overcome preconceptions and prejudices about others.

At the age of ten, Nel takes a long train trip with her mother, Helene Wright, to New Orleans to attend the funeral of Cecile Sabat, Helene's grandmother. At the funeral, Nel meets Rochelle, Helene's mother, who is a Creole prostitute. Smelling her odor of gardenia, regarding the vivid colors in her outfits, and listening to her Creole accent, awaken in Nel the wild behaviors inherent in her ancestors' blood that Helene tries hard to repress with a conservative and rigid education.

After Nel meets Cecile, Nel establishes a connection with her ancestors that allows her to liberate her self-consciousness. As she and her mother return to the Bottom, the young Nel looks at herself in the mirror of her bedroom and discovers for the first time that "me-ness" she needed in order to create her own personal identity. She whispers "I'm me, I'm not their daughter. I'm not Nel. I'm me. Me" (p.28). Nel understands how essential it is to develop her "me-ness" in order to become a wonderful and authentic person. Her self-awareness is awakened and she becomes determined to be nobody else but the person she wants to be. She would leave Medallion to carry out an experimental life full of discoveries and adventures.

Nel's authentic personality asserts itself more when she meets Sula. With Sula, Nel feels strong enough to release this me-ness. Because "they found in each other's eyes the intimacy they were looking for" (p.52), these two girls become best friends at the age of twelve. Growing in the middle of a war against black people, and being part of a society that was hostile and oppressive for women, Nel and Sula find comfort, freedom and harmony in each other's company. "Because each had discovered years before that they were neither white nor male, and that all freedom and triumph was forbidden to them, they had set about creating something else to be" (p.52).

With Sula, Nel reaffirms the authenticity of her personality. Sharing their thoughts and dreams, they develop self-awareness. Although they are young, they can understand very well that one cannot survive without the other: "They were solitary girls whose loneliness was so profound it intoxicated them and sent them stumbling into technicolored visions that always included a presence, a someone, who, quite like the dreamer, shared the delight of the dream" (p.51). They both acknowledge that the other is important for the self to feel liberated. The presence of the other complements the self. In this way, their friendship helps them construct an authentic self-identity, to find wholeness and balance in the other.

Contrasting with Nel's rigid and oppressive education at home, Sula is raised in a "woolly house where a pot of something was always cooking on the stove; where the mother, Hannah, never scolded or gave directions ... and where a one-legged grandmother named Eva handed you goobers from deep inside her pockets or read you a dream" (p.29). Thus Sula is permanently exposed to a free atmosphere without order or guidance.

Moreover, like Nel, Sula grows up without the model of a father (because Nel's father is rarely at home, and Sula's died when she was little), and without a sense of a traditional marriage since her mother is untraditional in this matter. Hannah is not an affectionate mother. She is not interested in marrying again. But she has lots of lovers, most of them her friends' and neighbors' husbands. Although Sula and Nel are exposed to these contrasting environments, Nel finds release from her oppressive and rigid home at Sula's house, and Sula becomes aware of the order lacking in her own home and life when she is at Nel's place (Banyiwa-Horne, 1985). In this way, Morrison indicates how Sula and Nel complement each other.

Later on, two events will define Sula's isolated life and teach her about the untrustworthiness in human beings. The first occurs when Hannah remarks without noticing that Sula is listening, "I love Sula. I just don't like her" (p.57). Her mother's words place Sula in a state of bewilderment with dark thoughts from which she manages to escape when she hears Nel calling her. Subsequently, the girls go to play near the river bank. There, a little boy named Chicken Little appears. Immediately, Nel shows her disgust for him but Sula, kindly and almost tenderly, invites him to climb a tree. Chicken Little feels insecure about the idea, but Sula tells him "Come on, Chicken Little, I'll help you up" (p.59). Sula shows herself as a trustworthy person on whom the boy can rely. As they climb, Sula keeps on steadying him with her hands and saying "Go on. Go on. I got you," to make him feel secure and safe. When they are high enough, Sula shows Chicken Little the far side of the river. Here Sula shows herself as an adventurous girl willing to climb high and see beyond the river bank, go farther than the river bank, farther than Medallion, farther in life, and also, she is willing to help others to discover the world and define themselves.

When they climb down the tree, the second event takes place. Sula picks Chicken Little up by his hands, and swings him around. The boy slips from her hands, falls in the river and drowns. Harshly, Sula learns from the first event that “there was no other that you could count on;” from the second event, she infers that “there was no self to count on either” (p.119). Thereafter, Sula develops an inquisitive and adventurous self, but she also becomes incapable of trusting in others, and reluctant to be trustworthy for others. Sula concludes that “Being good to somebody is just like being mean to somebody. Risky. You don’t get nothing for it” (p.145).

Thus an act of benevolence or an innocent action may be easily misinterpreted as evil. Therefore, Sula disregards the concept of good and evil because it is the same for her. She will just preoccupy herself with living to the fullest, taking pleasure, and giving pleasure. This particular way of thinking is what leads to her isolation because society does not accept self-reliant individuals and alienates those who challenge their morality.

Meanwhile Nel stays still *watching* Chicken Little drowns. She sees a silhouette on the other side of the river inhabited only by Shadrack. Sula goes to confirm whether Shadrack had seen the accident. Shadrack’s house looks as a very neat place, the opposite of a man who does not show a sign of sense or rationality in the streets of the town. Suddenly he appears in the entrance of the house and stares at Sula who looks quite scared. In order to help her calm down, he pronounces for her the word “always.” Sula, without understanding the meaning of the word, runs towards the river bank. Sula meets Nel and breaks down in tears. Nel tries to calm her by saying “Sh, sh. Don’t, don’t. You didn’t mean it. It ain’t your fault. Sh. Sh. Come on, let’s go, Sula. Come on, now. Was he there? Did he see? Where’s the belt to your dress?” (p.63). This is the first time the girls show

their different personalities. Nel acts the way her mother has taught her: emotions properly under control. She worries about Sula's belt which represents a person preoccupied with orderliness. While Nel acts emotionless, Sula cannot control her emotions. But this is how they pull together. Nel is Sula's support and balance for Sula's emotional personality.

At the boy's funeral, they are sitting close to each other but "there was a space, a separateness, between them" (p.64). Nel's calmness is due to the fact that she didn't have anything to do. Sula is the responsible for everything that happened. Nel has "done nothing." However, she feels that she is guilty too and is restless thinking that people will point at her at any moment. That is the first incident that provokes alienation for these two best friends.

The second is Nel's marriage to Jude. Nel is sixteen and Jude is twenty when they marry. He is a waiter at Hotel Medallion, but this job does not pay enough to support a wife. Jude believes that a job at the construction of the New River Road and a wife will signify adulthood and provide him with a higher status. He chooses Nel, "the girl who had always been kind, who had never seemed hell-bent to marry, who made the whole venture seem like his idea, his conquest" (p.83). Possessing an important job and a woman are part of the capitalist society's schemes imposed on blacks (Reddy, 1988). Jude's notion of a "real" man is emphasized in the following passage: "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" (p.83). Jude's conception of what constitutes a "real" man reflects the sexist social order during this period. It demonstrates the oppression on women, reducing their role to that of a being whose existence serves only to complete and satisfy the man, "someone to care about his hurt, to care very deeply. Deep enough to hold

him, deep enough to rock him, deep enough to ask, “How you feel? You all right? Want some coffee? ” (p.83).

For Jude, Nel represents just another being that complements him, serves him, and helps him endure his pain and carry his load. Nel is no more to him than what he wants her to be: “Jude could see himself taking shape in her eyes” (p.83). Despite her capacity to question and judge independently, Nel decides to marry Jude because she fears independence, and feels uncertain about love and life. With a marriage, all she has to do is to take care of her new family, to raise her children, and to be a sweet loyal wife as she and her husband grow old together.

Soon, Nel gives up her dream about leaving Medallion and settles for the conformities of a marriage with Jude. She does not construct the life she once dreamed of. She does not become what she had decided to be after her self-awareness was awakened on her trip to New Orleans. She replaces her “Me-ness” with Jude’s ego. She chooses convention instead of conviction. She relinquishes her own needs for the state of being needed by someone. Despite her previous self-definition and self-determination, the moral strictness and her marriage to Jude erase these characteristics from her personality: “Her parents had succeeded in rubbing down to a dull glow any sparkle or splutter she had” (p.83). Nel becomes the center around Jude and their children define themselves, and thus, she adopts “a conventionally feminine role of self-abnegation and self-sacrifice” (Reddy, 1988, p.38).

This powerless version of Nel is mostly produced by her separation from Sula. The day of Nel and Jude’s wedding, Sula leaves Medallion with the money from Hanna’s

insurance and travels around the country, attends college, and lives in the big cities. During this separateness, the girls' identities become vulnerable to their mothers' influence.

Banyiwa-Horne (1985) suggests that Morrison uses the language of psychoanalysis - symbolism and realism- to describe the girls' relationship. According to Banyiwa-Horne, the girls' dreams about the presence of the other represent the search of the unconscious self for the conscious self in order to achieve balance and a healthy personality. She also indicates that "What happens to the two friends is equivalent to the dislocation that occurs when there is a split between one's conscious and unconscious selves" (Banyiwa-Horne, 1985, p.30). Then, each one is the unconscious self of the other.

Nevertheless, Sula and Nel are not one person or two selves of the same woman. Instead, the book emphasizes that the convictions Nel represses and denies herself in her unconscious self are the convictions Sula possesses in her consciousness. They have a psychic relationship, deep and spiritual as Morrison implies through her narrative, that concludes with Sula as Nel's alter ego.

But Nel's blunder is to give up the identity she has constructed with Sula in order to satisfy Jude's need for a traditional wife. Nel finds herself reduced to the role of the traditional black woman preoccupied with fulfilling the community's moral standards by carrying out an unfulfilling life. Montgomery (1989) suggests that the social standards of the community with its narrow definition of women lead to Nel's loss of personal identity. She represses her authentic self-identity in order to conform to a proscribed identity.

In contrast, during her ten-year journey, Sula adopts an experimental life that allows her to explore a wider world and encounter a number of lovers, without ties or responsibilities for anybody or anything. A couple of weeks after Sula's arrival to

Medallion, Nel finds her with Jude in the bedroom, in an unconventional sexual position. Sula does not look naked to Nel. Nel only focuses on Jude's pants and the opened zipper. She is unable to pronounce a word, and struggles to let Jude know about his zipper, because she worries about what people will say if they see his zipper opened. It will be worse if they find out he cheated on her. Nel's reaction reveals how society posits morality over the individuals' emotional needs. The unconventional sexual position of Sula and Jude impacts Nel as she realizes how she has repressed her sexuality because of her fear of liberating passions and discovering her own pleasures.

Sula does not look naked to Nel because there are no repressions or constrictions between them since their friendship is based on openness. In contrast, her relationship with her husband is dominant and possessive. This relationship does not liberates their selves, as in the case of Sula and Nel's friendship; but rather, it is a relationship that constricts, especially for Nel, who after this disillusionment, she will not be able to establish other relationships with men. She will not even look at them or risk *looking* because the morality of her community does not approve of it.

In their trip to New Orleans, Nel and Helene are victims of racism. Two black soldiers look at Helene with disgust after she smiles at the white train conductor who calls her "gal" as she and Nel enter a wagon only for white people. After that, Nel decides that she "wanted to make certain that no man ever looked at her that way. That no midnight eyes or marbled flesh would ever accost her and turn her into jelly" (p.22). But, at the moment Nel finds Jude with Sula, she collapses, and all she can do is to watch how her husband leaves with his zipper down, and how he looks at her the same way those soldiers

looked at her mother. She turns into jelly too and her moral strictness and conservatism make her powerless, with no determination to impede her belittlement.

Whether what Sula did was a betrayal or not is a matter of perspective. On the one hand, Pontalis (2013) points out that it's very common that a man or a woman feels attracted to his or her friend's partner. Two friends can have such a deep friendship that they cannot resist feelings for the other's husband. On the other hand, Sula follows her mothers' model: she would sleep with any man, including her friend's husband; and she also follows the values she founded with Nel as children: "They never quarreled, those two, the way some girlfriends did over boys, or competed against each other for them" (p. 84).

Sula and Nel push themselves far to the extremes of their personalities, following their mothers' models instead of asserting their own authentic identities. On the one hand, Nel, like Helene, becomes a righteous and respectable church woman in her community. Her role is reduced to the loyal and industrious wife for Jude, and the overprotective mother of their children. She will not challenge the society's standards or attempt to change them. On the other hand, Sula, like Hannah, will sleep with any man without any obligation, and discard them with no explanations. This is what causes the two friends to misunderstand each other. For Sula "had no thought at all of causing Nel pain when she bedded down with Jude. They had always shared the affection of other people" (p.119). As Nel forgets that Sula "had no intimate knowledge of marriage, having lived in a house with women who thought all men available ... she was ill prepared for the possessiveness of the one person she felt close to" (p.119). Therefore, Sula disregards the boundaries of marriage, and Nel regards Jude as an object to possess.

Reddy (1988) contends that “Sula’s deepest desire is to *be* Nel” (p.37). She argues that Sula has always tried to imitate Nel since they were children. Sula used to find comfort at Nel’s conservative house. It is Sula who eventually achieves Nel’s dream of traveling far away from Medallion. Finally, Sula is the one who develops her sense of “Me-ness.” For this reason, sleeping with Jude is also an attempt to be, feel and live like Nel does. Later, Sula will argue that the motive for bedding with Jude was “this space in front of me, behind me, in my head” (p.144). Sula does not sleep with Jude for love, but because she has a lack of control, and a lack of moral strictness to tell her what is right and what is wrong. She is empty and finds emptiness around her.

Nel has internalized the sexism imposed by the conventional society, thinking that she has no worth if she does not have a husband. In order to fulfill the conventional society standards, Nel represses her sexuality, preventing herself from looking at other men and beginning new relationships. So she succumbs to the role of wronged wife and protective mother. But Nel does not complain about how limited her life has become. She does what she has to do with devotion in order to demonstrate to her community how virtuous she is. Nevertheless, she will eventually discover that those conventional female roles are unfulfilling for her.

Sula expresses her own perception towards Nel’s transformation of her personality through the metaphor of the spider and the web: “Now Nel was one of *them*. One of the spiders whose only thought was the next rung of the web... more terrified of the free fall than the snake’s breath below” (p.120). In Sula’s metaphor, Nel represents the spider that tailors her life like a web where everything has to be calculated and dependent. So the spider fears the free fall which refers to the leap of adventure and curiosity for the

unknown. The snake's breath refers to the risks, disillusionments, the drama and even death, which are inherent aspects in life. Then, Sula discovers how afraid Nel is about new experiences, her own passions and dreams. Nel chooses to live in the web where death is a constant, but she feels more secure in it than out of it, where she could explore and discover a wider world. But Sula takes the free fall. She makes that leap that allows her to experiment in life and live more experiences than the rest of the spiders.

While Sula Peace is resting in her bed dying of a mysterious disease, Nel Wright visits her for the first time in three years after Jude's departure. Nel is still mad at Sula for "taking away" her husband, and still blames her for her loneliness. Sula affirms: "My lonely is *mine*. Now your lonely is somebody else's" (p.143). She means that she chooses to live her life alone, and do everything by herself. She designs her own destiny because she is the owner of her life, and she owns her *self*. In contrast, Nel decides to live at the mercy of Jude, and that is why she blames Jude and Sula for her misfortunes, which are, in fact, the result of her own failures. In other words, what Sula means is that when one owns one's life and one's self, life will not depend on the others' decisions but on one's own choices.

Sula, instead of recognizing her treachery, asks Nel why she could not forgive her if they were such good friends. Then, Sula questions the importance of their friendship and implies a complaint about how Nel set her outside for Jude, and how she changed her own convictions for conventional attitudes. Shannon (1974) indicates that with this story, Morrison reveals how powerful and fragile a friendship between women can be. Furthermore, Morrison remarks that a betrayal of each other signifies a betrayal of self.

Still resentful, Nel, even though she is with Sula, is not able to recognize their self-identities. When she speaks to Sula, she does not speak like the Nel who was aware of her “me-ness,” but as the conventional women of their community: “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” (p.42). As she speaks these words, Nel does not realize that it’s not her true speech but the sexist and oppressive speech of the community. Nel is also unconscious that she does everything as well by herself, like a man. At the same time, Nel has had to be a mother and a father since Jude left them. He never writes or sends money. She has to take care of the kids, be in charge of the house, and has to work too.

As a church woman, Nel visits Eva at the nursing home almost thirty years after Sula’s death. Although Eva is senile, she still represents that elder character who says important things for the others. According to Morrison (as cited in Parker, 1979), Eva is playing God. Throughout the book, Morrison demonstrates the supremacy of Eva. In the first place, her name refers to the first biblical female progenitor. In the second place, when Morrison depicts Sula’s house, Eva is “the creator and sovereign of this enormous house ... who sat in a wagon on the third floor directing the lives of her children, friends, strays, and a constant stream of boarders” (p.30). In this form, Morrison attributes to Eva the characteristics of a goddess.

Furthermore, Eva’s role of God does not only consist in giving life but also taking life away. She decides to soak Plum, her son, in kerosene and light a match to burn him in his own bedroom. She argues that her reason for killing him is that he has become an addict to heroin in order to escape from cruel reality and the ghostly memories of war. When Plum

returns from World War I, he is unable to be independent. He has no job nor the will to reorder his life responsibly. He adopts childish and dependent attitudes. By consuming narcotics, Plum attempts to return to his childhood where he can feel safe and innocent again. Since it is not possible to return his son to childhood, Eva murders him as an act of salvation and purification of his manhood.

Finally, Eva asserts her role of omnipresent God as she accuses Nel of being responsible for Chicken Little's death. She asks Nel: "Tell me how you killed that little boy" (p.168). Nel, surprised because she was sure nobody was at the scene of the accident, affirms that Sula was the only one responsible. She says: "I didn't throw no little boy in the river. That was Sula" (p.168). But Eva, as a judge, replies: "You. Sula. What's the difference? You was there. You watched, didn't you?" (p.168). In this manner, Morrison criticizes the conservative institutions which always manipulate using the double standard. When Eva points out that Nel *watched*, she means that Nel participated too, and she did nothing to prevent the accident or to save the boy. Thus, Nel leaves all the responsibility to Sula, whose hands dropped the boy in the river. However, Nel feels restless at the funeral, because in her consciousness, her authentic self knows she is responsible as well.

In this manner, Eva's accusation encourages Nel to find self-awareness, again, and to acknowledge her love for her friend. She realizes that she is the one who has failed, just like Sula insinuated before: "How you know? About who was good. How you know it was you?" (p.146). At the same time, Morrison emphasizes the misperception of each one, and also, the duality of these characters where Sula may not be totally evil, and Nel may not be totally good.

Moreover, Nel also acknowledges that she has neglected her own emotional needs and pleasures for the construction of a social identity. Eva's words: "Just alike. Both of you. Never was no difference between you" (p.169) awaken Nel's unconscious self, allowing her to realize of the meaning of her friendship. She acknowledges that she misunderstood Sula the whole time, and accepts that she was the one who failed Sula. Then she understands the real cause of her pain, and the real meaning of loss: It is not Jude. It is the loss of Sula that hurts. Besides, the loss of Sula implies the loss of her selfhood, her authentic and personal identity that made her unique, wonderful, curious, critical and independent. She betrays Sula and she betrays herself. Nel judges Sula harshly and brings on their alienation because she fails to confront her own authentic selfhood.

Nel finally acknowledges that it is Sula who really knows her and not Jude. In fact, Jude is never able to see Nel. All that Jude sees in Nel is himself: "The two of them together would make one Jude" (p.83). But with Sula, Nel feels "new, soft and new" (p.98), because Sula's presence makes her feel clever, and able to question the world in new and different ways, "talking to Sula had always been a conversation with herself" (p.95).

At the end, Nel recovers self-awareness and freedom as she cries for her friend's death for the first time, and she mourns "We was girls together..." (p.174). As she acknowledges their togetherness, Nel finally admits her complicity with Sula in the accident of Chicken Little. She also recognizes that she is responsible for their alienation, which is caused when Nel restrains her selfhood. She also realizes the meaning of her friendship with Sula, and how their closeness provides individualism for each other where they can find freedom, harmony and nurturing in an alienating world.

Morrison points out that one of the distinctive elements of African American writing is the presence of an ancestor who represents a timeless person and provides wisdom to the characters. If there are no connections with the ancestor, the dangers of getting lost are imminent. One case of the negation of the ancestor in the book is the reencounter between Helene Wright and Rochelle at Cecile's funeral. Ashamed of her mother because she is a Creole prostitute, Helene constructs a life far away from her in order to become the opposite of her: a respectable and conservative woman. In *Medallion*, Helene Wright represents "a woman who won all social battles with presence and a conviction of the legitimacy of her authority" (p.18). Helene rejects any kind of connection to her historical roots in such a radical way that when she and Rochelle meet again, "There was no recognition in the eyes of either" (p.25).

For Helene, Nel means "more comfort and purpose than she had ever hoped to find in this life" (p.18). In order to keep her daughter apart from any kind of associations with their roots, Helene gives her a rigid moral education where "Any enthusiasms that the little Nel showed were calmed by the mother until she drove her daughter's imagination underground" (p.18). As mentioned before, when Nel meets Rochelle, instead of rejecting her, she is enchanted with her. In spite of that righteous education from her mother, Nel awakens self-definition after having contact with her ancestor. After the experiences she has during the trip, Nel desires to be different.

The second case of the negation of the ancestor is when Hannah asks Eva if she ever loved her and her siblings, Pearl and Plum. Hannah is influenced by the white schemes of the modern society where the white mothers play with their kids; therefore, she relates love with play, and asks Eva if she loved them enough to play with them when they were

children. Hanna's question sounds ungrateful to Eva, because she overlooks how difficult and overwhelming life is for a black woman, abandoned by her husband, who has to provide for her children and herself. Eva argues: "What you talk 'bout did I love you girl I stayed alive for you" (p.69). Hannah disregards the difference between the jolly way a white mother shows love for her children and the consecrated love of a black mother who has to make daily sacrifices in order to keep her children alive.

Another remarkable case of the negation of the ancestor is when Sula returns to Medallion. Eva, more grouchy than glad to seeing her granddaughter after a ten-year absence, tells her that she needs to settle down, get married, and have babies. Sula replies: "I don't want to make somebody else. I want to make myself" (p.92). Besides, Sula tells Eva: "I ain't never going to need you" (p.94). In such a way, Sula asserts a self-sufficient identity and a self-recognition, but also negates her ancestor by rejecting her grandmother. Furthermore, Sula emphasizes the negation of the ancestor by breaking all ties with Eva and sending her to the nursing home, an action that the town people consider abominable, because for blacks, elders deserve respect and consideration as they represent wisdom and prestige. Therefore, Sula ruptures with her only link to her past, her way to give sense to her present and future.

Likewise, Eva also fails. She contradicts herself when she adheres to the conventional roles of black women, knowing that she is also a self-sufficient woman. Neither Eva nor Hannah represents traditional domestic models for Sula, and they never provide security or guidance for her. However, Eva and Hannah are accepted by the community because they remain womanly, which implies marrying, raising kids, doing domestic chores, and depending on men's affections.

Moreover, Eva attempts to control Sula's life. She tells Sula: "It ain't right for you to want to stay off by yourself. You need... I'm a tell you what you need . . ." (p.92). She refuses to allow Sula the right to an independent existence, and to make her own decisions about her future. Eva assumes a role of possessive mother (or grandmother, in this case) who wants her progenies to live their lives the way conventionality demands. Eva tells Sula "You throwed yours [your life] away" (p.93). Eva underestimates Sula because this one prefers a life founded on self-determination and personal fulfillment to a domestic life. What's more, Eva rejects her when she adds: "You watched your own mamma. You crazy roach! You the one should have been burnt!" (p.93). As a consequence of their rejection of each other, the only two Peace women alive have no other path than the solitude of their selves. Eva, senile and alone, ends up in the nursing home. In turn, Sula becomes a pariah, alone and with no direction in her life.

The difference between Sula and the rest of women from Medallion is that Sula commits to no one else but herself in order to construct her life away from moral structures. She explores her thoughts and emotions, only to give and receive pleasure. She is free to experience life and self to the fullest. However, Sula's freedom is pointlessness because she has no aims or commitments in her existence. As a result, Sula never conquers her ego which means that she does not achieve personal fulfillment and social regeneration, because she has negated the other with whom she asserts wholeness. She goes deep into herself, into her own pleasure and pain, so she will never be able to play that other side of a relationship where she acknowledges the other's different needs and different perspectives toward the world. As Reddy (1988) points out "Sula never reaches real self-understanding because she has no abiding self to understand nor any way of creating a self" (p.37). This is

the reason Sula spoils her relationships with Nel and Ajax, leading her to a life she cannot live by herself, ending up dying too young. She becomes unable to acknowledge the other she needs to feel wholeness, and the other to rely on in order to share a life project.

In her attempt to become a different woman, Sula is labeled as evil by the community and soon she becomes a pariah. To find liberation and peace in life, Sula needs independence and a sense of adventure, which she already possesses, but she also needs a strong sense of self, humaneness and spirituality, that is to say, an integrated personality.

Sula's failure is to assume that there is no other to count on, and no self to count on either. Since she is not willing to trust in others and does not want to be a trustworthy person, she fails Nel by sleeping with her husband, trespassing the boundaries of marriage; but she also fails herself when she attempts to change her own convictions in order to possess Ajax.

In contrast to the rest of the men in the Bottom, Ajax is not interested in affirming his manhood by owning a woman. In fact, he finds detrimental women's dependency on men: "All they want, man, is they own misery. Ax em to die for you and they yours for life" (p.83). Ajax is a single thirty-eight year old man with a free spirit, passionate for airplanes and his mother. When he hears about the evil witch living in Medallion, his curiosity takes him to the porch of Eva's house. Sula "was perhaps the only other woman he knew whose life was her own, who could deal with life efficiently, and who was not interested in nailing him" (p.127).

Ajax likes Sula because she reminds him of his mother who is also a different type of woman, elusive and indifferent to community norms. Ajax's mother is "an evil conjure woman" (p.126) who digs into the occult and makes her living out of it. But for Ajax, only

her beautiful and wise mother and airplanes were elemental to him because “other than his mother, he had never met an interesting woman in his life” (p.126). Thus Ajax is not interested in establishing a conventional relationship because he, like the rest of the characters, is under the influence and model of his progenitor. From his mother he has acquired the values of generosity, kindness, thoughtfulness, and absolute freedom.

Therefore, Ajax and Sula start a relationship founded on love and the pleasure of genuine conversations where Ajax listens to Sula as if he were listening to a brilliant woman like his mother. And in these conversations, Ajax also speaks to Sula the way one talks to a friend, and not the way a man talks to a girlfriend: low voice with “puerile questions about her life or monologues of his own activities” (p.128).

In the consummation of their relationship, Sula recognizes Ajax as the soil she needs to stabilize the disorder of her life: “I will water your soil, keep it rich and moist. But how much? How much water to keep the loam moist? And how much loam will I need to keep my water still? And when do the two make mud? (p.131). For Sula, Ajax represents the loam, and she represents the water. These misperceptions towards Ajax and their relationship will speed up Sula’s self-destruction.

In the first place, Sula confuses Ajax with earth while he belongs to air, because he loves and dreams about airplanes (Domini, 1988). Sula assumes he wants water in order to become mud. In the second place, she attempts to give herself to Ajax so he can settle her topsy-turvy world. Moreover, she pretends the loam and the water will make one. In this way, Sula attempts to possess Ajax. She expects him to fill the emptiness she finds in life, believing that at the same time she will complement him, assuming he lacks wholeness.

Then, Sula will want to become one with Ajax, combining their selves and ending their individuality.

However, Ajax is not interested in owning women or being owned by them. In fact, he is like a male version of Sula, but improved. He is a free spirit with strong links to his ancestors, with integral values, and clear goals in his life. So Sula fails him as she starts to turn herself into another Medallion woman. Again, she attempts to imitate Nel's domesticity. In front of the mirror, Sula looks at herself wondering whether she is pretty or not and then, she puts a ribbon in her hair. Afterwards, she washes the bathroom and the kitchen, organizes the bed, and sets the table for two. Sula disappoints Ajax because she starts to behave like the traditional women he rejects. He liked her because she was different, and now "he knew that very soon she would, like all of her sisters before her, put to him the death-knell question 'where you been?'" (p.133). Finally, Ajax leaves Medallion in search of his dream of airplanes, and abandons Sula. The result of Sula's failures is her own loneliness along with her own destruction.

According to Munro (1984), "The fact that Morrison makes Sula susceptible to this gestalt of emotions serves to underscore the pervasiveness of those cultural pressures which encourage people to alter their behavior because of a desire for permanence" (p.154). In other words, Sula fails to establish an enduring relationship, solid and nurturing for her and Ajax, due to her inability to acknowledge the other's needs and individuality. Sula's attempt to possess Ajax demonstrates the vulnerability of her principles. Although she constructs an authentic identity, her principles lack solidity, and therefore she becomes vulnerable to the community's pressure. Which is to say that neither conventionality nor

irrational self-indulgence provides fulfillment. As Sula has no center or order in life, she lives a self-destructive identity and life style without balance and transcendence.

Although they stand outside the traditional moral standards, Sula and Shadrack represent a mirror for the townspeople. In their process of asserting their identity as the black community of the Bottom, the townspeople are preoccupied mostly with earthly things, wondering “what Shadrack was all about, what that little girl Sula who grew into a woman in their town was all about, and what they themselves were all about” (p.6). These characters, Sula and Shadrack, externalize the fears and passions that the others in the community do not dare to face, or try hard to repress. Shadrack and Sula are capable of doing things nobody else dares to do, since Shadrack and Sula are self-indulgent and self-determined people, free of material ambitions and conventionalities. They are both self-sufficient, which means they do not depend on anything or anyone in order to survive. Their preoccupations in life are supplying themselves with the bare necessities, and experimenting life’s pleasures. However, they both lack order, guidance and goals in life. They have no family or friends. Thus Shadrack’s indispensable things consist of food and alcohol, which he supplies by selling fish in the town. His only significant purpose is to overcome suffering through alcohol.

At the same time, Shadrack reflects the reality of the soldiers who become victims of the war as well. After fighting World War I, Shadrack experiences battle fatigue. He looks like a black ghost, directionless, full of painful memories, but dislocated from reality. Reddy (1988) compares Shadrack with a slave who is granted freedom but is left without any land, dignity, or family. Just as slavery takes everything away from the blacks, so does war take everything from the soldiers. In other words, Shadrack’s story is similar to the

modern slave narrative: the slave takes long journeys from the ancestral land to the land of freedom where he can be part of a community again. Reddy (1988) also concludes that “Shadrack is much like the questing figure of romance and therefore is linked to Sula, whose journey, like Shadrack’s, is a quest for self” (p.33).

In his internal struggle to find tangible proof of his selfhood and existence, Shadrack looks at himself in the water of the toilet, where he can see himself as a black man. He finally becomes aware of his race, history and identity. Like Sula, Shadrack acknowledges his race, but more significantly, he accepts it willfully: “when the blackness greeted him with its indisputable presence, he wanted nothing more” (p.13). According to Samuels and Hudson-Weems (1990), Shadrack links his self to the race which will provide a physical and psychological element that will help him to achieve his selfhood.

Thus his return to the Bottom results in a quest for his ancestors. Nevertheless, Shadrack’s psychological traumas from the war, plus his fear of death, take him to isolation. In his struggle to reorder his life and overcome his fear, he creates the National Suicide Day. Every January third, the National Suicide Day will take place as a sort of ritual devoted to recognizing death, releasing it, and feeling free of it. Its purpose is to exorcise the misery and pain in people provoked by the inevitability of death. He attempts to establish order and control in order to overcome the vulnerability that comes with death.

The difference between Shadrack and Sula is that Shadrack does not want to be totally isolated after all. Twice a week, he sells the fish he catches. Also, his National Suicide Day represents an attempt to reintegrate himself into his community, a way to play a role in it, and an attempt to help these people be safe from the misery of death. Thus working is a key element for the characters to make them part of the community. For

Shadrack, working as a fisherman gives him a different role from the National Suicide Day. Also, selling fish makes him useful to his community. But Sula does not have a job, so she does not establish any type of connection with the town.

The townspeople define Shadrack as crazy “but that did not mean that he didn’t have any sense or, even more important, that he had no power” (p.15). Despite his strangeness, they recognize Shadrack as part of the Bottom. In fact, they incorporate the National Suicide Day into their lives. Paradoxically, Shadrack behaves like a rational man in his isolation: he organizes his bedroom, he makes the bed, and he cleans his house. This is certainly a result of his military habits. But this also means that in fact, he has some sense.

Therefore, the irrationality and the madness Shadrack shows on the streets—he walks with his penis out, pees in front of girls, goes drunk all the time, and also curses white people—can also be seen as liberating actions of his self. They demonstrate that he has chosen a self-determined and self-willed life. Shadrack, like Sula, does what others want to do, such as challenging the whites. So his irrational behavior, misperceived as madness by the townspeople, is indeed an act of rebellion against the oppression and discrimination of the ruling system. Moreover, for Shadrack, following conventional standards would mean becoming a slave or a soldier of the community’s norms that enclose and limit the self.

Shadrack and Sula are the only characters who challenge the oppressive white system, and therefore, the moral standards of their community. They recognize their condition of being black, how this limits their lives, and how this frustrates their goals. However, they attempt to create a world where they can rule with self-determination and self-indulgence, where they are able to explore and develop their selves to the fullest capacity in order to achieve wholeness.

Sula becomes Shadrack's only visitor when she enters in his house after Chicken Little drowns in the river. The ambiguous word "Always" he says to her means that death is permanent in life so she should not be scared of it. Sula is the only person to whom Shadrack shows friendliness. While the townspeople view Sula's birthmark close to her eye as the mark of evil, Shadrack relates it to the kind of fish he loves. So he perceives Sula in a different way than the others do. In fact, when he sees her on the street, he takes a bow. He shows her respect and sympathy because they both share the knowledge he taught her about death, and they also share the same status of social outcasts.

Nonetheless, after Sula's death, Shadrack finds out he is wrong: "No 'always' at all. Another dying away of someone whose face he knew" (p.158). He realizes that the National Suicide Day does not make sense because it is not possible to become immune to the grief of somebody's death. No matter the effort one makes to be invulnerable, death always affects individuals. Shadrack understands the importance of the other in one's life. Furthermore, he realizes of how much he has been missing the presence of the other in order to give sense to his own existence. In other words, Sula's death brings self-awareness to Shadrack. He learns that he cannot be isolated anymore. He finally acknowledges the need for the company of others, and how essential is the presence of others in order to achieve the wholeness and balance he has been trying to find.

Reddy (1988) indicates that just as a real hero cannot exist without embracing others, so the self cannot be a whole in isolation. In this way, Morrison proclaims the importance of living in a community, and of having relationships with others. Just as Sula and Nel need each other to be a whole, the townspeople need someone who represents their center in order to find a balance in their actions, and to define themselves.

Certainly, Shadrack does not represent a model to be followed. Nevertheless, this character justifies the importance of power and determination of the self. In other terms, Shadrack gives meaning to every act, choice and decision he makes. He is a man of self-determination and yet he is misperceived as lunatic by the others. Ironically, in the last parade of the National Suicide Day, which used to be a solitary parade, many of the townspeople follow Shadrack, but they go without any sense of what or why they are doing it, turning the National Suicide Say into a disorganized and headless display. As they take actions with no sense or meaning, they make wrong decisions, take the wrong path unconsciously, lose control over their selves, and end up killing themselves.

The fictitious community of the Bottom portrays the reality of the blacks in the modern America. The Bottom is an isolated black community located on the top of a mountain which the whites regard with disdain. This community is not only excluded but it also survives in the middle of a socioeconomic war against blacks, where racism, sexism, hostility, frustration, and disillusionment are constants in their lives.

In the novel, there are no important white characters. Nevertheless, they are immersed in all of the characters. They represent the social order that defines the fate and possibilities of the black characters. The whites are also part of the center around which the blacks of Medallion define themselves. As they start to spread the rumor that Sula sleeps with white men, “Every one of them imagined the scene, each according to his own predilections—Sula underneath some white man—and it filled them with shocking disgust” (p.113). Therefore, many kinds of discrimination exist.

Thus Sula and the whites are the center around which the community of the Bottom define themselves. Since Sula has relations with white men, she represents evil. And so, the

townspeople represent morality and virtue. Thereby, Sula's negative example inspires them to carry out virtuous actions: they change their ways of treating each other. The drunk mothers start to moderate their drinking in order to take care of their children. And the wives begin to caress their husbands more. Nonetheless, they are not aware that they are wrong as well. They are able to recognize the other as evil, but unable to recognize evil in themselves. In the same sense, they suffer discrimination from the whites, but they also discriminate against the individuals who want to be different and free.

After a number of unfortunate incidents –Teapot falls down the steps of Sula's house. Mr. Finley chocks on a bone and dies after he sees Sula. Eva is put in the nursing home. Jude abandons his wife and sons. Plus the rumors about Sula sleeping with white men—the townspeople begin to view Sula as the materialization of evil. Therefore, they reject her from the community. The birthmark close to her eye becomes the evil mark. They call Sula “devil” (p.117). Still, they do not attempt to execute her. They simply ostracize her since they acknowledge that evil is part of the world and they have to learn to live with it.

One of the main characteristics of the black culture reflected in *Sula* is the concept of evil. For black people, “The presence of evil was something to be first recognized, then dealt with, survived, outwitted, triumphed over” (p.118). In this sense, evil is inherent in their lives and always has its place in the world. In contrast to white people who always attempt to eradicate it, black people assume a different perspective towards evil and towards the other: with tolerance and acceptance, they recognize everyone and everything has a place on earth.

Of course, black people need to protect themselves from evil forces. In order to be safe from Sula's evil, they act superstitiously: they start to place broomsticks across their

steps and sprinkle salt on their doorsteps. This superstition is another characteristic of black culture reflected in African American literature. As Morrison (1984) points out, superstition makes up part of the cosmology of black people and constitutes another sort of knowledge about the world.

When the news of Sula's death spread through the Bottom, they all rejoice. Furthermore, they go back to the old manners of treating each other. They have lost a motive to keep changing for good. On National Suicide Day, half of them join Shadrack's parade, laughing and dancing. They are glad that Sula is dead by natural causes. The parade stops at the mouth of the tunnel excavation on New River Road. They pick up bars of timber and steel, and start smashing the bricks of the construction. Suddenly, everything collapses and young women, men and children sink in the river. "In their need to kill it all, all of it, to wipe from the face of the earth the work of the thin armed Virginia boys, the bull-necked Greeks and the knife-faced men who waved the leaf-dead promise, they went too deep, too far..." (p.162).

The destruction of the tunnel at the National Suicide Day represents an act of protest against white oppression, against false hopes and unfaithful promises. But since destruction goes against their own convictions, the result is fatal: they destroy themselves. Domini (1988) remarks: "One must understand that, above all, the drama here is one of *misperception*" (p.85). He explains that the failure is not violating the community's moral standards, but rather assuming facts as absolute, and acting under this misunderstanding. Racism and sexism are part of this absolutism: For black women, it is unthinkable to have sex with white men because it signifies rape. Moreover black women are not allowed to control their sexuality because they belong only to black men. Therefore, black people

“regarded integration with precisely the same venom that white people did” (p.113). These absolute ways encourage each community to misperceive the other. As a result, their actions are wrong and self-destructive.

Thus, the community suffers oppression and discrimination, but they also oppress their own people, especially women. They reject Sula because she is different. As they ostracize her, they negate the other. Domini affirms that “Sula upsets the others in town not because she’s vicious, but because she’s visionary” (p.88). The Bottom misperceives Sula’s behavior as evil. They do not accept the different perception towards life she developed in her long journey. She possesses a different knowledge of the world with different points of view towards her own race and values.

Therefore, the community does not kill Sula but they are in part responsible for her loneliness and destruction. Because they call for a free world but they are not willing to allow freedom. They want equality for themselves but they are not willing to accept others who behave differently. As a result, there is no victory for the townspeople because as they lose the center around which they define themselves, they do not achieve sense or balance in their actions anymore. Thus the affectionate and caring mothers become negligent again. The wives do not caress their husbands anymore. The young people start to feel disgust for their grandparents again. They “now had nothing to rub up against. The tension was gone and so was the reason for the effort they had made” (p.153).

The community sees Sula as a scapegoat that unites them against evil, and makes them feel they are morally superior. In this way, they manipulate their reality rather than acknowledging their real mistakes and undertaking real changes in each one. Therefore, they seek a scapegoat for their mistakes and their faults. But they do not need a scapegoat

because evil and injustice not only exist but they have them inside of them too. So they have to recognize the evil inside themselves to start making real changes. One of these changes is the way they have internalized the white system: racism, sexism and oppression. They use these anti-values against themselves. So Sula and Nel are not only victims of the dominant white culture, but they are also victims of the oppression of their own people.

Morrison explores the way a community creates realities, values and prejudices where they exclude the other who is different. In this way, they construct the basis for discrimination and racism, which are indirect ways to destroy the other and yet in fact are violent. Falsely, they make the others feel safe through oppressive and rigid values, preconceptions and norms that thwart freedom and the knowledge of the self, creating “safe” but unfulfilling lives for the individuals. They create individuals afraid of the world, afraid of changes, afraid to experiment, afraid of others and themselves.

The novel suggests that a community needs to have diversity among its individuals because it is actually through variety that a community achieves enhancements, harmony and balance. When Sula dies, the community loses its center, the mirror that made them see what was wrong with them, what they had to change, and how they had to act rightly. In the same manner, Sula needs the community to define herself, to acknowledge what she wants to become and the way she wants to live. Therefore, everyone has a role, and everyone contributes to the harmony of the world.

6. Conclusion

Eventually, each individual comes to depend on the other in order to define and give meaning to their existence. Each represents a mirror for the other. Not acknowledging the other implies the negation of self, and consequently the denial of the total human condition. An attempt to destroy the other signifies an attempt to destroy the balance of the world.

Sula and Nel are mirrors for those women who are aware of the oppression from society, and seek freedom and fulfillment, but worry about being ostracized. Also, the characters represent a call for the future generations who will undertake the journeys they took to the depths of the selves and who will have to face solitude and overcome critics and discrimination from others. It is not easy to make the community change its values and morality. But to give up one's own convictions, or to act against them in order to fit in the community and to be accepted, results in self-destruction.

Morrison implies that it is through relationships with others that the *self* achieves definition and balance. The individual cannot find fulfillment and wholeness in isolation, and the community only finds self-destruction in the alienation of those who tend to be creative, and search for freedom. On the one hand, individualism or irrational self-indulgence does not allow the individual to construct a social identity or to develop self-awareness. In addition, it obstructs the individual's integration into society. Furthermore, conservatism or conventionalities restrain self-development and self-knowledge; as a result, individuals become afraid of exploring themselves, and feel insecure about making their own life decisions. Personal and social identities are, in fact, two essential components of a

whole, authentic, and balanced identity, in which the individual can find fulfillment and wholeness in life.

A community cannot succeed if it does not have variety of individuals. If this one includes those individuals who attempt to be different, or develop a different way to think and live, it is actually able to reaffirm its true identity. Otherwise, these individuals will have to leave in the pursuit of places where they can find freedom, and the community will lose the opportunity to progress. Thus, a community must be flexible in order to create authentic and creative individuals whose purpose is to work for a harmonious and constructive, not destructive, society.

Through the character of Sula, Morrison explains that friendship is the most important relationship, not only for women but for everyone. Through friendship, people get to know the other and also to know themselves. A friendship offers the individuals more freedom, fulfilment, harmony and tolerance if there is no place for jealousy or possession. Morrison does not mean to value friendship above love relationships, but she rather suggests that if a marriage does not include such friendship, then it is not a relationship that allows the individuals to grow and become happy.

A real and significant friendship allows the individuals to transcend, which involves overcoming turbulent oscillations of time and intrinsic ambivalences of love. Thus, it is equally important to take care of it, nourish it, and not to let it fade. Sula spoils all types of relationships with the people of her community because she posits her own needs, her ego, and hedonism over the others' needs, but she could have survived if she had kept her friendship with Nel, which is the only meaningful relationship for her because it provides her the space where she can find freedom, feel real love, and be truly loved.

Finally, the pursuit of transcendence calls for authentic women and men capable of transforming their society in order to make the community a place where it is possible to achieve wholeness through the establishment of honest and meaningful relationships. The goal of present and future generations must be to construct a society where nothing and no one is futile, where everyone is recognized as unique, where everyone has a place, where everyone is linked and contributes significantly to the balance of life.

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